Beyond East vs. West: Critically rereading Asian American art today

by

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INTRODUCTION

Asian American art is rarely given the care and attention it deserves. The formal and conceptual complexity of the art is so often erased by prioritizing the trite and hollowed out idea of blending East and West. Any Asian content within a piece is attributed to essentialized notions of the artist’s racial identity, swiftly disregarding any counter-orientalist gestures or political formulations that may emerge from the work. This is exactly the type of discourse I hope to avoid and counter in my analysis. Rather, I would like to approach Asian American art not simply in terms of representation and visibility, but, as a place to examine and critique the constraints placed upon the Asian American through racialization.

Readings of ethnic art are haunted by the legacy of multiculturalist notions of racial identity beginning in the 1980s. As Susette Min explains in *Unnameable: the ends of Asian American art*, multiculturalism spread through the art world in the 1990s in response to Ronald Reagan’s promotion of colorblind politics, initially resulting in exhibitions centered on marginalized and minority identities that were highly politicized and geared towards increased access to representation and institutional change. Larger museums soon caught onto the potential profit to be gained from this and began to hold their own multicultural exhibitions, but their engagements with race were flattened and depoliticized, following the greater trend of the absorption of multiculturalism into the mainstream.\(^1\) They worked by actively encouraging artists of color through a shallow embrace of difference that provided

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greater exposure for artists of color but only under conditions that confined the boundaries of their artistic production and tried to depoliticize their work. In this there was a conflation of race and culture, and a reduction of the value of art down to its binary sameness to and difference from the dominant culture. As Lucy Lippard notes, this made the artwork legible to the mainstream and accommodated it for white consumption. Though these critics have acknowledged the superficiality of these early exhibitions’ embrace of “diversity,” the legacy of multiculturalism still dominates discourse surrounding ethnic art today.

Multiculturalism has led to a proliferation of marginalized artist’s work in museum collections and exhibitions, but it also has put severe constraints on the ways in which the art is read. The multiculturalist celebration of difference frames cultural production by people of color as wholistic representations of an essentialized identity to which they belong, which results in a reading of the artwork as merely an extension of the artists’ identity and experience. The value of the art is derived from its ability to represent static notions of the artists’ racial and cultural difference, neutralizing any critical labor performed by the artwork by constraining its meaning to self-reflection. Furthermore, this constant emphasis on the artwork as a transparent reflection of identity results in notions of non-white identities and cultures as static and either fixed in the present moment or permanently relegated to the past. It also flattens these racial and cultural categories, erasing hierarchies and differences within a given group. This over-emphasis on identity creates expectations for what ethnic art

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3 Ibid., 12.
should look like. As a result, if a work does not meet dominant, usually stereotypical aesthetic expectations for art produced by someone of a certain identity – that is to say if the work cannot be made sense of through the lens of racialized self-expression – its value and title as ethnic art is questioned. In *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, Darby English poignantly sums up the issues faced by black artists as a result of this emphasis on black art as a representation of black identity and experience:

> It is an unfortunate fact that in this country, black artists’ work seldom serves as the basis of rigorous, object-based debate. Instead, it is almost uniformly generalized, endlessly summoned to prove its representativeness (or defend its lack of same) and contracted to show-and-tell on behalf of an abstract and unchanging “culture of origin.” For all this, the art gains little purchase on the larger social, cultural, historical, and aesthetic formations to which it nevertheless directs itself with increasing urgency. And in the long term, it runs the risk of moving beyond serious thought and debate. Viewed this way, the given and necessary character of black art—as a framework for understanding what black artists do—emerges as a problem in itself.4

These same phenomena are seen in the reception of Asian American Art, circumventing the formal complexity and critiques they pose to focus on identity.

