

Byron Kim

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture

Garden, Smithsonian Institution

Washington DC

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Those encountering Byron Kim's paintings for the first time may not recognize the importance Kim's dual heritage (born in California, being of Korean descent) has played in their conception and production. At a glance, the 10 large monochromatic abstracts in the exhibition "Grey-Green" seem related to the work of such artists as Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, or Ellsworth Kelly. Each of Kim's canvases is an unframed rectangle about 7' x 5' that has been painted a beautifully rich grey-green color, the tone of which might range from turquoise to yellow-green. The paint has been applied in a highly refined manner so that only the subtlest variations in texture, color, and gloss are visible. It is obvious that the principal subject of these works is their color, but as one looks, one finds that the canvases have distinct qualities pointing away from the muted black grids, soft brushwork, and monochromatic shapes found, respectively, in the other three artists' work.

The key to the content of Kim's work, and the reason for its distinctiveness, lies in the color itself. His grey-green tones are not typical of modern western painting (an observation easily made by comparing Kim's paintings to the work of such artists as Gorky, Rothko, Diebenkorn, and others hanging in neighboring galleries), but of celadon, a ceramic glaze. Originally used by the Chinese, celadon became very popular during the Koryo dynasty (tenth to fourteenth centuries) and is a source of great pride within Korean culture. Kim's familiarity with Koryo dynasty ceramics stems from his childhood, but the potential of the glaze's color as a subject for his work was realized relatively recently, and derives from his interest in color, his ongoing inquiry into the concept of beauty, and a personal examination of both his background and education. The appropriateness of the subject was also confirmed by similarities between the potter's and painter's crafts, that is, the application of liquid colors over a neutral substrate.

The work, therefore, resonates with a certain otherness that not only derives from the color of the paintings, but also from the way the artist has handled his materials. Color and technique combine to produce canvases possessing a vibrant translucency and sense of solidity and rigidity. Since the appearance of these works refers to an altogether different type of material, the success of the artist's aims could be confirmed by looking at examples of the ceramics themselves. This was possible by visiting the Smithsonian's Freer Gallery of Art just a short distance away. In fact, didactic material accompanying the exhibition noted that objects in the Freer Gallery's collection formed the basis for a number of Kim's paintings. The Freer Gallery's exhibit thus operated as an important adjunct to the Hirshhorn exhibition, and the rich

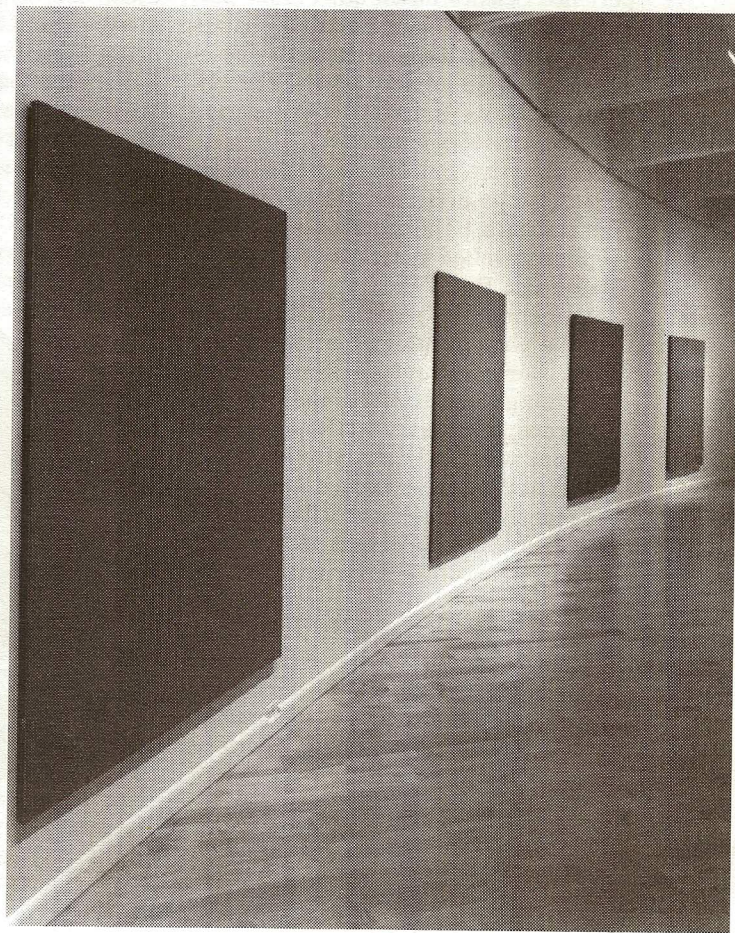
color of the pottery on display partially explained Kim's fascination with the glaze's color.

Viewing the ceramics proved how deeply Kim had immersed himself in his subject. The results of his investigation are not that of a copyist, but of one who has an innate understanding of the complexities of the color as well as the knowledge and skill to develop new forms of visual expression based on that understanding. The surfaces of many of the ceramic objects have been decorated with low relief patterns made by incisions into the clay's surface. This process increases the tonal variations across the objects' surfaces by enabling glaze to pool in the hollows of the design. The resulting visual effects are very subtle and do not undermine the monochromatic appearance the pieces are intended to have. Kim's response to these objects has been to transfer his understanding of the color to canvas using means specific to the discipline of painting. In his works, subtle tonal variations are created by variations in the thickness and surface texture of the paint film, effects achieved by the type and amounts of paint used as well as by the tools and techniques used in spreading it. The relationship between paintings and ceramics not only involves color, but also includes a shared sensitivity to the effects of light. The resulting nuances evident in Kim's paintings demonstrate both his attentiveness to detail and highly refined skills.

Although Kim's paintings refer to the work of color-field painters, the relationship seems limited to that of general appearance. In terms of content, Kim's paintings suggest the work of Robert Irwin, especially some of the latter's small paintings that appear to embody both Eastern and Western cultural forms. As an abstract painter in the late 1950s, Irwin desired to have more control over the gesture in the large works he was creating. In response to this desire, he produced a series of small paintings that were set into extremely thick, smooth wood frames. These canvases, measuring no more than 12" square, were intended to lie on a table or be held in the hands for viewing. This departure from the large format common to abstract painting resulted in works that had to be experienced in an entirely different way. Their intimate, tactile nature enabled them to be touched, held, and turned—essentially, to be viewed in the same way one looks at pottery. Although Irwin has downplayed his interest in Eastern culture, there is evidence of its presence among his friends and peers, and this may have indirectly influenced his work.

Despite the obvious physical differences between the two artists' paintings, Kim and Irwin have both produced art that is as much about the possibilities of painting as it is about the nature of visual phenomena. It is rigorously thought out, carefully produced, and demands time to be seen, understood, and felt. Kim's ongoing interest in the phenomenon of color has taken him through a range of personal subjects and seen his painting technique evolve. In earlier works, he explored the colors of his friends' and son's skin, as well as some of the features specific to the places he has lived. Kim's aim to accurately duplicate the colors of particular elements in those paintings suggests a process highly clinical in nature. The "Grey-Green" series has been painted in a manner that is freer, more intuitive. Although they have been based on the various tones of celadon glaze, his aim here was to go beyond duplication to capture something of the color's essence. In direct contrast to Irwin's paintings, Kim has successfully freed the color from its original form and given it new life. Any reference to the ceramics' other qualities—scale, volume, weight, sense of tactility or rigidity—has been deemed irrelevant.

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Byron Kim, "Directions—Byron Kim: Grey-Green," installation view, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (photo: Ricardo Blanc, courtesy of Byron Kim and the Max Protetch Gallery).