

DIRECTIONS

Byron Kim: Grey-Green

July 18–October 20, 1996



Koryō Green Glaze #2, 1995–96, oil on linen, 84 x 60 in. (213.4 x 152.4 cm).
Courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch Gallery, New York.

The bottle is like green jade, finely engraved
with golden flowers.
A noble family should use it, filling it joy-
fully with wine.
One should revere old age and know how to
greet an honored guest.
We cherish the spring, and sit intoxicated
by the mirror of the lake.

—inscription on a celadon bottle, National
Museum of Korea, Seoul (Beth McKillop,
Korean Art and Design [New York: Harper
Collins/Icon, 1992], 46)

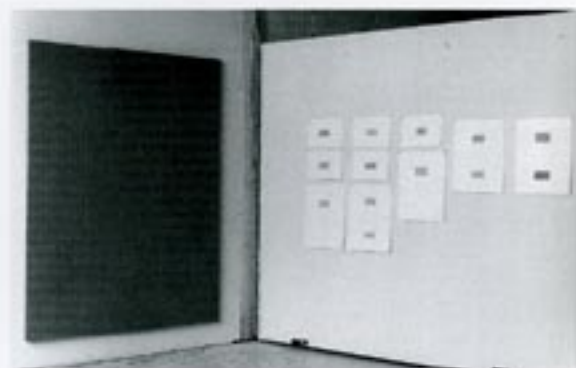
BYRON KIM RESPECTS THE Western high art traditions of the twentieth century yet, like many artists of his generation, he questions certain assumptions underlying them. Kim's particular reference point is the utopian beauty of abstract painting as practiced in this century by artists such as Piet Mondrian, Ad Reinhardt, and Mark Rothko, who aspired to make works of aesthetic purity that would be sublime, timeless, and universal.

Paying homage to that tradition, Kim makes monochromatic paintings of great sensual beauty, but, while they might otherwise be perceived simply as beautiful objects, his titles call attention to the paintings' specific subjects. *Synecdoche*, for example, named for the figure of speech by which a part of something is used to refer to the whole, is an ongoing painting composed of numerous panels in tones from beige to brown. Appearing to be a study of formal relationships between colors, it actually reproduces the skin tones of the friends, acquaintances, and strangers who posed for the artist. Thus in *Synecdoche*, the skin color stands for the person. This and other of Kim's paintings that depict individuals by their skin colors have been seen to represent an encoding of social issues and have been associated with the work of other artists who address issues of race,

gender, identity, and the mutability of the human body. Kim's paintings, however, are also often intensely personal and intimate; many are family portraits.

As an undergraduate at Yale University, Kim studied science and painting, while majoring in English literature. Reminiscent of the work of the nineteenth-century American artist Thomas Eakins, who also had scientific training, Kim's paintings combine minutely observed detail and clinical realism with a particular kind of poetic reverie. *Emmett at Twelve Months*, 1994, a painting made up of panels representing tiny anatomical details such as "upper eyelid," "rim of nostril," or "inside of elbow" in subtly modulated colors, forms a composite portrait of the artist's then one-year-old son. Other paintings, including *Metropolitan Pool, Williamsburg, Brooklyn* and *The Errant Colt (Colt Factory Dome, Hartford, CT)*, both also 1994, record the colors of significant features of places where the artist has lived.

The paintings in this exhibition refer to Korean Koryŏ dynasty celadon pottery. Celadon is a ceramic glaze that results in pottery of infinitely subtle modulations in shades of blue to greyish green. Although the glaze originated in China, the production of celadon ceramics reached a point of singular



The artist's studio, showing *Koryŏ Green Glaze #1*, and color sketches he made at the Freer Gallery of Art, 1996.

refinement in Korea during the Koryŏ dynasty (A.D. 918–1392). Kim's "celadon paintings" are all large enough, according to the artist, to be related to the "heroic" stature of classic American postwar abstraction but not so large that they begin to lose their status as discrete objects. Autobiographical to the extent that they began with studies of objects in his parents' home and address his Asian heritage, they are also meditations on Western abstract painting, notions of beauty, and the mystery of the possibilities contained in an idea about color.

The following text was edited from recent correspondence with the artist.

Phyllis Rosenzweig, Associate Curator

PR: What did you have in mind when you began your first celadon painting?

BK: Korean celadon announced itself as a natural subject to me when I began to understand how important it is as a symbol of pride in Korean culture. There is a consensus among Koreans that the various greens, blues, and greys produced by Koryŏ potters are unsurpassed in their beauty. Why is such significance attached to these colors? The answer to this question is complex and cannot be limited to aesthetics. For example, I'm sure that Korea's long history with China—including Korea's development of Chinese greenware, the Chinese admiration of Koryŏ green glaze, and the subsequent Japanese fascination for these Korean ceramics—has a lot to do with their value.