In this project, I seek to reread the work of two contemporary Asian American artists, Steven Young Lee and Byron Kim, against the limited multiculturalist understandings of their work that confine it to a transparent reflection of Asian American identity and experience at the expense of the comprehensive investigations of the art objects and the larger formations they are addressing. Both of these artists make critical interventions into multiculturalist understandings of ethnic art, as well as understandings of Asian American identity more broadly, which I would like to

center in my analyses of these works. My ultimate goal is to do these artworks justice – to draw out their formal and conceptual complexities in order to both reexamine and rethink the place of Asian American art within the art world, and to draw out the interventions they make into the social, political, and historical forces that shape Asian American racialization. With this, I want to resituate Asian American art beyond the realm of the representation of Asian American identity, as a means of provoking and elaborating critical discourse that allows us to reframe the very terms by which we understand representation and Asian American identity.

In the first chapter, I examine the fractured forms of Steven Young Lee’s *deconstructed* (2009-2013) series, focusing on his blue and white porcelain vases. Lee is a contemporary Korean American ceramic artist who was born in Chicago in 1975 to immigrant parents. Lee received a BFA and MFA in Ceramics from Alfred University. In 2004 to 2005, he took part in a one-year fellowship in Shanghai, Beijing, and Jingdezhen – the capital of Ming porcelain. In 2006, he was appointed as the resident artist director at the Archie Bray Foundation for Ceramic Arts. His work has been displayed in exhibitions at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C.

The medium in which he works, Chinese porcelain, is highly implicated in the construction of Western fantasies of Asia, the invention of an early American bourgeois identity, and the objectification of Asiatic femininity. On the surface, it appears that Lee is fulfilling expectations of Asian American artists by working with this ancient Asian medium with which he is assumed to hold an intimate connection. Yet as one looks closer, Lee is able to use this medium to break open myths of
authenticity relied upon by multiculturalist readings of ethnic art. This enables us to look beyond Lee’s individualized Asian American identity and to the more significant interventions Lee makes into conceptions of Asian American identity by uncovering the legacy of Asian porcelain in America and its role in the objectification of Asian women. From here, I will look what this means for our understandings of humanity and objecthood.

In the second chapter, I focus on two series of abstract paintings by Byron Kim, *Synecdoche* (1991-present), a grid of monochromatic canvases depicting skin colors, and *Grey-Green* (1994-1996), a series of ten large monochromes based off the glaze of Koryo Dynasty Korean ceramics. Kim, born in 1961 in California, completed his undergraduate degree in English at Yale University, where he now serves as a Senior Art Critic, before attending Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 1986. Kim’s work has been displayed in numerous exhibitions around the world and can be found in permanent collections at museums such as the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Hirschhorn Museum.5 Beyond his capacity as an artist, Kim was also a founding member and regular contributor to Godzilla, a collective of Asian American activists, artists, and art professionals, and holds a deep knowledge of art history which forms the basis for much of his work.6

After discussing the 1993 Whitney Biennial – a pivotal point in solidifying a multiculturalist framework for reading ethnic art and the show in which Kim

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premiered his breakthrough piece *Synecdoche* – and the way in which this exhibition lead to reductive readings of Kim’s work, I will provide an alternate reading of his work, putting it in conversation with Abstract painter Ad Reinhardt, one of his main artistic influences, to examine how his work makes interventions into both the practice of Modernist abstractions and our conceptions of race. Kim injects the self-contained form of abstract painting with racialized content, disrupting its claimed autonomy and breaking open its conceptual framework to place race and abstraction analogous to each other. In doing this, he is forcing us to rethink racial embodiment and the possibilities and constraints of racial representation. Building on this reading of *Synecdoche*, I will turn to *Grey-Green*, a series that engages questions of race, abstraction, and appropriation by repainting Brice Marden’s *Grove Group* with the content of celadon glaze rather than Marden’s Greek landscape. In this series, Kim both extends the theoretical explorations of *Synecdoche*, as well as illuminates the uneven constraints placed upon the artist of color and the different ways in which the body is present in ethnic art as compared to art by white artists.

