

Threshold
BYRON KIM
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The initial pleasure of looking at a painting by Byron Kim arises from the very material presence of color. But a closer examination yields another, almost belated “pleasure”—the pleasure of provocation—as we are challenged by a centuries-old quandary concerning the nature of truth and our potential to access or represent it. In Western philosophy, essence opposes appearance; that is, a fixed truth beyond our experience is distinguished from a thing as it seems to us through perception. Color presents a challenge to this philosophical opposition, since it seems to exist simultaneously as physical fact and optical illusion. The use of color in Kim’s work is integrally linked to this dilemma.¹

The experience of color in perception is both temporal and relational: It is momentary and nearly impossible to remember, represent, or reproduce. Yet in our daily lives, we believe only in color as fact, representing a reality independent of our own perception. Whereas color as fact might concern the physicist who quantifies it in wavelengths of light, philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and painters such as Josef Albers critique such a category of truth as ultimately fictive when they privilege the instability of color in perception. However, it seems that Byron Kim is interested in the everyday factual approach to color, if only to reveal such a pursuit as absurd. Kim acknowledges, rather than denies, our seemingly unshakable belief in the essence of color. For him, the attempt to localize color is the impossible game of possessing the fleeting, fixing the mutable, and containing the infinite. But what comes of such a game? In striving to know an object by asserting its irreducible color truth, Kim actually widens the gap between perceiving subject and perceived object, and he questions the basic premise of

¹ Anoka Faruqee, “Enumerating Infinity: Cloning Color,” *Visual Resources*, published by Oxon: Routledge (Taylor & Francis Group), vol. 19, no. 3, (September 2003), pp. 179–93. (Many of the ideas in this essay originally found form in a paper presented at the 2001 College Art Association Conference in Chicago. A version of that paper was later published in the quarterly *Visual Resources*. Consult this publication for a more detailed discussion about color’s duality and its implications with respect to painting and mechanical reproduction.)

representation: How can an artist represent reality when the true nature of things is unattainable?

For centuries, color theorists and image technicians have attempted to define a universal color standard that would contain, locate, and quantify every imaginable color. Such a model would be systematic, comprehensive, and blind to context. By contrast, the painter derides the exhaustive color model and engages instead the palette, which is unsystematic, limited, and aware of context. In his *Interaction of Color*, Albers (a painter and theorist) illustrates that our perception of a color varies according to its quantity and the colors around it. These variables make color “the most relative medium in art.”² According to Albers, it is color’s optical instability, not its physical fact, that should occupy the painter. Post-Renaissance European painters were indeed questioning “local color,” the artistic term for color as fact, when they realized that re-creating relationships between colors yields a more convincing account of perception than re-creating isolated colors. If their mimetic approach to representation reveals a faith in reality, in order to make such a convincing mimesis possible, they had to understand that color has no essence. In his *Remarks on Colour*, Wittgenstein contemplates such a contradiction, noting, “There is gold paint, but Rembrandt didn’t use it to paint a golden helmet.”³ Rembrandt’s paintings, unlike the gilded medieval paintings that preceded them, are a game of balancing relative color. Rembrandt also had to consider the fluidity of color under varying lighting conditions, for it is the representation of light, of the reflectivity of the golden helmet, that makes one see it as gold. Centuries later, Claude Monet, by painting the Rouen Cathedral repeatedly and at different times of the day, abandoned local color even more boldly. By representing the effects of the changing color of light, Monet shifts the focus of representation from the reality of the thing represented to the primacy of human perception itself. These paintings might destroy the essence of the object (the cathedral) and its colors, but they attest to the truth in light itself, and the power of the painter (and viewer) in his ability to perceive light.

2 Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 1.

3 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, translated by Linda McAlister and Margarete Shattle (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), p. 3:79.

In his black paintings of the 1960s, Ad Reinhardt, whom Byron Kim has cited as a major influence, also affirms the primacy of the subject's perception in relation to an object; however, this object is no longer the absent thing represented (the cathedral) but the painting itself. Truth in these works exists only in relation to a subject. When confronted with *Abstract Painting #11*, 1961-66, for example, our recognition of the nine squares contained within it happens only after a prolonged viewing. Black in a Reinhardt painting is meant to evoke pure absence of color, the theoretical state of total darkness as defined through science. But the longer we look, the more the squares cease to be an absolute black: in relation to one another, one square becomes bluer and another redder. The blacks change before our eyes, and thus destroy their own essences. In so doing, they affirm the viewer's presence as paramount.

Kim's paintings represent a new point of departure. Kim documents colors in perception by isolating color facts and reasserting the "common sense" of local color. For *Synecdoche*, 1991 (fig. 2), he would venture to the park or library, approach people, observe the color of their skin, and make a close approximation of it in paint. Though Kim chose areas of the body of somewhat undifferentiated expanse, such as the arm or neck, he surely must have had to simplify the multiple tones he observed into a single shade. In reasserting color as fact, Kim accepts a reduction and fragmentation of this very fact—as the title "*Synecdoche*" implies. Wittgenstein's description of an imaginary painting divided into color patches addresses a similar impulse to isolate color from its context:

Imagine a painting cut up into small, almost monochromatic bits which are then used as pieces in a jig-saw puzzle. Even when such a piece is not monochromatic it should not indicate any three-dimensional shape, but should appear as a flat colour-patch. Only together with the other pieces does it become a bit of blue sky, a shadow, a high-light, transparent or opaque, etc. Do the individual pieces show us the *real colours* of the parts of the picture?⁴

⁴ Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, p. 160 (emphasis in original).

