

Byron Kim

James Cohan Gallery | Lower East Side

Mulling over his American contemporaries and their shared reach for the sublime, Barnett Newman once wrote: "Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or 'life,' we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings." Years later, Byron Kim seems in part to be taking Newman's sentiment to its next logical, almost literal conclusion: Kim's latest pieces consecrate our flesh and its sensations, via large-scale abstract renderings inspired by the bloom and flush of bruises on skin. The results will either seem mournful or erotic, depending on who's looking.

To those familiar with his earlier output, Kim's source material won't come as a complete surprise: Previous works captured the skin tones of diverse sitters in grids of monochromatic panels. But whereas his interest in skin, before, yielded inquiries into socially constructed taxonomies, it now leads to visually lush records of violence and abuse—or accidents and missteps—and the ensuing limbo of recovery. While those former works' Pantone-like precision helped make them convincing, these new pieces welcome tonal ambiguity.

Kim dyed his latest canvases with natural elements like sandalwood and ochre, then used oil- and hide-glue-soaked rags to apply more pigments. The results—stirring, almost lambent surfaces—seem to invoke the moment AbEx gave way to Minimalism's monochromes. And if subtle folds on the canvases might resemble wrinkles, to narratively minded viewers, they also conjure painterly traditions of both measured and aleatory mark-making. But maybe art-historical references seem impotent after an election year that often felt like one long, persistent contusion. If so, Kim's paintings also find resonance in the fact that the colors we use to describe bruises—black and blue—have racial, psychological, and musical overtones all at once. In this context, the series reminds us that bruising evinces a sort of power, too: to be responsive, sensate—alive rather than deadened. In "I Ain't Got Nothing but the Blues," a song arguably about reaching rock bottom, Ella Fitzgerald sang, "Ain't got no feelings to bruise." We're not there yet.