This project is by no means an attempt to provide a wholistic model for how to read Asian American art. Nor does it argue that all art by Asian Americans is and must be read as political. My analysis is not meant to be a consolidation of Asian American art and identity, but rather strives to show the ways in which these artworks have the potential to disrupt and break open the terms of hegemony that constrain understandings of Asian American art and Asian American identity. Ultimately, this project is an attempt to give this artwork the attention it deserves, to recognize the
richness of its form and its critical potential, to push back against shallow readings
that flatten the artwork and reify fixed understandings of identity.
When one approaches Steven Young Lee’s “diptych, eagles” [figure 1-2], it immediately appears familiar, belonging to the legacy of blue and white porcelain from Asia that is so often displayed as representations of Asia and Asian art in American museums. Yet upon closer viewing the violent deformations of the forms become apparent, bringing this classification into question. The vases are warped and ruptured, creating jagged edges that clash with the smooth curves of the surrounding porcelain. These objects have clearly been violated and seem to demand that the viewer mourns their wounded state, but leave the viewer helplessly speculating who or what has led to this damage. This piece is part of Lee’s *deconstructed* series, which consists of 26 works separated into three categories: jars, vases, and platters. All of
the objects are crafted from porcelain and decorated with either cobalt inlay or copper inlay.

“Diptych” features two 10 by 11 by 23-inch blue and white porcelain vases that stand beside one another. The two vases are warped and bend slightly in towards one another. They each have a violent crack in their mid-section that allow one to see the insides of the vases, which is illuminated by an overhead light. Though their shape is mirrored, the subtle differences in design suggests two separate entities in conversation, rather than two identical clones of one another. Each of the vases is adorned with a similar, but not quite identical, cobalt-blue landscape consisting of trees and mountains. These landscapes are unmistakably Asian, yet this is not what would typically be found on Asian blue and white porcelain. Rather, it is akin to traditional Japanese and Chinese ink painting. The design of the landscapes on each individual vase is made from the same few elements – a single type of tree, an outline of a mountainscape – repeated multiple times around the vase with variations in scale. On a more micro level, each element is made up of straight, repetitive lines that would not resemble anything if taken individually. The cobalt pigment that makes up the landscapes is relatively unsaturated, and is sparsely distributed throughout the exterior of the vase, creating a flat image with little priority given to foreground over background. The inlay on traditional blue and white is much more saturated without visible strokes. This begs questions of how – despite these departures – the vases can remain so immediately identifiable as Asian and, more specifically, part of the legacy of Asian porcelain. There is another major break with traditional Asian porcelain that disrupts the subtle, dream-like landscape of the vases through the inclusion of bald
eagle decals atop the landscape. These decals are rendered in a multichromatic, photorealistic fashion that gives them a self-contained depth which visibly disturbs the equal exchange between the blue and white. Their opaque texture does not allow any of the porcelain or cobalt to show through, giving them clear priority over the more minor elements of the piece. The eagles very clearly allude to American national identity, which is far from the otherwise Asian vases. What is Lee doing by placing these seemingly disparate elements of Japanese and Chinese ink painting, an icon of American nationalism, and damaged form in conversation with each other?

In what follows, I will show how Lee’s engagement with Asian porcelain disrupts multiculturalist identitarian readings of his work through its rejection of authenticity on both the level of artwork and identity. In reading this artwork beyond just a reflection of Lee’s own Asian American identity and experience, it enables us to examine larger socio-historical forces. In particular, I will show how Lee’s engagement with the cultural history of porcelain critiques the way in which Asian porcelain has moved from an object from Asia to an object representative of the generic style of Asianess. In addition, considering links between Asian porcelain and Asian femininity, I will show how Lee engages in a gendered critique of the objectification of Asian women, embracing a fragmented state in order to break open the rigid categories of personhood and objecthood.
Part I: Embracing the inauthentic

