

Wadsworth Atheneum  
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

*Byron Kim / MATRIX 125*  
*October 2 - November 20, 1994*



Byron Kim, 1994 Photo: Dennis Cowley, Courtesy Max Protetch Gallery.

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## Byron Kim / MATRIX 125

*"The history of Western art privileges form at the great expense of content, or, rather, art history has always done its best to evade the question of content in its pursuit of formal objectives . . . The notion of the abstract sublime in painting fascinates me. I am especially interested in paintings that deal in extremes of abstraction, particularly abstract monochrome paintings, and the notion that these paintings had a special, spiritually advanced standing and also, somehow, stood at the end of art history . . . It is my pleasure to work in what has become a fine, long tradition of lastness in painting. I have been making monochrome paintings for the last couple of years. But instead of using the color field to represent something universal, spiritual, something too large for words, I use it to represent an idiosyncrasy, something better described in words, maybe too small for words."*

Byron Kim,  
"An Attempt at Dogma,"  
*Godzilla*, 1992, p. 3

Byron Kim is among those who have challenged prevailing beliefs in the transcendent nature of abstract expressionist painting. Far from being "universal" in their meaning, Kim suggests that, in fact, these abstract paintings require special knowledge, even indoctrination to comprehend. Painters such as Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), Mark Rothko (1903-1970) and Barnett Newman (1905-1970) sought a quasi-religious communion through their work both for themselves and for their viewers. Today, few young painters presume to subscribe to the same ambitions.

When it comes to the daunting, heroic tradition of abstract expressionism and subsequent related developments, Kim is a skeptic who questions the absolute authority to which such traditions lay claim. Yet, rather than simply turning his back on the tradition of abstract painting, he makes it the very object of his inquiry: it is a paradigm through which he explores his curiosity, obsession, and, yes, affection for these same art-historical antecedents.

Challenging the well-established canons of abstract painting, Kim paints abstract monochromatic works that, paradoxically, are also portraits and still lifes. When first working on *Synecdoche*

(1991-1994), a very large painting now made up of over 300 small oil paintings, each based on close observation of one individual's skin color or pigmentation, Kim said, "*It's a strange project, because I'm making abstract paintings, but their subject matter is so concrete. In a sense, these paintings are representational, even figurative.*"<sup>1</sup> A **synecdoche** is a figure of speech by which one part stands for the whole. Each panel is a standard 8" x 10" portraiture format, and all colors are an approximation of the color of each subject's forearm or back of neck. It takes Kim about twenty minutes or so to mix a satisfactory color match. Like the impressionists, he carries a French easel and prefers to work under natural light.

Kim first called upon friends and family and, then, at random, on visitors to the Brooklyn Public Library – where Kim teaches adult literacy – on students at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and at the School for Visual Arts in Manhattan. **Synecdoche** also includes thirty panels based on students at the Blackham Middle School in Bridgeport, Connecticut. The final twenty-five panels were painted in La Jolla, California, where Kim was commissioned to paint portraits of all of the members of the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. A set of these panels has now entered the permanent collection of that museum. This installation of over 300 panels here in **MATRIX** is the largest number yet exhibited together. The names of all subjects are posted near the painting.

When some people look at **Synecdoche**, they are moved to contemplate the vexing issues of racism, and, even, perhaps, to recall Rodney King's plaintive query, "Can we all get along?". For Kim, however, **Synecdoche** is, above all, a comment on modernism, its insistence that abstraction has a generalized kind of meaning, and its preoccupation with the flatness of the picture plane and its surface of paint. Kim is, however, well aware that this surface of paint is commonly referred to by some modernist art historians and critics as the "skin" of the painting. Kim's interests need not negate any additional readings of the piece we might choose to make, but those interpretations are ours and not necessarily the same as the artist's. Indeed, there has been a misunderstanding about the degree to which Kim's paintings are political commentary. Kim is clear that his first preoccupation is painting and, especially, the history of abstract painting in the twentieth century. Ironically, he says he has, on occasion, "*used social issues to make a point about painting.*"<sup>2</sup>

Kim's approach is consistently conceptual. He has said that he looks at abstract painting through the art-historical lens of the 1970s. As an undergraduate English major at Yale University, Kim was greatly influenced by a course in contemporary art taught by Anne Gibson, and he has strong memories of coming with Gibson's class to the Wadsworth Atheneum in the spring of 1983 to visit the LeWitt Collection, an important archive of conceptual

art. He recalls that (as an emerging and frustrated young artist) viewing the LeWitt Collection – which includes works by Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Eleanor Antin, Hanne Darboven, Richard Long, and many others – opened a world of possibilities.

