

Color is a Boundary: Byron Kim's Paintings

March 01, 2017 | By William S. Smith

Page 1 of 13



Byron Kim: *Blue Lift Sandalwood Fall*, 2016, dyed canvas, 62 1/2 by 48 inches.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY.

The colors of Byron Kim's new paintings appeared timely when I first saw them, on a gloomy day in November 2016, not long after the US presidential election. The thirteen canvases then on view at New York's James Cohan Gallery are somber. Dark oranges float on charcoal fields. Dyed patches of muted pinks and purples emerge out of splotchy grays. They could be enlarged details of Mark Rothko paintings, homing in on the small places where borders of color fields overlap in polychrome haze.

They just as strongly suggest expansive vistas, cosmic formations. Although Kim's paintings can resemble the work of Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, or Agnes Martin, they also represent a strange version of realism. The sky has been one of Kim's major subjects for the past three decades. He captures views upward—past the horizon line—depicting the sky at a particular place and time, a process that results in muted fields of color. My first inclination was to interpret these new works as similar perspectives, appropriately dour views from the here and now: atmospheres polluted with rusty clouds and brackish smoke.



Byron Kim: *Koryeo Dynasty Cup with Dragon Head Handle*, 1994,
oil on linen, 84 by 72 inches.
JAMES COHAN GALLERY.

When Kim told me that the paintings should be regarded instead as depictions of bruised skin—close-ups presented full-bleed, so to speak—they seemed all the more of the moment. In the early 1990s, he began painting small monochrome panels, the colors of which were based on the skin tones of people who modeled for him, most frequently by showing the insides of their elbows. *Synecdoche* (1991–), a large grid of these panels, became a poster image for the 1993 Whitney Biennial, where it was shown alongside work by Glenn Ligon, Daniel J. Martinez, Renée Green, and other artists who were instrumental in bringing race and identity to the forefront of contemporary American art.

It's tempting to understand the bruise paintings as a pessimistic return to this foundational subject matter. If *Synecdoche* can be taken as an expression of identity politics in the early 1990s, then perhaps paintings of damaged and bruised skin offer a visual response to the traumatic victory of racist and xenophobic politics in the fall of 2016.

Of course, paintings are seldom really timely in this way. The logistics of production and display alone keep paintings in an asynchronous relationship with the world. "One thing that makes oil painting interesting," T.J. Clark has observed, "is that usually it is done slowly. The interest becomes greater the more the surrounding culture puts its stress on speed and immediacy."¹ Kim's paintings have a way of inviting us to stress their topicality—to find, amid their uneasy union of abstraction and realism, a third register, that of political allegory. What's interesting about them is how they ultimately transform that simple invitation into a provocation to think broadly.

If his new color fields can be interpreted as commentary on racialized violence with any modicum of plausibility, sustainable even for a few paragraphs, it's a testament to Kim's deft negotiation of both his artistic medium and the aesthetic expectations embedded within it. It's even more remarkable that the traumatic reading is incomplete.

Kim was inspired to take up the subject after reading a line from a poem by Carl Phillips about the experience of examining a bruise on a lover's body. Bruises are a recurrent image in Phillips's work; rather than evidence of violent episodes, the bodily marks are often focal points for tender observation. Deep bruises are associated with depth of romantic feeling.

To guide his painting process and color choices, Kim turned to photographs from online roller derby forums, where women often post images of the bruises they sustained in the contact sport along with boastful narratives describing the circumstances. For roller derby combatants, bruises stand as triumphant evidence of a rough match well played. Though he used such images as reference material, there's nothing photographic about Kim's process. Stained with natural pigments and dyes that he concocted by hand, the works are exquisitely crafted objects that look like bruises because they embody the structure of a bruise: subdermal hemorrhaging is evoked by the spills of paint saturating the canvas or linen fibers. Like the paintings, bruises are also always belated, marks of action or violence that has occurred in the past. At the same time, they also always imply the promise of change in the future. By the time you see the bruise, the wound is already healing and the process of reflection on what's happened has already begun.



Byron Kim: *Synechdoche*, 1991-, oil and wax on panels,
10 by 8 inches each.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY. PHOTO DENNIS COWLEY.

