

Sang Woo Kim

The Seer, The Seen

Individual experience is valueless unless made sense of within a social constellation. However singular one feels themselves to be, their desires, fears, and experiences are products of tangible political conditions—symptomatic of how lives are formed and flow out of material structures. To frame an individual life as being particularly important or exceptional, without asking how that life is but a *consequence* of the world around it, would be to remove it from the experience of living.

Sang Woo Kim's self-portraits—at times textured with broken brushstrokes, sometimes smoothed, at other points gestural, though always tightly cropped—reflect, in the artist's words, a desire to “reclaim agency” over his racialisation as a Korean man in British society. In particular, Kim's eyes, and eyes writ large, are a motif in his paintings: his epicanthic folds, once widely ridiculed by the West, are now seen by many through the lens of orientalist fetish. Indeed, Kim's emphasis on his eyes are an attempt to encode a different set of significations beyond their Otherness: of a more complicated meeting between racism, objectification and the struggle against these forces. Here, in Kim's debut solo exhibition in London, the contrast between his eyes and those of others—held open by a speculum, gazing away from the viewer, staring in amazement at something beyond the frame—suggests a multidirectional spectatorship between the artist and his milieu in the imperial metropole.

The artist's sprawling suite of self-portraits indicate, in their sheer quantity, an immovable resolve to recuperate his identity. This propulsion is traceable in Kim's methodical, obsessive, and unrelenting style. It can be found, too, in the personal refusal that threads his paintings together. Having worked as a fashion model for many years, Kim's image continues to circulate at the whim of that rapacious industry, thrown across the globe to satisfy market desires separate from his own. Cropped so that his entire face is never seen, his paintings resist the idea that the wholeness of his person is discernible through any photograph that is made of him. Here, the instantaneity of photography is put into question. The process of making his portraits, so slowed down and rendered with paint, functions as a provocation: Kim asks viewers to consider the rate at which a photograph is taken, and the *speed* at which one's gaze onto him might flit between subjectification and objectification.

Kim's questioning of photography is similarly present in his pigment transfer works, also on view. Images mined from online forums, reels from his phone and those of his friends' are digitally manipulated, effaced, or otherwise altered before being transferred onto canvas. Arranged as both singular panels and polyptychs, these works in the exhibition unfurl into a vibrant and cacophonous mass. This chorus of gazes, colours, and textures is likened by the artist to our modern experience of visual immediacy and its relentless stimulation: “In a world where images are constantly generated, shared, and readily accessible, the act of appropriation and the use of found imagery speaks to the overwhelming visual landscape of our time.” Moreover, Kim experiments with the codes of photography, stripping objects and people of their original contexts to mark out a distance between representation and reproduction. Pulling into view an uncanniness between images and their washed out double—like a marble statue or a close-up film-still—Kim's pigment transfer works play with perceptions of photographic “truth” and can be contextualised as an extension of Robert Rauschenberg's “painterly prints.” These works blur the line between photography and painting while indexing their interchangeability and kinship within Kim's practice.

Whatever artifice lies behind Kim's formal processes is merely his desire to disrupt the expectations we might have of his editorialised and racialised image, and those images that he paints in response. These works stand as a theatre of self-interrogation or a hall of mirrors, whereby viewers are left to read themselves into Kim's world, witnessing an artist searching for an image of himself that has yet to be seen.

Text by Eugene Yiu Nam Cheung