**Emmett at Twelve Months** (1994) is a tender inventory of twenty-five different colors found on the body of the artist's young son – from his hair, eyes, and lips to his inner wrist and the heel of his foot. This is Kim's first use of egg tempera, a medium that gives the painting an appropriately rich and sensual presence. It is interesting to consider this piece in the context of portraiture. The fragmentation and multiple points of view seem both contemporary and descendant from the compelling portraits of analytic cubism.

Kim's typically split agenda is embodied in **Metropolitan Pool, Williamsburg, Brooklyn** (1994). On one hand, this diptych with its exquisitely painted quasi-romantic fields is an intentional reference to work by the abstract painter Brice Marden (1938- ), an artist of particular interest to Kim. Some might also think of the work of Mark Rothko, an artist who sought to make "universal" statements on his canvases. On the other hand, there is at the core of all of Kim's work an intentionally specific and personal subject.

Kim swims three times a week at the Metropolitan Pool in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. It is a once-grand facility that is now greatly deteriorated. Recently, due to quixotic local politics, the future public use of the pool is in jeopardy. Kim chose this as a subject because he had great affection for the community of individuals (including many artists) who share the pool. In preparation, Kim made a series of gouache studies to match the colors of the water and the interior brick walls of the pool auditorium. Though Kim himself might disdain such claims, for some, **Metropolitan Pool** is every bit as expressive as other great abstract paintings. Yet, it is, says Kim, not only a referent to earlier abstractionists, but also "*at the same time ridiculously personal*".<sup>3</sup> In an act of subversion, Kim employs the conventional visual vocabulary that has been heralded as a language of transcendental spirituality in the service of specific and personal references to memory, experience, and identity, thereby challenging the universality implicit in abstraction.

How might we reconcile these two different forces – the abstract sublime and the quotidian detail? Perhaps a clue might be found in the philosophies of Zen Buddhism and American transcendentalism, both of which hold that to a trained initiate a modest detail might speak of the universe itself.

All of Kim's abstract paintings are based on specific color memories that have personal meaning. **1984 Dodge Wagon** (1994) is a rather uningratiating work that elevates the key colors of the artist's Dodge Aries to a large-scale painting. Says Kim, "*I didn't really like the colors. To me, both the design and the color scheme were representative of a nadir in American automotive taste. Yet, I felt very attached to the car itself.*"<sup>4</sup>

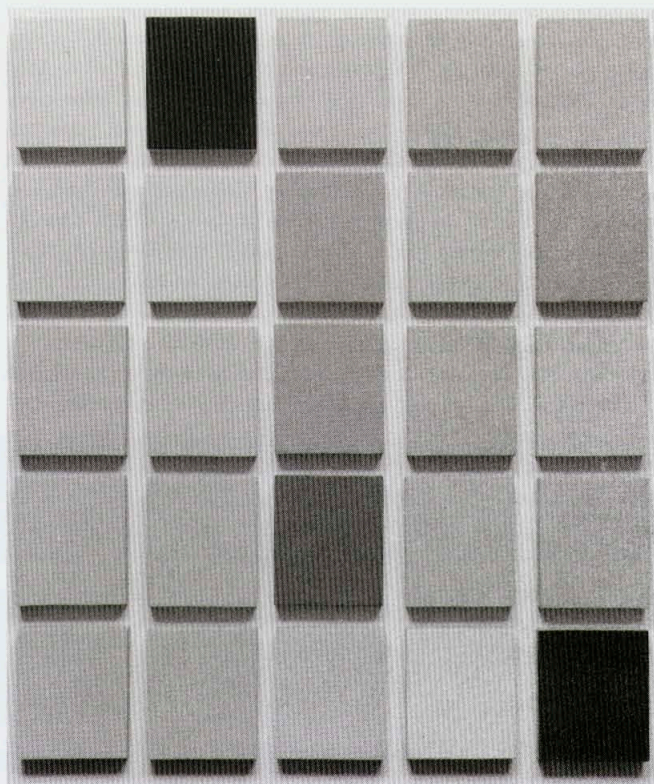
Is it a transgression to portray such a mundane topic in the vocabulary of a grand tradition? The impressionists were broadly criticized for using the grand tradition of painting to describe the details of bourgeois daily life. It is unlikely that **1984 Dodge Wagon** is a topic that would have engaged any preceding abstractionists.