"My painting has a tendency to rely on the contrast of its idiosyncratic content with its modernist form," Kim told curator Phyllis Rosenzweig in a 1996 interview, published in the pamphlet for his solo exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C.² The Hirshhorn show included a series of large gray-green paintings, the hues of which Kim modeled on the celadon glazes found on prized Korean and Chinese ceramics. The reference to a ceramic vessel constitutes the simplest version of content in these works, but Kim explained in the interview that celadon is a more complex cultural signifier with personal resonance. Growing up in a Korean-American household, he was encouraged to appreciate celadon glazes as the pinnacle of beauty and a symbol of his heritage.

He reproduced the sensuous surface effects of a finely glazed ceramic object while adhering to the formal conventions of modernist painting par excellence, the monochrome. "Contrast" might be too gentle a term to describe the tension inherent in this uneasy merger. Kim's celadon works invite viewers to contemplate two aesthetic modes simultaneously, one linked to the decorative arts, the other predicated on an aesthetic tradition that explicitly excluded both narrative content and affinities with the decorative arts.

In some of his early statements, Kim hinted at an ironic disposition toward this tension. "It is my pleasure to work in what has become a fine, long tradition of lastness in painting," he wrote in a 1992 article in which he makes reference to the avant-garde artists in the early twentieth century who claimed that the monochrome marked an end point, a physical and spiritual limit for the development of the medium.³ In the face of such declarations, Kim's early work could be understood as an endeavor to redeem modernist form by infusing it with personal significance. Here was a young Asian-American artist finding in the "last" painting a new starting point.

Kim's work also represents a fundamental transgression against some basic tenets of modernist abstraction. As Rosenzweig observed, Kim's celadon paintings have as much in common with Thomas Eakins's scientific realism as they do with Reinhardt's work. Kim's paintings tend to be precise depictions—the sky, the surface of a ceramic vessel, the skin on someone's arm. It's possible—albeit perverse—to argue that Kim isn't really an abstractionist at all, but a realist working in an abstract style.

These labels are not merely semantic but point to key aesthetic hierarchies and biases. "Abstraction is the law and . . . realism is the criminal," Linda Nochlin famously wrote in these pages, pushing back against the dominance of abstraction in histories of modernist art.⁴ Kim unabashedly embraces both law and crime. He recently told me that he considers his work to be "adulterated abstraction,"⁵ a term that suggests the introduction of impurities into a pristine field. But adherents of modernist painting regard the presence of these impurities—Kim would call it "content"—not as small irritations, but as basic contradictions to the entire logic of abstract painting.



Byron Kim: *Palms (Head Over Heart)*, 2005, oil on linen, diptych,
60 by 126 inches overall.
JAMES COHAN GALLERY.

Adulterated abstraction demands interpretation. It encourages paraphrasing. You can say the work is about something, a formulation that would have appalled some modernist artists for the reason that being interpretable represented a kind of constraint. “Content is a glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash,” wrote Willem de Kooning. “It’s very tiny—very tiny, content.”⁶ The tiny, tiny perspective afforded by content stood in contrast to the expansive purview of abstraction, which addressed transcendence, ineffable emotion, the sublime. In his 1992 statement, Kim flipped de Kooning’s implied hierarchy upside down. “Instead of using the color field to represent something universal, spiritual, something too large for words,” he wrote, “I use it to represent an idiosyncrasy, something better described in words, maybe too small for words.”⁷

Kim has embraced the small and the particular throughout his career, even when his subjects are expansive. It’s not just any sky that he paints, for example, but the one above San Diego, where he grew up, or Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where he kept a studio for many years, or Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, where he exhibited in a recent biennial. The glimpse of the sky that would pass in a moment—a flash—is preserved in his paintings, the subtle changes in light frozen and offered for extended contemplation.

And it's in that mode of contemplation that the ironic blending of form and content in Kim's work gives way to something sincere. For Kim, the surface of a celadon vessel invites a kind of attention that complements, rather than contradicts, that invited by a modernist monochrome. Both acts of looking are highly mediated by specific cultural conventions. Kim learned to appreciate celadon, to "know" that its subtly modulated color was the work of a master, in the context of Korean culture. The ability to find transcendence and the sublime (rather than emptiness and banality) in the monochrome is equally an acquired skill, one honed by familiarity with some tenets of modernist abstraction. These codes and conventions can be considered part of the content of Kim's work. The celadon paintings in particular make such learned conventions visible without denying that a viewer might get lost in the process of unlearning them—of experiencing something transcendent in an adulterated green.

