

Art in America

REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

NEW YORK

Byron Kim at Max Protetch

Byron Kim's paintings lead a double life, operating as pure abstractions while referring to things-in-the-world. In the early 1990s, Kim became known for monochrome canvases in shades of brown, black and beige that served as "portraits" of friends and family via their skin pigmentation. In one case, a Minimalist grid comprised all the hues on his one-year-old son's body. Such works were followed by two- or three-zoned canvases, reminiscent of early Brice Mardens, that color-sampled objects, sites or people, and seemed to resonate with obscure autobiographical meaning. A triptych represented the body colors of a 1984 Dodge wagon; latex house paint on panel had, as its title, a Connecticut address; a grid of bi- or tricolored squares paid tribute to National Basketball Association teams.

In the past few years, Kim's scope has become broader, extending, for one thing, into landscape. Translucently lovely paintings, manifesting greater inflection and surface variety, have alluded to natural vistas. In his recent exhibition at Protetch, "The Sky Is Blue," the artist's focus shifted upward. Six large paintings, all approximately 90 inches square, nearly all of them oils, absorbed the viewer into the heavens in their various moods.

Kim once again occupied the territory where abstraction turns into representation, and back again. *White Painting #5* features a stratosphere of white fading to baby blue, then dissolving into a warm, sandy buff; it vaguely resembles a beachscape on a misty day, the

canvas radiant with pale, transparent layers of color. In the light and effervescent *Asphodel*, ivory blends into warm gray-green, while the acrylic-and-gouache *White Painting #4* offers a random sampling of a light gray overcast sky, faintly dappled with linear puffs of white. These vibrant color fields have an affinity with the spiritual-esthetic aura of Mark Rothko's canvases.

On the other hand, the deep, rich *Clear Blue #1* seems at first a pure monochrome; on closer view, varnishlike swirls of wax can be seen as they catch light from certain vantage points. Then suddenly, barely noticeable toward the center, a tiny wisp of white like a fugitive cloud comes into view. A dull robin's-egg-blue canvas, bearing ever-so-faint gray diagonal streaks that recall dark nimbus clouds, functions mainly as a visual texture. Its title, *43,000*, suggests it might represent the sky viewed through an airplane window at that altitude. *Grunion Run* has a thicker layering of paint than the others, sky blue over teal, and is the most allusive and articulated of the works on

view; the modulations of color summon the image of churning water below a darkening sky.

Kim always seems to be working through the problematics of abstraction. His skyward-looking subject matter suggests an indirect tribute to painters such as Still, who used the form to enfold the sublime. And in his sensitive observation of nature's subtlest nuances, there are hints of a Zen Buddhist inclination, also apparent in his appreciation of dualism and paradox: in Kim's work, a painting can be both an abstraction and a landscape--yet neither.

Kim's earlier, breakthrough "skin-pigmentation" monochromes crossed painterly genres and also, through their analysis of the relativity of racial identity, conveyed ingenious social insight. The daytime sky doesn't lend itself to the same pointed commentary. Nonetheless you have to admire a cosmopolitan artist with the courage--or contrariness--to take on content brimming with that most dangerous of all qualities nowadays, the gorgeously romantic.

-Carey Lovelace

Byron Kim: *Grunion Run*, 2001, oil on canvas, 90 by 92 inches; at Max Protetch.