**Korean Koryo Dynasty Cup with Dragon Head Handle** (1994) features the celadon green from a very rare 12th-century Korean porcelain that was a gift to Kim from his Korean-born father. Here, Kim takes an object modest in size, greatly enlarges the scale and engages significant issues. The painting not only refers to a moment of very high achievement in the history of Asian ceramics, but also commemorates the fact that the knowledge of these achievements is being taught by father to son, from one generation to the next.

The most recent work in the exhibition is **The Errant Colt, Colt Factory, Hartford, CT** (1994). It refers to what Kim believes is his earliest "color memory," although he is not sure if the recollection is visual or linguistic. When a young boy, Kim lived in Hartford for a year or so with his family, and they would frequently motor to visit an uncle who lived in New York City. Upon return, sighting the gold and blue dome of the Colt Building was a signal to Kim that they were almost home. This piece includes a schematic representation of approximately twenty stars that mark the two constellations, Pegasus and Equuleus. These two constellations refer to the horse that until recently marked the top of the dome.

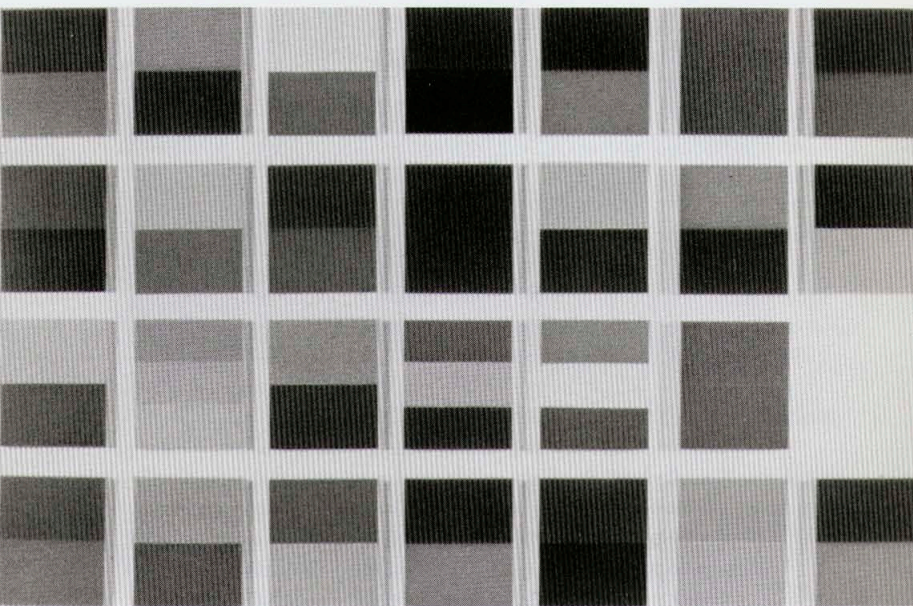
**N.B.A., 1994-1995** is the only painting for which the artist did not mix or even choose the colors. All sanctioned to be "authentic," the team colors of the National Basketball Association were marketed by Dutch Boy Paints. Kim purchased his paint at Sears. Both Kim's initial plan for and the installation of **N.B.A., 1994-1995** are highly conceptual. The ratio of each segment's height to width is exactly proportional to the measurements of the lane on a basketball court. When Kim first installed this piece for public view on November 3, 1993, he arranged the team colors in the order he thought the teams would be ranked at the season's end (Its title then was **N.B.A., 1993-94**.) Here at the Atheneum, where the painting was installed on September 27, 1994, Kim arranged the panels according to his predictions of what team rankings would be at the end of the 1994-95 season. Though the subject of **N.B.A., 1994-1995** might seem to be more "public" than many of the artist's works, basketball has been a long-time "obsession" for Kim.<sup>5</sup>