The belief in the beauty of Koryŏ green glaze reminded me of the value placed on abstract painting in Western culture. My introduction to the idea of the sublime in visual art came through modern abstraction. Based in part on my examination of my own education

and cultural upbringing, I have developed a strong sense that beauty is a learned concept. I believe that one cannot walk in from the street uninitiated and see a Rothko painting as beautiful. My work in the last few years has explored this idea. I began my study of Koryŏ dynasty ceramics by looking at a few of the pots that my parents have collected, and I continued by observing various pieces in museum collections. Having grown up an American Korean, I "knew" that these objects were beautiful, but I didn't know exactly why. So, I figured I would be able to start from scratch, to take the color at face value, to undertake a kind of phenomenology of Koryŏ green glaze.

PR: Your approach to the new celadon paintings differs significantly from the earliest ones and from your previous work in general. Can you elaborate on that shift in your thinking?

BK: In the last few years I have been copying things. After choosing an object to look at, I scrutinize it and try to duplicate its color with paint. Often I have been happy with a kind of one-to-one correspondence between painting and subject: if the painting reminds me of its subject, it is working. My painting has a tendency to rely on the contrast of its idiosyncratic content with its modernist form. My approach to studying Koryŏ green glaze started similarly but has expanded into a more intuitive process.

In the celadon series, I have become interested in capturing the spirit of the color more than simply copying it. As I stared into so many grey-green pots, I became curious about the artisans who made them. I wondered what their objectives were. Were they aiming for a particular color? Did they have any inkling that they were producing objects with which a whole culture would come to identify? How could

color be at the root of such a phenomenon? And given the potters' lowly social status, what forces cultivated such subtle inventiveness? These questions motivated me to explore how color, time, and emotion might be communicated in an abstract painting.

PR: In describing your "sense of place" paintings, you have emphasized the great care you took to make them beautiful. Can you say more about your idea of beauty in relation to your celadon paintings and to your thoughts about those twelfth-century Korean potters?

BK: As a painter I am in the business of making beautiful objects. Now that I am older, I have fewer pretensions about being another kind of artist, someone, let's say, more experimental. I remember being in the basement of the Freer Gallery of Art, cupping a very old piece of stoneware in my hand, thinking, "I've never seen a painting nearly as beautiful as this little green bowl." I guess that my objective is not so different from that potter's in A.D. 1150 on that Korean hillside, trying to get it right. I want to get into the potter's mind or to find that aspect of the potter's mind that is the same as an abstract painter's mind. My goal is to make a group of paintings that will take on a life of their own, visually, and not rely too much on what they are about. In other words, forget what I say about them—what do the paintings say?

PR: Stating so bluntly that you are in the business of making beautiful objects seems at odds with your questions about beauty.

BK: Yes, I see the contradiction. Maybe some things just *are* beautiful. Koryō green glazes can be visually spectacular. The glaze is often translucent because it is applied so thinly. The play between the ephemeral skin of

