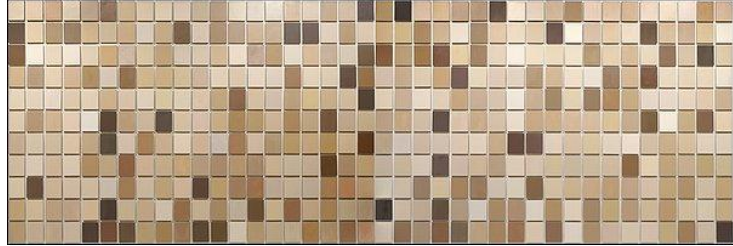


Can a museum that specializes in the Old Masters also hope to keep up with the new ones? Then again, can it choose to wait for younger artists and their reputations to mature, given how quickly prices soar for new talent these days?



The National Gallery of Art's new acquisition of a work of cutting-edge contemporary art shows that, in this case at least, the gallery has kept up, and that to have missed the chance would have been a shame.

"Synecdoche," by the 48-year-old Korean American artist Byron Kim, recently went on view to the public, filling a huge wall on the lower level of the East Building. The piece should raise eyebrows and questions, even some ire -- which shows just how good it is.

Like a lot of the best fine art, the premise behind the piece could hardly be simpler: It consists of a grid of 429 panels, each one 8 by 10 inches. Kim has painted each panel a single shade of pink or brown or tan that is meant to reproduce the skin tone of a different person who sat for him. A grid of names on a nearby wall lets us match sitters to their color patches. Lorna Simpson, the well-known African American artist, turns out to be dark-chocolate brown. The late Marcia Tucker, founder of the New Museum in New York, is a pale beige. Kim's unfamous relations tend toward pale olives and dark buffs.

A simple premise, yielding tangled thickets of meaning.

These are portraits, clearly, in the grand tradition of Titian and Rembrandt and the other Old Master portraitists so well represented on the walls of the National Gallery's West Building. Except that they do as much to undermine that tradition as to shore it up. They flesh out the obvious claim that you can't judge by appearances -- that portraits may pretend to show the inside, but all they really do is reveal a patch or two of skin. Our faces may be almost as arbitrary as the names we choose: By a happy accident, the top row of Kim's names begins with Aaron Dunkel (German for "Aaron Dark") and ends with "Anthony White" -- neither of which, of course, tells us anything about the men themselves, not even their skin color. (Kim allows his piece to be installed in a grid of any size; its panels are to be arranged alphabetically by the first names of the sitters. Begun in 1991, the open-ended work will continue to have "portraits" added to it.)

Or maybe portraiture isn't the art-historical tradition Kim's piece is working in at all. That perfectly regular grid, those uniform colors, the almost uninflected surfaces of each panel put him in the thick of the high modernist tradition represented by a piece just upstairs from him, the monumental grid of rectangles of "Color Panels for a Large Wall," conceived by pioneering abstractionist Ellsworth Kelly in 1978. Kelly's kind of abstraction argued that content can be purged from art, to

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let it concentrate on how shape and color and composition can tickle an observer's eye. Kim turned out one of that tradition's more intriguing examples, by choosing to work with strange hues most abstract artists have avoided. Simply in abstract terms, his piece looks great. It also casts doubt on the whole enterprise of abstraction.

Or it could be that Kim's not even got art history much in mind at all. His work can be seen as fiercely topical, even political, which is how many viewers took it when it made a splash in the infamously "political" 1993 Whitney Biennial. The piece can be read as making a strong declaration about race. It could be holding up a mirror to our insane American obsession with skin color. Or it could go much more optimistic than that -- almost "It's a Small World"-ish -- by portraying the promising racial and cultural "mosaic" of America today. Or, in my favored reading, it could be questioning the very idea of race.

Harry Cooper, the National Gallery's head of modern and contemporary art, suggested to me that the piece immediately gets viewers thinking about where their own skin might sit in Kim's grid. Then he rolled up his sleeve to check his own place in it, and made me realize how many different "skin tones" even one person is made of: The black-haired back of Cooper's hand is something very different from the hairless skin behind his ear, not to mention his lips or elbows. Our standard ideas about fixed and separate races are as artificial as the clean boundaries between one Kim panel and the next. Kim's grid is closer to the colors in a theatrical makeup box than to anything that we can truly find out on the street. Or, in our new digital age, we might prefer to read it as a vastly pixelated close-up on a single face than as a compendium of many different identities.

The literary term "synecdoche" refers to a figure of speech that takes a part of something for the whole -- saying "all hands on deck" when you hope for more than hands to show up. Kim's "Synecdoche" raises questions about how any picture could ever act as shorthand for the world's impossible complexity.

Molly Donovan, the National Gallery curator responsible for the Kim acquisition, saw the piece when it first went on view at the Whitney, and remembers how "radical" it seemed back then. Now, however, she can only see it as "prescient" of everything that's happened in art since: It seems, she says, "so absorbed into the discourse." Which means it's time it entered her gallery's collection.