Paintings of skin suggest a different, and more complicated, relationship with modernist art because the corporeal overtones—and the class and racial codes bound up with them—tend to counter any aspiration toward the sublime. Kim continues to create skin-tone paintings according to the methodology he developed in 1990. He studies a patch of skin on a model's body and then mixes acrylic paints until he's achieved a corresponding hue. The actual painting is fairly rote: a flat application of paint on a ten-by-eight-inch waxed wood panel. Kim notes the sitter's name on the back of each work.

The flatness of these paintings differentiates them from those in the recent bruise series, although both establish a tight relationship between the surface of a human body and the surface of the painted panel. Though the skin paintings certainly belong to a tradition of monochromes, they suggest other precedents. Robert Rauschenberg created full-body photograms in the 1950s by lying flat on top of huge sheets of photosensitive paper that he exposed to light. Jasper Johns created a series of "skin prints" in the early 1960s by pressing his Vaseline-covered body parts against prepared sheets and then covering the greased areas with pigment. These works establish a one-to-one relationship between the artist's body and the artwork.



Byron Kim: *Sunday Painting 2/19/12*, 2012, acrylic and ink on canvas mounted on panel, 14 inches square.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY.

David Hammons's body prints of the late 1960s moved beyond this literal condition. Hammons pressed himself against sheets of paper in a procedure similar to the one enacted by Johns. But Hammons also embellished his prints, pointing toward meanings larger than his physical presence, such as when he assumed the pose of a Black Panther leader bound to a chair and gagged. Hammons's prints assert a racialized corporeal presence: the black pigment that he used was consistent with the specifically African-American identity that he projected through the prints.

Kim's skin paintings are not so much figurative images as rhetorical figures. The title *Synecdoche* suggests as much, and indeed, substitutions of parts for wholes occur on multiple levels. Each panel stands in for an individual subject, and the overall work is also a group portrait of sorts, integrating each distinct skin tone into an ordered structure. This structure, in turn, is a synecdoche for broader social conditions. Many of Kim's early skin paintings "depict" his friends and relatives. He quickly expanded the range of models, for example by asking everyone in a particular park to pose for him and quickly painting their skin. The panels in *Synecdoche* therefore come from a broad range of subjects, offering a cross section of a multiracial society. Kim has effectively created a giant history painting in the guise of a grid of monochromes. Critics have described the work in that regard as an affirmative vision of coexistence. At the same time, however—and often in the same critical discussion—the work is cast as an ironic gesture, "a reduction ad absurdum of the notion that skin color can stand proxy for a person."⁸ In this view, the work appears contradictory: the colored panels can stand in for racial diversity even as they reveal how color fails to carry adequate significance. *Synecdoche* becomes an autocritique of modernist form, with the monochrome used to deliver an absurd parody of racist ideology.

But what if we take seriously the work's modernist roots, viewing it as a grid of color fields, an experiment in pure color? "Like form itself," wrote Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, "color 'begins' where it no longer corresponds to natural coloration or organic form."⁹ In Eisenstein's view, color becomes an aesthetic element when it is detached, or at least pulled away, from a system of meaning that we take for granted or find natural. Because Kim's paintings can be seen as pure color (if only for a moment) they pull away (if only slightly) from a system of racially coding people's bodies, a system that's central to histories of power and oppression in the US. We can understand this gap in terms of another rhetorical device, catachresis, which refers to the application of a word or phrase in a way that departs from its established meaning.