Discussions of Steven Young Lee’s work typically interpret his work as a reflection of his Asian American identity and experience, in line with the multiculturalist readings of ethnic art discussed in the introduction. These reviews make sense of Lee’s art through his identity as an Asian American, assuming that it can be entirely explained on the level of the Lee as an individual. Such readings understand Lee’s art as both sourced from and authenticated by his racial identity, and thus inevitably rely upon a conception of an essential and stereotyped Asian American identity and experience. An emblematic example of this is a 2010 review of Lee’s work published in Ceramics Monthly. The title of this article, “West to East and Back Again,” situates the work, and Lee himself, as a blending of Asia and America. This review goes on to describe his work as “bilingual” and, when discussing his incorporation of both American pop cultural symbols and Asian imagery in his work, states that “one might draw a parallel between this and immigrants’ experiences of assimilation versus integration—the former being wholesale absorption into the dominant culture; the latter, adaptation to that culture but without abandoning one’s native identity.”\(^7\) The review presents Lee’s work as the expression of a stereotyped idea of the Asian American experience of a cultural clash – failing to accurately describe Lee’s own experience, which is described in the same review not as “bilingual” at all, but as an “artist of Korean descent…raised speaking English in Chicago.” This is mirrored even in an MFA thesis by a Korean American artist who

cites Lee as an artistic inspiration. The artist says that by “combining traditional Korean patterns and motifs, like the lotus, with imagery from his own personal narrative, Lee expresses his struggle with identity and assimilation as a first generation Korean American.”

Lee’s work is repeatedly reduced to his racial identity and experience, one that is entirely felt and worked out on the level of the individual. Paradoxically, I will argue, Lee’s work is in fact critiques precisely such conceptions of racial authenticity and identity that these reviews rely upon.

Though on the surface Lee’s use of traditional Chinese blue and white porcelain may appear to stem from his Asianess and assumed intimacy with Asian traditions, he rejects this assumption on two levels. First, his work belies his supposed intimacy with Asian traditions by the way it stages distance from those traditions, and second, through the blending of styles and techniques from disparate East Asian locations and temporalities which amplifies its inauthenticity. His vases are thrown in white porcelain originating in China but are inlaid with cobalt in a technique originating in Joseon Dynasty Korea. The landscapes that he creates are primarily influenced by conventions of Japanese and Chinese ink painting, in their sparse and delicate design, much less saturated than the typical ornamentation of traditional blue and white porcelain. Additionally, his inclusion of bald eagle decals further distances this piece from any claims at authenticity. This can be seen as an insistence that, despite being ethnically Asian, Lee himself has physical and temporal distance from Asian cultural traditions. His racial identity does not enable an intrinsic connection to Asian cultures, a connection unmediated by American culture.

8 Kwan Jeong, “What to Value,” (Syracuse University, 2018).
Lee’s work intervenes in discourses of authenticity on yet another level, for the collapsing of different Asian styles and temporalities in fact mirrors the history of Chinese porcelain, particularly the invention and conceptual development of the Ming vase. Despite the specificity of its name, the category of Ming vase has little to do with porcelain produced in the Ming Dynasty, rather, it has become a generic type to represent Asianess in a broader sense. From the beginning, this category was surrounded by myth and misrecognition due to a reliance on inaccurate translated texts. An example of the inaccuracy of basic conceptions about Ming porcelain is seen in its use as a representation of authentic craftmanship as an argument against mass production in the 19th and 20th centuries. Ironically, Ming porcelain was actually mass produced in the industrial city of Jingdezhen. Here, Lee’s work is performing another reversal, quite an ironic one, by crafting his vases by hand.

This same loose understanding of Ming porcelain spread to popular culture through 19th and 20th century fiction, where the descriptions of Ming porcelain were consistent only in that they privileged exotic, oriental elements of the porcelain – such as dragons or flowers – over specific features that may appear in actual Ming porcelain. There is again a collapse of disparate Asian styles, cultures, and time periods to signify a generic type: Asianess. Despite Lee’s atemporal amalgamation of Asian cultures and arts, his work is still recognized as belonging to a specific aesthetic tradition. This collapse not only rejects the discourse of authenticity surrounding art made by marginalized artists, as discussed in the previous paragraphs,

9 Stacey Pierson, From Object to Concept: Global Consumption and the Transformation of Ming Porcelain, (Hong Kong, 2013), 66, 98.
10 Ibid., 70.
11 Ibid., 75.
but also highlights the false nature of exhaustive and static definitions of Asianess and Asian aesthetics.