Wittgenstein in this example maintains the absurdity of any attempt to separate a color from its surroundings, but, like Kim, he contemplates such attempts because they demonstrate a compelling quandary. In a sense, the pixels from the picture are not the real colors in the picture, but Wittgenstein's description suggests that someone might naively believe or hope they are. Kim's work speaks to this pretension to and desire for the absolute in the realm of something so relative as color.

We can never truly isolate Wittgenstein's color patches; even outside of the picture, they would exist in another context. Similarly, in Kim's *Synecdoche*, the denial of one context opens the floodgates for another. Context exists not within each painting, but outside of it: the panels are relative to one another and to their titles (the sitters' names), and ultimately to the culture at large. That each panel on its own is an absolute color fact, a visual truth apart from contingent perception, experience, and convention, is an assertion of false essence analogous to society's demarcation of "race" as the fixed truth of phenotype. Kim can critique the concept of racial essence, and its visual component, precisely by imitating or *enacting* it. In attempting to present his object's skin color as a fixed and irreducible truth, he exposes such representations of truth, including the concept of racial essence, as absurd.

In works subsequent to *Synecdoche*, Kim moves between the observation of color and the memory of it, acknowledging more directly the difficulty in arriving at an irreducible color truth. A series of works from 1994 depicts his mother's skin tone. In three successively sized paintings titled *Mom I-III*, Kim painted her skin tone from memory, only to culminate in *Mother*, a huge triptych that depicts her skin tone(s) from observation. For a 1995 work, *46 Halsey Drive, Wallingford CT 06492* (fig. 9), Kim sent members of his family a chart of pink paint samples from a hardware store, asking them to remember the color of a childhood home. He then chose several of their selections, painting them in horizontal bands across the canvas. Like *Synecdoche*, this work reveals a fascination with color

as fact, but this time Kim is explicit about its impossibility. For there was indeed a correct pink, but this truth is no longer attainable and is only relevant as an ideal. The gulf between physical fact and perceived reality is especially poignant here, in that the search for truth is finally futile. Kant's definition of the aesthetic experience lay in the pursuit, however unattainable, of essences, or noumena. While Monet and Reinhardt may have rejected the noumena of colors, the destruction of one essence only affirmed the search for another: the independent truth of the viewer's perception. But consider the viewer in front of Kim's *46 Halsey Drive*, empathizing with Kim's family in their inability to identify the true color. The object is the old Kim home, which, unlike Monet's cathedral, is absent from the picture. Standing before these subtly shifting bands of pink, one feels as if one is embodying the most basic problem of representation, since both object and subject have lost their wholeness: what remains is the mediation (in the form of a painting) between two lost entities.

Kim's work presents a satirical but reverent rupture with the traditions of both abstract and mimetic painting. The blue in an Yves Klein painting is the ultimate in self-referentiality, and can therefore be named only after the artist, thus International Klein Blue. By contrast, the color in a Kim painting is not just a single formal fact, but a fact distilled from perception or memory. The viewer is confronted with a document of a color "reality." Furthermore, the work disrupts the traditions of mimetic painting in its fragmentation of color, which, as Rembrandt knew, is in itself an obstacle to mimesis. A single color fact happens at the expense of the representation of the whole picture. Whereas both the Rembrandt and the Reinhardt mentioned above offer a presence, either of the golden helmet or of the painting itself, a Kim painting presents above all an absence. Reinhardt's goal of presenting absence, in his case through the color black, is successfully taken up here by Kim, but this time through, rather than without, representation.

No one can see colors apart from the context of a moment. As Albers notes, "He who claims to see colors independent of their illusionary changes fools only

himself, and no one else.”⁵ We can’t remember colors because the moment always passes. But even if Monet couldn’t remember the precise colors of light on the cathedral, he could represent them in paint for the viewer to experience continually anew. If you forget the color in a Reinhardt, simply return to the museum and it reminds you. In contrast, each Kim painting is a false truth. Like an oversized version of one of Wittgenstein’s homemade pixels, a single cell is made to represent the (now absent) object. By the very nature of the isolation and subsequent fragmentation involved, the search for truth in color always results in a loss in our ability to represent the totality of the world and its objects. Kim gives us color facts, but by virtue of their incompleteness we see that his facts are indeed not true. Even in subsequent paintings based on the gray-green glazing of Korean celadon pottery or on the sky and ocean, where he shifts the uniformity of his earlier surface to encompass translucency and modulation, Kim continues to affirm the primacy of the fragment. Kim’s paintings are themselves fragments, and perhaps the weight of his work lies in his ability to remind us that all paintings, once thought to be autonomous, are but fragments pretending to be complete: fixed, isolated rectangles asking to be free from the light, the frame, the wall, the architecture, and the world outside. Pleasure in a Kim painting is the pleasurable longing for certainty. Color is the essential vehicle for him to deceive us while exposing our need for truth, to provide isolated moments while revealing our (very painterly) fear of contingency.