Byron Kim feels a very close affinity with the work of painter Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967), who pushed abstract painting to an intriguingly absurd place. Reinhardt painted works that were all red, all blue, and, eventually, all black. Yet, unlike most of his colleagues, he disavowed any spiritual claims for his work.



*Emmett at Twelve Months*

Bottom of Foot	Forearm	Rear of Thigh	Ankle	Behind ear
Upper rim of ear	Lips	Heel of Foot	Cheek	Edge of Foot
Hair	Under Big Toe	Mongolian Blue Spot	Lower Eyelid	Rim of Nostril
Elbow	Back of Hand	Calf	White of Eye	Dark of Eye
Back of Upper Arm	Back of Neck	Shin	Upper Eyelid	Inner Wrist



*N.B.A.*, 1993-1994, Photo: Dennis Cowley  
Courtesy, Max Protetch Gallery.

Kim believes, however, that there is a duality in Reinhardt's work. *"Reinhardt insists that his paintings meant nothing, and, though he always seemed to protest, I think he got a perverse enjoyment when someone provided them with grandiose subject matter. I love Reinhardt's work like no other because it is deadly serious and an elaborate joke all at the same time. The black paintings are incredibly beautiful . . . especially when I was able to see a whole room full of them [Museum of Modern Art, New York Ad Reinhardt, 1991]. But in a second the whole roomful of them can collapse; they look like what they are, a bunch of black squares."*<sup>6</sup>

Reinhardt's iconoclastic skepticism about abstract painting – so articulately expressed at the same time the artist was making monochromatic works that are now thought to be landmark statements in the history of abstract painting – reassures Kim in his own interrogation of modernism.

Says Kim, *"The truly fascinating thing about an abstract monochrome painting that works is that, content-wise, it operates at both extremes. You look at it once, and it is merely a red rectangle. You look at it again, it is the universe in red."*<sup>7</sup> This co-existence of opposing forces – that an abstract painting can be everything, and then, in the blink of an eye, nothing – is quietly operative at all times in Kim's paintings. This willingness to entertain doubt and ambiguity with such candor gives Kim's work a poetic resonance for those who consider uncertainty to be a fact of modern life.

Andrea Miller-Keller  
Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of  
Contemporary Art

1. Byron Kim. "An Attempt at Dogma," *Godzilla* vol. 2 no. 1 (Summer 1992), p. 3.
2. Byron Kim. In conversation with Andrea Miller-Keller, 9 June 1994.
3. Byron Kim. In conversation with AMK, 9 June 1994.
4. Byron Kim. In conversation with AMK, 26 August 1994.
5. Byron Kim. In conversation with AMK, 26 August 1994.
6. Byron Kim. "An Attempt at Dogma". p. 3.
7. Byron Kim. "An Attempt at Dogma". p. 3.



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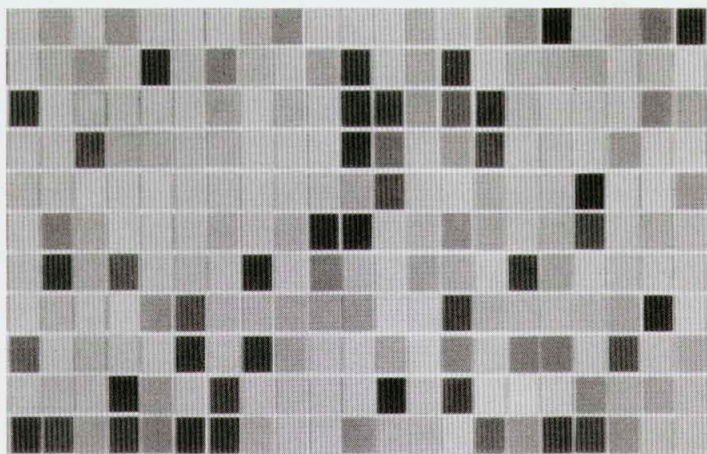
James Rondeau, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art, will give a gallery talk on Tuesday, October 11, 1994 at noon.