In addition to Lee’s amalgamation of different Asian styles, his focus on negative space disavows the expectation of ethnic art as a reflection of any sort of true interiority, putting its very possibility in contention. The notion of interiority relies upon a separation between the exterior – how one is viewed by society – and the interior or the true self, but Lee’s work makes both the interior and exterior of the objects simultaneously visible and the same. The fractures in the vase allow one to look inside – and at certain times directly through – the object. The division between interior and exterior can’t be upheld. Lee further disrupts the distinction between surface and depth by making the blue inlay unsaturated with minimal shading. In other words, the distribution of pigment is consistently sparse. This allows it to interact harmoniously with the porcelain, presenting a relatively balanced relationship between content versus negative space, leading the vase as a whole to be configured as much by its material presence as by its absence. The plain white porcelain is given as much attention and significance in configuring the landscapes as the cobalt that is placed atop it; the jagged openings are just as important to defining the vase’s form as the rigid porcelain. A separation between surface and depth is shown only in so far as it illuminates their sameness.

The fractures on Lee’s vases further disrupt the idea of “interiority” because they appear forcefully smashed, with large fractures throughout the vases, bent inward along their borders, that allow one to cast their gaze onto both the exterior of the vase and the unguarded interior. The violent fractures and refusal to distinguish
interior and exterior can be read through the internalization of racist stereotypes as discussed in Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan’s 1972 essay “Racist Love.” In this essay, Chin and Chan describe the way American culture encourages Asian Americans to internalize white stereotypes. Such internalizations disrupt the border between exterior and interior – much as the fractures in Lee’s vases do. The internalization of racist stereotypes is heightened in Lee’s work through the inclusion of decals on the interior of the many of his vases which are visible through their cracks, showing that both exterior and interior are marked. Rather than producing a subject split between how it is viewed in the eyes of white society and a true, untouched interiority, the fracture sits so deep that an interiority cannot be reconciled. In short, the bind placed upon the Asian American does not allow an authentic Asian American identity to exist because the externally imposed racial stereotypes have permeated the interior of the racial subject, and the interior cannot exist on its own as it can only be articulated through the same language that resulted in this fracture.

The two discussions of Lee’s work mentioned above read Lee as a representative of Asian American experience defined by being caught between East and West, exemplary of the way in which the racist stereotype is constantly forced upon the Asian American, transforming racialization into an individualized struggle that takes place on the level of the psyche. For Chin and Chan, this is not some sort of struggle that begins in the interior of the racialized subject or exists solely at the level of the individual; Rather, the racist stereotype is violently forced upon the Asian American from the outside, and cannot help but be absorbed into their interior, and is

constantly reinforced by rhetoric surrounding Asian American art as a reflection of an individualized struggle that Chin and Chan call the “dual personality thesis.” It is the idea that Asian Americans must reconcile “East versus West” and make a choice between wholesale assimilation and holding onto one’s “native” culture. The broader structural forces that cause this struggle are masked by the false relegation of this struggle from a social and historical one into an individual one. Both of the reviews understand Lee’s work as a struggle with assimilation and identity, putting forth a picture of Asian America as a collection of discrete individuals who share a stereotyped experience, rather than a historically formed category situated within the larger society. This type of reading allows one to disregard the more outward-facing critiques of Lee’s work that explicate historically rooted racism.

In contrast to the dual personality thesis, Lee’s work does not try to reconcile a ruptured whole or a balance between his Asianess and his Americaness. Nor does it try to situate itself as an authentic extension of the tradition of Chinese porcelain as coming from the artists true culture which, for Chin and Chan, would just be an acceptance and internalization of the stereotypes and expectations placed upon the Asian American, no more than a false claim at authentic expression. Far from a reflection of an authentic Asian American identity then, Lee’s work is better understood as a critique of it. Rather than just reading it as a universalized struggle faced by Asian Americans at the level of an individual – something that can easily be assigned to most Asian American art with little effort or need for specificity – it enables us to see how his work pushes back against this flattening of ethnic art into a representation of identity or search for that identity. Furthermore, it allows us to view
his artwork as a form of critical labor that engages with not an individualized 
struggle, but broader social-historical processes of racialization that are implicated by 
his use of Asian porcelain.