In a new book on African-American modernist painters, Darby English explores a version of catachresis within the visual arts. He coins the term “artifactual color” to designate “not a hue or mark or object-property but a sense of color generated in the tension between color’s racial connotations and its aesthetic meanings.”¹⁰ English examines the work of artists who developed their styles in the late 1960s and early 1970s—Al Loving, Alma Thomas, Jack Whitten, and many others—and deliberately embraced formalist abstraction, sometimes facing criticism for eschewing overt statements about social justice and identity. Yet their abstraction was always adulterated, to use Kim’s term, by the context in which they worked. “Artifactual color is an aftereffect of direct action,” English writes. “It is a legacy of a political form that, unlike direct action, managed to thrive in the shadow of Black Power.”¹¹ Kim’s work systematically and overtly creates tension between the aesthetic and racial meanings of color, destabilizing both. This explicit act of catachresis foregrounds what is latent or implicit in the work of the African-American artists that English examines. Reinhardt and Ellsworth Kelly may be important precedents for Kim’s body of work, standing in as avatars of pure, content-free modernism. But his skin paintings also extend a tradition within modernist art—a tradition of serious and deeply felt abstraction that identified a source of power in the gap between color as a formal property and color as a signifier of race.

Mark Rothko wrote, “once color is out of the paint can, it is seen in the world of human action in relation to the time and the event [sic] of the day and the eyes for whom the time and events occur.”¹² On this point, Kim and Rothko are in agreement. The bruise paintings may not be timely in a deliberate way, but they are part of the “world of human action” and so will continue to sync with and depart from feelings of trauma or passion as they arise.



Byron Kim: *Pathos Cosmos*, 2016, glue, oil, and pigment on dyed canvas,
18 by 15 inches.
JAMES COHAN GALLERY.

The experience of time passing and historical change is a subtle but integral component of the idiosyncratic content of Kim's paintings. For the last decade he has marked time with a series of "Sunday Paintings," small works completed without fail every Sunday that depict the sky in the straightforward manner of an accomplished amateur. The serial rhythm of these works has much in common with On Kawara's daily postcards—dispatches that conveyed the Conceptual artist's continued existence—but Kim's paintings are rich in personal detail. He writes diary entries over the completed paintings, detailing his anxieties and hopes on that day.

Like the "Sunday Paintings," *Synecdoche* is also an ongoing work: Kim has refused to declare it complete. Though the installation is owned by the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., Kim has reserved the right to add skin-tone paintings to the grid as he sees fit, potentially reinventing the piece for the present. In advance of the work's reinstallation this month, shortly after Trump's inauguration, Kim has embarked on one of the most ambitious expansion projects in years. He told me of his plans to ask prisoners to pose for these new skin paintings. Adding several hundred panels painted during these visits with the collaboration of mostly African-American and Hispanic models could transform the piece. Folded into the larger grid, the paintings of prisoners could affirm a notion that incarcerated men and women remain members of the larger society. Added to one side of the existing array, however, these new paintings, in hues that are darker on average than those in the rest of the grid, could offer a critique of the integrationist vision glimpsed in earlier versions of *Synecdoche*, highlighting how physical exclusion underlies the appearance of social cohesion and stability in a liberal democracy with one of the largest prison populations in the world. As this article went to press, Kim hadn't yet decided on the overall composition. Whatever its final form, one can hope that visitors, and perhaps certain US officials, will be moved by the work's timeliness—the topical charge of pure colors within social flux.

1 T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the World of Manet and his Followers*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1999, p. xix.

2 Byron Kim, interview with Phyllis Rosenzweig, "Directions: Byron Kim Grey-Green," exhibition pamphlet, Washington, D.C., Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 1996, n.p.

3 Kim, "An Attempt at Dogma," *Godzilla 2*, no. 1, 1992, p. 3.

4 Linda Nochlin, "The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law," *Art in America*, September–October 1973, p. 56.

5 Kim, in conversation with the author, Brooklyn, N.Y., Jan. 9, 2017.

6 This quote is an epigraph to Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York, Picador, 2013, p. 3. "The idea of content is today mainly a hindrance, a nuisance," Sontag writes in her aggressive critique, "a subtle or not so subtle philistinism."

7 Kim, "An Attempt at Dogma," p. 3.

8 "Byron Kim," in *Color Chart: Reinventing Color from 1950 to Today*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 2008, p. 188.

9 Sergei Eisenstein quoted in Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning," in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag, New York, Hill and Wang, 1982, p. 327. See also Tan Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004: The Joy of Cooking*. Middletown, Conn., Wesleyan University Press, 2010, unpaginated.

10 Darby English, *1971: A Year in the Life of Color*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2016, p. 9.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

12 Mark Rothko, "Notecards 1950" in *Writings on Art: Mark Rothko*, ed. Miguel López-Remiro, New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 2006, p. 143.