Byron Kim will give an informal MATRIX Lecture on Sunday afternoon, October 23, 1994 at 2:00 p.m. in the Hartford Courant Room. A reception in honor of the artist will follow the talk.

Andrea Miller-Keller, Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art, will give a gallery talk on Tuesday, November 8, 1994 at noon.

For special tours of this exhibition, please contact Linda Friedlaender, Associate Curator of Education at 203/276-2670, ext. 321.

All of these events are free with museum admission.



*Synecdoche* (detail), 1991-1994

Photo: Dennis Cowley Courtesy, Max Protetch Gallery.

***WORKS in MATRIX:***

**Synecdoche**, 1991-1994, oil and wax on panel, c. 300 panels, each 10" x 8".

**1984 Dodge Wagon**, 1994, oil on linen, 44" x 90" (3 panels, each 44" x 30").

**Korean Koryo Dynasty Cup with Dragon Head Handle**, 1994, oil on linen, 84" x 72".

**Metropolitan Pool, Williamsburg, Brooklyn**, 1994, oil on linen, 72" x 60" (2 panels, each 36" x 60"). Collection of Dorothy and Martin Bandier, Southampton, New York.

**N.B.A., 1994-95**, latex on panel, c. 44" x 68" (27 panels, each 9 1/2" x 8").

## Emmett at Twelve Months

Bottom of Foot	Forearm	Rear of Thigh	Ankle	Behind ear
Upper rim of ear	Lips	Heel of Foot	Cheek	Edge of Foot
Hair	Under Big Toe	Mongolian Blue Spot	Lower Eyelid	Rim of Nostril
Elbow	Back of Hand	Calf	White of Eye	Dark of Eye
Back of Upper Arm	Back of Neck	Shin	Upper Eyelid	Inner Wrist,

1994, egg tempera on panel, 17" x 14" (25 panels, each 3" x 2 1/2"). One of edition of four. The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT.

**The Errant Colt, Colt Factory Dome, Hartford, CT, 1994, oil on linen, c. 57" x 48".**

All works lent courtesy of Max Protetch Gallery and the artist, New York City, unless otherwise indicated.

### *Selected One Person Exhibitions:*

Max Protetch Gallery, NYC '92, '94; Baumgartner Galleries, Washington, DC '93; Galerie Francesca Pia, Bern, Switzerland '94.

### *Selected Group Exhibitions:*

Asian American Arts Centre, NYC *Yesterday: Reflections on Childhood* '88; San Diego Art Institute, CA *34th Annual Juried Exhibition* '88; Portland Museum of Art, Portland, ME *Skowhegan Faculty and Staff Exhibition* '89 (Traveled also to Colby College

