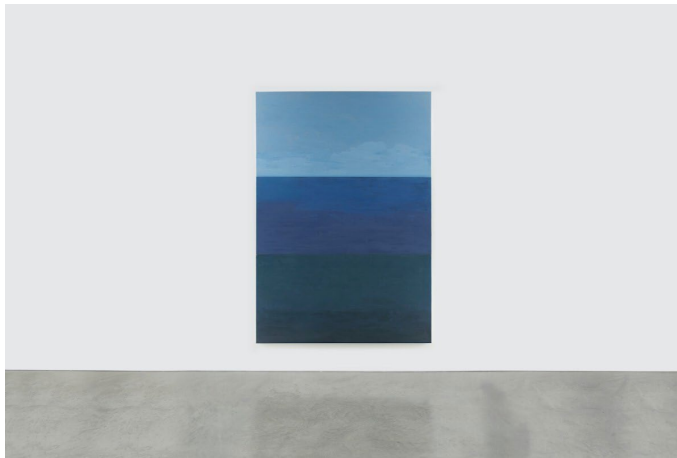


Byron Kim Plumbs the Depths of Nature and the Imagination

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Despite all we know about the environment and what we are doing to it, Kim arrives at another, less palatable realization: As much as we call the Earth our home, we are strangers here.



Byron Kim, "B.Q.O. 17 (Gliderport)" (2021), acrylic on canvas mounted on panel, 104 x 72 inches (all images © Byron Kim 2022, courtesy the artist and James Cohan, photos by Phoebe d'Heurle)

Byron Kim has long been recognized as a conceptual painter inspired by Minimalism and artists such as Ad Reinhardt, Barnett Newman, Agnes Martin, and Brice Marden. In his ongoing, acclaimed series *Synecdoche* (begun 1991), he combined wax and pigment to arrive at fleshy surfaces that evoke different skin tones, on panels measuring 10 by 8 inches. By equating color with complexion, he introduced external subject matter into intimately scaled, monochromatic panels. When I have seen works from this series, I am reminded of cosmetics counters and the pigmented blushes they sell to those who want to make their skin appear flawless. More importantly, I am made aware of the diversity of complexions that exist under the sun alongside the different ideals of beauty that are prevalent in every culture and group. There is something smart, vulnerable, and hardy about this open-ended series, including the celebration of the inexhaustibility of difference.

In 2001, Kim began what he collectively titled his *Sunday Paintings*. In this series, he devoted himself to recording from memory a view of the sky on a square canvas measuring around 14 1/2 inches. On each painting he would write a short diaristic entry, as well as the time and place of his observation. In contrast to *Synecdoche*, which seamlessly merged the aesthetic and social, in this ongoing series they were joined but distinct. One of the problems that I had with the *Sunday Paintings* is that when you know the personal entry is going to be read, at what point do you start thinking about how you present yourself publicly? Is it possible for the writing to take over and the unexpected to surface? Or does it become too staged and artful?



Byron Kim, "B.Q.O 25 (Solaris)" (2021), acrylic on canvas mounted on panel, 104 x 72 inches

These were two of the thoughts that danced around each other when I went to the exhibition *Byron Kim: Drawn to Water*, at James Cohan (January 7 – February 19, 2022). As with the two series I have cited, there is a detailed backstory and conceptual framework to the 11 acrylic panel paintings, in three different sizes. According to the gallery press release,

The works [...] belong to a new series titled *B.Q.O.*, an abbreviation for Berton, Queequeg, and Odysseus, three key characters from famous oceanic tales: Stanisław Lem's *Solaris*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, and Homer's *The Odyssey*. Kim first began this new series of paintings during a Rauschenberg Residency on Captiva Island, Florida, in January 2020, while rereading these classic stories to spur his imagination.

Each painting consists of three equally sized panels stacked vertically, with the top signifying the sky, the middle evoking the ocean, and the bottom panel conveying what is beneath the ocean's surface. Kim stated in the press release:

Swimming in the open ocean gave me a new relationship to my body. Normally, I privilege imagination and mind space over the body, which corresponds with my tendency toward abstraction. Depending on my body as a vehicle brought me away from abstraction — in a strange way, it was grounding, and brought me toward representation.

As much as these statements are intended to frame and direct the viewer's experience of these paintings, and to help the individual complete them, I found them most convincing when the words fell away. It was when I began looking at what was in front of me without thinking about how I was supposed to see them that the paintings opened up.



Byron Kim, "B.Q.O. 24 (Scripps Set)" (2021), acrylic on canvas mounted on panel, 54 x 36 inches

In the six large, visually commanding paintings, the separation of the view into three distinct, vertically arranged panels invites viewers to consider a relationship that is not visible to us, except in the mind's eye. What is the relationship these three realities have with each other? Does the calmness of the ocean's surface hide something dangerous and threatening? What is the sky telling us? These questions have haunted humans ever since they began sailing on the open ocean. Kim's ability to arrive at these elemental questions is one of the core strengths of this series.

In "B.Q.O. 24 (Choppy Cove)" (2021), the viewer is apt to puzzle over the relationship of the pale violet-gray sky to the green-gray turbulent ocean, to the bottom abstraction consisting of 10 interlocking triangles that alternate between rust red and slate green. While we can comprehend the top two panels of sky and ocean, the bottom panel eludes interpretation. In different ways throughout the series, Kim includes areas like this, where the painting takes over and the inexplicable becomes part of the work. At once literal and imaginative, the shifts in paint handling and degree of representation from panel to panel are what hold our attention, as well as pull us into a state of reflection.

Kim has always been a subtle colorist, and this series enables him to explore a wide range of color and paint application. He does more with color, hue, and brushwork than in many of his previous works. More importantly, he makes no overt connection between the three panels in an individual work; this is a world where the laws of cause and effect are not apparent, which is unsettling, as it reminds us that nature exists beyond our control.

I was also struck by the tension between the sensual beauty of the color and brushwork and what they might signify. How are we supposed to read the green of the bottom panel in "B.Q.O. 21 (Triakis semifasciata)" (2021)? Does it symbolize ripeness or poison? Despite all we know about the environment and what we are doing to it, Kim arrives at another, less palatable realization: As much as we call the Earth our home, we are strangers here. Being guests, however brief or long our stay, we might wish to think seriously about how we can be more considerate to our host, even as it is indifferent to us. In grasping that fundamental fact, Kim has commenced a series of contemplations that go beyond what he attained in *Synecdoche*, and its merging of the aesthetic and social.



Byron Kim, "B.Q.O. 23 (Honu)" (2021), acrylic on canvas mounted on panel 54 x 36 inches

Byron Kim: *Drawn to Water* continues at *James Cohan Gallery* (48 Walker Street, Soho, Manhattan) through February 19.