

BYRON KIM A '86, F '99, '13

SKOWHEGAN MEDAL
FOR PAINTING



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One of the leading artists of our era, Byron Kim has exerted, over the course of his career, extraordinary influence on the practice and pedagogy of art, and it is a special pleasure to offer a tribute to him on the occasion of his receipt of the 2022 Skowhegan Medal for Painting. His thoughtful and thought-provoking work has earned the artist international recognition. This includes the Robert De Niro, Sr. Prize (2019), a Guggenheim Fellowship (2017), and the Alpert Award in the Arts (2008), to name just a few of his honors, in addition to the numerous leading collections in which his work appears. It is exciting to witness Skowhegan, where he has studied (1986), taught (1999 and 2013), and offered guidance as a Governor (1994–2019), honoring his exceptional achievements.

In the late 1990s, while I was a graduate student, I had the good fortune to attend a talk Byron delivered at the University of Texas at Austin about his painting practice, which included a discussion of *Synecdoche* (1991–present) and examples of his *Belly Paintings*. Byron's work—and the questions it raised about identity and representation and the politics of color and its deployment—

BYRON KIM works in an area one might call the abstract sublime. His work sits at the threshold between abstraction and representation, between conceptualism and pure painting. In his richly hued, minimalist works, Kim seeks to push the edges of what we understand as abstract painting by using the medium to develop an idea that typically gets worked out over the course of an ongoing series. Kim's paintings often appear to be pure abstractions but reveal a charged space that often connects to the artist's personal experiences in relation to larger cultural forces.

Byron Kim (b. 1961) is a Senior Critic at Yale University and the Co-director of Yale Norfolk School of Art. He received a BA from Yale University (1983) and attended Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (1986). Kim's numerous awards include the Louise Nevelson Award in Art (1993), the National Endowment of the Arts Award (1995), the Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant (1997), the Alpert Award in the Arts (2008) and the Robert De Niro, Sr., Prize (2019). His works are in numerous international permanent collections including the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., SFMOMA, CA and the Tate Modern, London, UK.

crawled under my skin and has continued, since that time, to exert a powerful influence on my thinking. Through seemingly simple strategies Byron has built a complex practice, shifting the potential of pigment to signify by acknowledging the political weight of color in our world.

In many ways, it seems appropriate that it should have been in a classroom that I first met Byron. For in addition to his extraordinary achievements as a visual artist, he is also an exceptional teacher, gifted as much in his ability to ask questions and to listen as in his ability to share wisdom. These are attributes that have shaped his work at Yale, where he is Senior Critic, and at the Yale Norfolk Summer School of Art, where he serves as co-director with his wife, Lisa Sigal (A '86, F '06, and Skowhegan Governor).

I have been fortunate to have also had the opportunity to work with Byron as a curator (*This Is a Portrait If I Say So: Identity in American Art, 1912–Today*, co-organized with Jonathan Walz and Kathleen Campagnolo at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art in 2016) and, just as powerfully, to have observed him working with students and building enduring connections with them. These are connections forged by a mutual and generous interrogation concerning our relationship to the world around us.

Byron has explained that he was drawn to visual art as a professional practice not because it was easy for him, but rather because of the inherent challenges it represented. As he puts it: “I always wanted to pursue the subject area that was most difficult, most interesting, and most fluid.” In choosing to dedicate himself to confronting the philosophical and technical hurdles intrinsic in painting, Byron has navigated with thoughtful deliberation the nuanced relationship between individual experience and global, historical concerns. His *Sunday Paintings*, for example, serve both



as a personal testament and a meditation on how an experience of the sky might connect those separated by vast distances. In the microcosm, it seems, the macrocosm might be glimpsed, just as a painting of the head of an infant might call to mind the cosmos. In more recent paintings—specifically his *B.Q.O.* (an abbreviation for Berton, Queequeg, and Odysseus) series—Byron contemplates bodies of water and the relationship of human bodies and narratives to this natural resource. Just as earlier paintings referencing bruises may reflect conflict among people, so too his recent work draws attention to our vexed relationship to the environment. There are no easy answers. But in Byron’s painting one may find the serenity that comes with an acknowledgement of the many painful conflicts now shaping our world, and, through this recognition, the prospect of the potential for a pathway toward healing.

Nearly twenty years ago, Byron reflected, with characteristic modesty: “I don’t think my work is obviously generous, but I’m hoping that in the end it will be, because I’m trying to create some space there for people that wasn’t there before. I don’t mean formal space. I mean space to be, or thinking space, and so maybe struggle is an integral part of it.”¹ On this occasion, I wish to affirm and thank him for his manifest generosity, and to express my profound appreciation for the space he has indeed created for others through his painting, and for the capacity to see the world, in light of his work, a little more clearly.

1 Constance M. Lewallen, “Generosity: A Conversation with Byron Kim, Janine Antoni, and Glenn Ligon,” in *Threshold: Byron Kim,*

1990–2004, edited by Eugenie Tsai (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2004), 57.