Museum of Art, Waterville, ME '89); Blum Helman Warehouse, NYC *China: June 4, 1989* '89 (Traveled also to P.S.1, Institute of Contemporary Art, Queens, NY '90); Bronx Museum of the Arts, NY *Artists in the Marketplace* '90; Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, Buffalo, NY *A Question of Paint* '90; A/C Project Room, NYC *Micro-Colonization* '90; 494 Gallery, NYC *Race and Culture* '91 (Traveled also to City College New York Gallery, NY '91); P.S.122, NYC *The Naked and The Raw* '91; A/C Project Room, NYC *Salvage Utopia* '91; Amelia A. Wallace Gallery, State University of New York, Old Westbury, NY *Color Theory* '91; P.S.1, Institute of Contemporary Art, Queens, NY *Slow Art* '92; 500 Greenwich, NYC *Seventeen* '92; John Good Gallery, NYC *Cultural Abstraction* '92; Pamela Auchincloss Gallery, NYC *Contemporary Surfaces* '92; 4 Walls, Brooklyn, NY *Sleeping with The Enemy* '92; A/C Project Room, NYC *Byron Kim and Kiki Smith* '92; A/C Project Room, NYC *Glenn Ligon and Byron Kim* '93; Procter Art Center, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY *Physical Evidence* '93 (Traveled also to Lehman College Art Gallery, Bronx, NY '94); New Museum of Contemporary Art, NYC *Skin Deep* '93; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC *1993 Biennial Exhibition*; Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt, Germany *Prospekt* '93; American Academy of Arts and Letters, NYC *American Academy International* '93; White Columns, NYC *Markets of Resistance* '93; Whitney Museum of American Art at Champion, Stamford, CT *Spheres of Influence: Artists and their Students in the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art* '93; Transamerica Pyramid Lobby Gallery, San Francisco, CA *New Sculpture: Soft Surfaces* '93; Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego Downtown, CA *Contemporary Collectors* '93-'94; Galerie Gilles Peyroulet, Paris, France *Oliver Herring, Byron Kim, Glenn Ligon* '94; Todd Gallery, London *Stephen Hepworth, Byron Kim, Cathy de Momchaux, Beverly Semmes* '94; TZ'ART & Co., NYC *Defining Color* '94; Max Protetch Gallery, NYC *Stories* '94.

## ***Selected Bibliography About Byron Kim:***

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Wright, Charles A., Jr. *A Question of Paint* (exhibition brochure), Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center (Buffalo, NY), 1990.

Harrison, Helen. "Skin Pigmentation as a Determinant of Attitudes," *The New York Times*, Sunday, December 1, 1991, p. D22.

Smith, Roberta. "Body, Body Everywhere, Whole and Fragmented," *The New York Times* May 15, 1992, p. C24.

"Slow Art: Painting in New York Now," *The New Yorker* May 18, 1992, p. 14.

Larson, Kay. "The Painting Pyramid," *New York Magazine* May 25, 1992, p. 85+.

"Byron Kim and Kiki Smith," *The New Yorker* June 1, 1992, p.12.

"Scott Burton (1939-89)/Byron Kim," *The New Yorker* October 12, 1992, p. 18.

Schenk-Sorge, Jutta. "Byron Kim," *Kunstforum* vol. 120 (1993), p. 399.

Hirsch, Faye. "Byron Kim at Max Protetch," *Art in America* vol. 81 no. 1 (January 1993), p. 101+.

Hughes, Robert. "Whitney Biennial: A Fiesta of Whining," *Time Magazine* March 23, 1993, p. 68+.

Danto, Arthur. "ART. The 1993 Whitney Biennial," *The Nation* vol. 256 no. 15 (April 19, 1993), p.533+.

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Levin, Kim "Singular Dimensions in Painting," *The Village Voice* August 17, 1993, p. 67.

Wright, Charles A., Jr. "The Mythology of Difference: Vulgar Identity Politics at the Whitney," *Afterimage* vol. 21 no. 2 (September 1993), p. 4+.

McCoy, Mary. "Kim at Baumgartner," *The Washington Post* October 30, 1993, p. G2.

Pincus, Robert L. "Abstracts Offer a Unique Distraction From Everyday Life," *The San Diego Union-Tribune* November 18, 1993, p. 17.

Molly Sullivan. *Physical Evidence* (exhibition brochure), Lehman College Art Gallery (Bronx, NY), 1994.

Cotter, Holland. "Byron Kim's Codes," *The New York Times* April 8, 1994, p. C28.

Rubinstein, Raphael. "Byron Kim at Max Protetch," *ARTnews* vol. 93 no. 7 (September 1994), p. 167+.

## *Selected Bibliography by Byron Kim:*

"An Attempt at Dogma," *Godzilla* vol.2 no.1 (Summer 1992), p. 3.

Artist's Statement, *Flash Art* vol. 26, no. 172 (October 1993), p. 12.

"The Tortoise is the Hare: The Nomadic Art of Nam June Paik and Ik-Joong Kang," *Multiple/Dialogue* (exhibition catalogue) Whitney Museum of American Art at Champion (Stamford, CT) 1994.