

Byron Kim

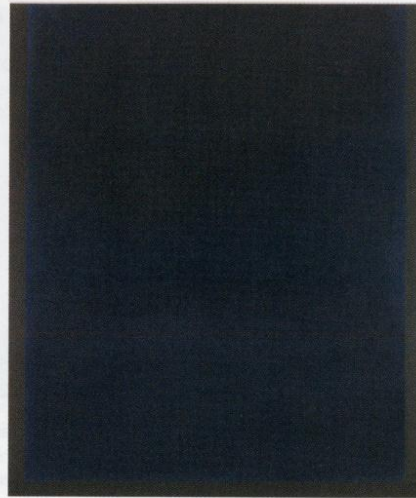
JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Best known for *Synecdoche*, 1991—a project comprising a grid of hundreds of monochrome “self-portraits,” the color of each faithfully corresponding to its sitter’s skin tone—Byron Kim has long been associated with contemporary art’s so-called multicultural turn. But of course, the very medium for which his work first gained traction (in the famously polemical 1993 Whitney Biennial, no less) sets him apart from artists such as Janine Antoni, Lorna Simpson, and Gary Simmons, with whom he is often grouped. Instead of shunning abstract painting—once widely deemed inadequate for conveying the politics of identity—Kim has insisted on the possibility of employing it as a vehicle for both individual signification and social content. In Kim’s hands, painting joins the sensual and the conceptual, as Barry Schwabsky put it in these pages over a decade ago. But this method could also prove fractious, favoring one of those qualities over the other: pleasure above seriousness, or vice versa. Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that his later work—from digital assemblages of his Brooklyn backyard to a mirrored fish tank (both from 2005)—evinced equivocation about his approach.

By contrast, Kim’s newest works, recently on view in his first show at James Cohan, seem remarkably unfettered. The suite of a dozen paintings and a handful of smaller works on paper depict the night sky above New York City absent stars and unapologetically resplendent with cloudy, vespereal effect. Each painting is called *Untitled*, this designation appended with the initials of an individual to whom it is dedicated—e.g., the gorgeous, inky *Untitled (for G.L.)*, 2011, for Glenn Ligon.

Each piece also includes a border, running along one, two, or three edges—never all four. These suggest windows, cornices, and crests, and as such allow the picture plane to evoke the negative space between buildings. And their absence at the canvas’s top (in all but one instance) suggests that the compositions infinitely expand. (This is why the strategy succeeds at a large size; the small-scale works flatten into decorative, patternlike blocks.)

Kim’s modernist morphology immediately recalls Rothko or Reinhardt, and he shares those artists’ tendency toward repetition—the better to show the utter nonequivalence between individual manifestations of a single format. Indeed, the similarities in scale, composition, and foundational conceit invite viewers to track subtle distinctions among the works: from their hues (purple, ultramarine, and gray) to the various qualities of their colored fields (from washy gradation to saturated uniformity). In many respects, the works are related to Kim’s “Sunday Paintings,” diaristic *plein air* sketches of the cloud-flecked blue that Kim has completed nearly each week since commencing the series in 2001. But unlike that body of work, the panels in this show were created in the studio: from memory or the process of painting itself. Kim’s preoccupation with the night sky here comes close to Georgia O’Keeffe’s abiding fascination with the New York skyline, in pictures that crane to see the tops of high-rises or glimpse the evanescent moments in which the atmosphere both compromises observation—most famously in her sunspots obscuring, even merging with, the Shelton Hotel—and privileges the uncanny, personal effects of such occlusions. Kim flips foreground and ground (sky becoming subject, not interference), revealing



Byron Kim, *Untitled (for E.T.)*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 72".