

## Painting the Sky on Sunday

Byron Kim's diaristic texts offer a bird's-eye view of his life — the youth soccer games, the dinner parties, the glum and the optimistic moods, the children going away to college.



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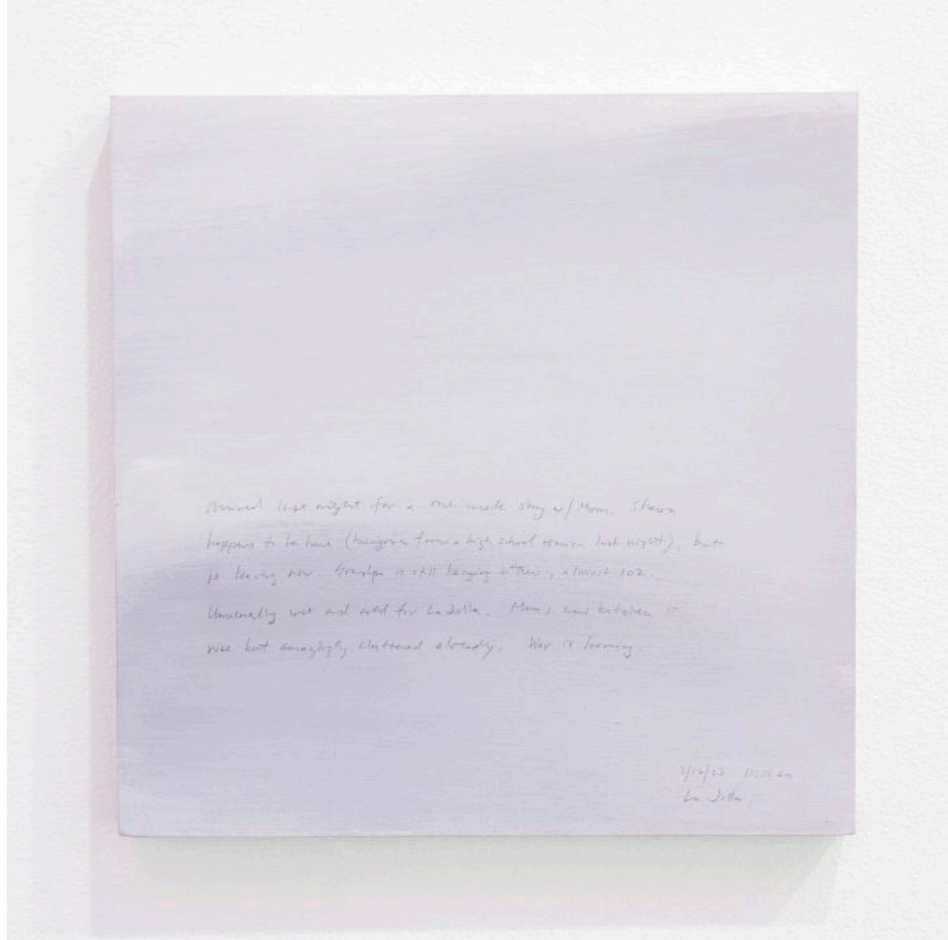
Byron Kim, "Sunday Painting 6/5/16" (2016), acrylic and pencil on canvas mounted on panel, 14 x 14 inches

In the diaristic handwritten paragraph overlaid upon the white, cloudy sky of his *Sunday Painting*, "6/5/16," Byron Kim meditates on his use of color and jokes, "Maybe someday I will be considered the idiot savant of the abstract sublime." The self-deprecating joke reflects an unfortunate truth about some perceptions of Kim's oeuvre. His penchant for creating minimalist painting series' that straddle the line between abstraction and representation and play with part-whole relationships can suggest that he has a narrow artistic range. This sense of aesthetic narrowness is compounded by his landmark *Synecdoche* (1991-2) — a grid of small

monochromatic rectangles, each panel of which depicts the skin color of the sitter whose “portrait” Kim has painted — which is so evocative and art historically important that it tends to eclipse the rest of his work in the public imagination.

At James Cohan Gallery, Kim’s *Selected Sunday Paintings, 1/7/01 to 2/11/18* complicates any oversimplifications of his career. The exhibition, which contains nearly 100 paintings, is the largest presentation yet of a series that has been ongoing for over 15 years; as such, it allows us to consider an underappreciated but essential strand of Kim’s life work. I say “life work,” rather than “oeuvre” or “output,” because, in aggregate, the series turns out to be a tour de force of accidental autobiography. Every Sunday since 2001, Kim has produced a 14×14-inch acrylic painting that depicts a slice of sky — blues and whites predominate, with occasional washes of gray — and contains a small observational paragraph handwritten on the canvas. Reading through the paragraphs from start to finish provides an unexpectedly poignant bird’s-eye view of Kim’s life — the youth soccer games, the dinner parties, the glum and the optimistic moods, the children going away to college.

What makes the exhibition more than just a series of dreamily rendered analogue status updates is the intersection of Kim’s personal timeline with the timeline of world-historical events. He begins the project with trepidation — “Every Sunday?” he wonders in “7 January 2001” — but finds solace in its routine after the September 11 World Trade Center attacks. As the project continues, Kim’s quotidian equilibrium is periodically disrupted by seismic shifts in the larger world: “War is looming” (“3/16/03”); “Today we have a Black President” (“1/20/09”); Hurricanes Irene roils New York City (“8/28/11”); “Donald Trump is the president elect of the United States” (“11/14/16”).



Byron Kim, "Sunday Painting 3/16/03" (2003), acrylic and pencil on panel, 14 x 14 inches

Even as the *Sunday Paintings*' texts register an array of personal and political changes over time, their skies remain relatively constant. Kim skillfully captures the sky's subtle variations with his brushstrokes and color gradations, but the fact is that an arbitrary square of sky doesn't change much from day to day; viewed from a distance, the paintings, gauzy and calm, appear interchangeable. This contrast gives the work much of its force. Whether Barack Obama or Donald Trump has been elected President, whether Kim's daughter, Addee, scores a goal or rides the bench, the sky's celestial indifference remains the same.



Byron Kim, "Sunday Painting 12/6/15" (2015), acrylic and pen on canvas mounted on panel, 14 x 14 inches

In addition to providing cosmic perspective on life, Kim's *Sunday Paintings*, in their incorporation of writing into painting, also provide perspective on the artist's aesthetic. In themselves and in comparison with one another, his minimalist painting series' are far from one-note exercises in figurative abstraction. With an economy of aesthetic means, each series conveys surprising depth of thought and range of emotion. In the *Sunday Painting*, "12/6/15," Kim has just returned from viewing The Bronx Museum's Martin Wong retrospective and gushes, "What a great artist. It doesn't need to be so complicated or sensational to be so good." The observation applies to Kim's work as well. Few artists manage to do more with less.

***Sunday Paintings, 1/7/01 to 2/11/18*** continues at James Cohan (533 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through February 17.