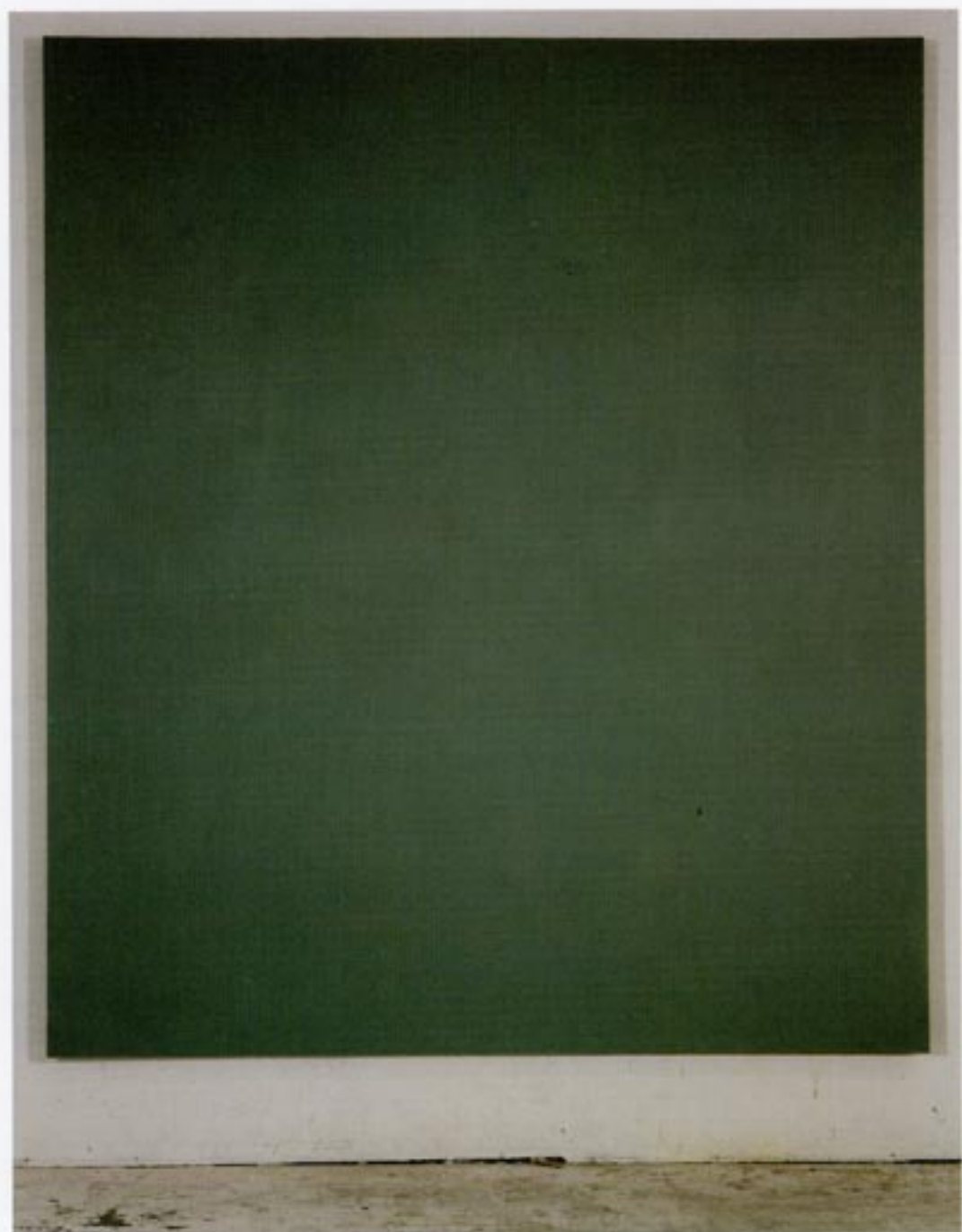


A Koryō dynasty cup belonging to the artist.

color and its faint grey underbody is magic. I find that the imprecision of the color distinguishes Koryō green glaze. The color of each piece seems to present itself in the form of a question, elusive and full of wonder. Somehow there are infinite variations within a narrow range of grey-green and grey-blue. No two pieces seem to have the same hue, and even within one piece the glaze may pool around an edge and appear to be much clearer and bluer, like one's idea of the color of crystal, cool water.

PR: Is there anything else you would like to add?

BK: A few years ago, I had the horrifying experience of dropping and shattering an exquisite cup with a handle in the shape of a dragon's head. It arrived at my studio in Brooklyn in mint condition after eight hundred years of commerce and through the generosity of my parents. Due to one instance of carelessness, there it lay, demystified on my studio floor. Though I was very saddened, I learned something by looking at the fragments themselves. The cup had an unremarkable, cement-colored body to which the brittle glaze adhered. Seeing a cross-section of the color layered on top of the neutral ground taught me how close the potter's process is to that of the painter and how appropriate it would be to resurrect this experiment in grey-green through abstract painting.



Korean Koryŏ Dynasty Cup with Dragon Head Handle, 1994, oil on linen, 84 x 72 in. (213.4 x 182.9 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch Gallery, New York.

CHECKLIST

All works are oil on linen and are lent courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch Gallery, New York.

Korean Koryŏ Dynasty Cup with Dragon Head Handle, 1994, 84 x 72 in. (213.4 x 182.9 cm)

"Koryŏ Green Glaze" nos. 1 and 2, 1995-96; nos. 3-9, 1996, each 84 x 60 in. (213.4 x 152.4 cm)

BIOGRAPHY

Born in La Jolla, California, 1961. Yale University, New Haven, B.A. English Literature, 1983; Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Maine, 1986. Awards include Artist-in-Residence Grant, New York State Council on the Arts, New York, 1990; Diverse Forms Artists' Project, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, New York, 1991; Louise Nevelson Award in Art, American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York; Biennial Competition Awards to Individual Artists, Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, 1993; Award for Visual Arts, Korea Arts Foundation of America, Los Angeles; Fellowship in Painting, New York Foundation for the Arts, 1994; Visual Artists Fellowship in Painting, National Endowment for the Arts, 1995. Lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1992 Max Protetch Gallery, New York.
1993 Baumgartner Galleries, Washington, D.C.
1994 Max Protetch Gallery; Galerie Francesca Pia, Bern; Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut.
1995 Korean Cultural Center Gallery, Los Angeles.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1988 "Thirty-Fourth Annual Exhibition," San Diego Art Institute, California; "Yesterday: Reflections on Childhood," Asian American Arts Centre, New York.
1989 "Skowhegan '89: Works by Faculty and Staff," Portland Museum of Art, Maine.
1990 "A Question of Paint," Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, Buffalo, New York; "Artists in the Marketplace: Tenth Annual Exhibition," The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York.
1991 "Color Theory," Amelie A. Wallace Gallery, State University of New York, Old Westbury.

- 1992 "Byron Kim/Kiki Smith," A/C Project Room, New York.
1993 "Skin Deep," New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; "Physical Evidence," William Cooper Procter Art Center, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, and tour; "1993 Biennial Exhibition," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; "Prospect 93," Frankfurter Kunstverein.
1994 "Stories," Max Protetch Gallery
1995 "Face Value: American Portraits," The Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, New York, and tour; "Twenty-Five Americans: Painting in the 90's," Milwaukee Art Museum; "Tampering (Artists and Abstraction Today)," High Museum of Art, Atlanta.
1996 "In the Flesh," The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut; "Screen," Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York.

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Krane, Susan. *Tampering (Artists and Abstraction Today)*. Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 1996. Exhibition brochure.

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