Part II: A Cultural History of Asian Porcelain in the United States

Despite Lee’s collapse of disparate Asian styles and techniques, Lee’s work is 
still immediately legible as Chinese porcelain. Through this, Lee’s work reflects the 
layered history of Asian porcelain from its move from an object from China to a 
material manifestation of China and Chinese aesthetic. Rather than reflecting a 
personal history or experience, Lee’s vases invoke this accumulation of meaning. To 
understand these layered meanings, we must draw out the cultural history of Asian 
porcelain beginning from its role in the early 18th century as a marker of distinction 
and mechanism of self-building for the bourgeoisie class, shifting to a means for 
white women to embrace a formerly unattainable strange and exotic land, a 
representation of Asian art and aesthetics, and finally as a manifestation of the exotic 
in popular culture.
While Lee’s critics read his art as an act of Asian American self-expression, ironically, Asian porcelain was first used in the United States as a technology of self-making for patriarchs such as George Washington. The import of Asian porcelain predates the existence of actual Asian bodies in the United States. Starting during the American Revolutionary period, prominent political figures sought to craft a self-image of patriarchs worthy of leading a revolution, which they largely based off of British norms of distinction. Beginning during this period and extending to his time as the first president of the United States, Washington imported luxury goods, particularly Asian dishware, in order to present himself as a man of elite stature.\textsuperscript{13} This practice spread beyond just the founding fathers, becoming a defining factor in elite culture. Inviting people over for tea time became a means of building one’s reputation, an opportunity to display one’s exotic luxury goods in order to cement

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their position within high society. The more refined one’s possessions, the more virtuous they appeared. In this culture of distinction, Chinese porcelain held significance beyond its ability to reflect a distinguished identity, holding potential as a rallying point for independence from the British Empire. In a country built on the ideology of individualism and class mobility – as seen through the Lockean ideals of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of property” which was transmuted into “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” by Thomas Jefferson – barring one’s access to the accumulation of material goods was seen as a limitation on the individual freedom to pursue happiness, as defined by one’s estate. The British limitations on direct trade and the import of foreign goods, particularly those from China, through the East India Company triggered boycotts of their products and stirred nationalist sentiment that justified revolutionary action. On the same day that the Edward sailed from U.S. shores to deliver the ratified Treaty of Paris and establish America as an independent nation, the Empress of China set out to establish direct trade with China for the first time. The ship successfully returned to the U.S. with large quantities of Chinese porcelain and other luxury goods, their consumption no longer inhibited by the British. This held great symbolic weight in displaying the country’s new independence and strength as a nation.

Lee’s inclusion of bald eagles in these “Asian” vases could be read as a reference to the use of Asian porcelain in the construction of an American national identity, and perhaps as a critique of the process of looking into the “exotic” as a

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14 Ibid., 10-13.  
15 Ibid., xvii, 9.  
means to consolidate one’s conception of self. Lee’s work is mirroring this on a formal level in the prioritization of the eagle decals over the white porcelain and cobalt inlay. The “Chinese” blue and white landscape primarily consists of outlines with delicate shading, allowing much of the porcelain to remain visible behind the cobalt inlay. The ink bleeds down from the darker areas of the landscape, obscuring a clear divide between the white background and blue foreground. This produces a minimal and dreamlike appearance characteristic of Japanese and Chinese ink painting. By contrast, the eagles are created from completely opaque decals. They do not blend with the porcelain like the cobalt, but sit atop it with clearly defined boundaries. Their life-like proportions and coloration clash with the minimalistic landscape. In separating the Asian background from the American decals, Lee reflects the consumptions of Chinese porcelain in this early period of American nation building, where the use value of Chinese porcelain had little relation to its site of origin. Its Asianess was only significant in so far as it is able to reflect back one’s sense of belonging to a bourgeois class and American identity.

The role of Asian porcelain in American national self-fashioning is admittedly obscure. We are more likely today to think of Chinese porcelain as a decorative object. In doing so, we register the historical shift in the circulation and symbolic meaning of Asian porcelain in the US that occurred in the 19th century, a shift that signals the movement of Asian porcelain from a tool of masculine self-making to its more familiar role as a feminized consumer object. By the 19th century, transpacific trade was a commonplace and Asian goods were no longer confined to the realm of male intellectuals and the upper-class. In particular, white, middle-class
women began to consume Asian objects with a passion in the late 19th and early 20th century. This afforded them “a cultural, educational, and liberating experience akin to the grand tour of the world which their wealthy male counterparts undertook,” through the incorporation of these objects within their homes. A major factor in the development of Chinese porcelain as a feminized object of consumption was the proliferation of spectacles of Asia through events like the Worlds’ Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 – organized by a logic of racial and cultural supremacy with the grandiose White City reserved for the Western nations while the non-Western nations were prohibited from the White City and relegated to the subordinate Midway Plaisance – which transformed Asian architecture, arts, artifacts, cultures, and people into objects for the white gaze. These fairs, and similar presentation of Asian cultures as spectacles, typically presented decorative objects for consumption such as porcelain, furniture, and textiles. White women were able to engage with a distant, exoticized land as shaped by American Orientalist perceptions of Asia while still remaining within Victorian era gender norms through this unthreatening consumption of Asian objects.

While white women were consuming mass-produced Asian porcelain, some porcelain remained linked to connoisseurship. It began to appear more frequently in English texts, first as feminized objects, or as minor aspects in discussions of China more broadly, and eventually as a significant aspect of Chinese history and aesthetics. Ming porcelain in particular became singled out in connoisseurship circles due to a

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18 Ibid., 17-18, 25.
focus on Ming wares in the few early translated texts relied on by Western experts. Its growing prominence in art literature and ceramic connoisseurship circles was partially because of the thought-to-be easily identifiable reign marks which became synonymous with “imperial” quality. The reign marks made it simple for Western connoisseurs to single out what they believed to be Ming porcelain, an act that was used as a display of expertise. In the early 19th century, increased contact with and exposure to China led ceramic scholars to reexamine their lack of genuine knowledge and exposure to true Ming porcelain, leading to anxiety about the category of Ming ceramics and its place within the broader category of Chinese art. The authority of the earlier circulated texts, which the category had been built on, became threatened by increased interaction with and archeological study of China. The reign marks that were previously unquestioned indicators of authenticity started to be scrutinized, as it became apparent that they were easily faked and often misrecognized. This caused Ming porcelain to become a largely contested subject in connoisseurship circles, leading to an increase in the publication of scholarship on Chinese ceramics, particularly through the lenses of archaeology and technology.

Despite the growing anxiety within connoisseurship circles, the increased dialogue around Ming ceramics had a contradictory effect on its place in the sphere of mass culture, leading to an increase in its popularity. These ceramics were widely owned by wealthy collectors and institutions, meaning that there was a particular interest in presenting them as artistically significant in the broader category of

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19 Pierson, 85.
20 Ibid., 90, 93.
21 Ibid., 98.
22 Ibid., 94.
Chinese art in order to justify their frequent inclusion in gallery and museum
exhibition. One strategy was including it in exhibitions about Chinese painting –
which already fit Western standards of fine art and was accepted as representative of
“Chinese taste” – drawing a connection between the two mediums.23 Another
important move was the individualization of ceramic object, achieved through giving
them possessive names and presenting them as part of specific collections.24 This
growing prominence among connoisseurs and the art world caused it to take on new
significance beyond its capacity as luxury object within the domestic sphere in the
late 19th and early 20th century, dematerializing and spreading into popular discourse
through its role as the literary motif of the “Ming vase,” which gave it layered
meanings of both an object of distinction as well as a manifestation of the exotic,
precious, rare, fragility, and dangerous – a discourse that specifically echoed those
surrounding Asian females.25

Lee’s vases can be read in relation to this layered history of American
orientalist engagement with Asian porcelain from the early period of importation to
its proliferation as a pop cultural symbol of Asianess. The inclusion of bald eagles
clearly invokes the importance of Asian porcelain in American nation building. They
are crucially layered atop the cobalt inlay because the meanings it held in this period
– distinction and belonging to a bourgeois class – did not disappear; they remained as
part of a series of other layered meanings. Beyond this, they engage with the Asian
vase’s move from an Asian object to a representation of Asian aesthetics, mirroring

23 Ibid., 100-3.
24 Ibid., 87.
25 Ibid., 62.
the collapsing of disparate Asian styles and techniques. Lee’s marriage of craft and fine art, through the ink painting-based adornment of the ceramic vases, and the inclusion of a visible signature on the exterior of each vase reference these two connotations of Asian porcelain, as a decorative object for collectors and as an essential aspect of Asian art and aesthetics. Additionally, the vases reflect the conceptual developments of porcelain as a representation of the simultaneously fragile and dangerous in their sudden transitions from their smooth curves to their sharp and jagged fractures, which reflects a specific part of Lee’s engagement with this conceptual history that I would now like to delve deeper into: the substitution of Asian porcelain and Asian female flesh.

Part III: “She got skin like white jade, and she’s built like a Ming vase”\(^{26}\): Asian Porcelain as Asian Flesh

“From the thingliness of Anna May Wong (whom Walter Benjamin once referred to as a “moon” and a “bowl”) to Nancy Kwan’s trademark Porcelain Skin, for the Asian American woman, porcelain has always been flesh and not flesh.”\(^{27}\)

Steven Young Lee’s vases directly resemble (female) bodies due to their anthropomorphic proportions and erect stature. He amplifies this in the way that his vases are delicately manipulated. “Peonies and butterflies” [fig. 3] lays on its side, contracted as if it has gently collapsed from the exhaustion of holding its own weight. It appears to possess the malleability of flesh, tender and forgiving when handled yet deceivingly fragile due to the violent, wound-like gashes at its foot and lip. The

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\(^{26}\) Quote from *Flower Drum Song* (1961), the first mainstream American movie with an (almost) all Asian cast.

sunken neck of “landscape and magpies” [fig. 4&5] mirrors a slouched head and the fractured slabs that jut out from the body like arms, one of which is reaching out to shield the neck. Lee’s manipulation of these Asian forms thus conjures a history and bodily presence that haunts Asian porcelain, the figure of the objectified Asian body. The body is still absent, but its presence is clearly felt.

*Figure 3: Steven Young Lee, peonies and butterflies, 2013. Porcelain, cobalt inlay, gold luster, 12”x 26” x 13”; copyright the artist.*
The connection between Asian bodies and Asian porcelain is immediately familiar due to stereotypes that invoke the Asian female through her likeness to porcelain, visible in common phrases like “porcelain skin” or “China doll.” From this orientalist reduction of Asian humanity has arisen an intimate relationship between this anthropomorphized object and the objectified body; a relationship that cannot be overlooked. It is so deeply rooted that Asian porcelain always dialectically invokes the Asian body, but the Asian body that has been reduced to object. In its movement from a luxury commodity to a popular motif and representation of Asian art more generally, Asian porcelain has continually led to the displacement of Asian subjectivity and humanity. By working with this highly implicated medium, Lee’s work inevitably conjures the likeness of Asian porcelain to the Asian female. Yet rather than simply reiterating this objectification or pushing back against the ways in which the Asian body has been fragmented and degraded, Lee doubles down on this,
embracing a state of objecthood and fragmentation. In drawing this out, Lee specifies this legacy of objectification in order to deconstruct hegemonic conceptions of personhood that the dehumanization and objectification of Asian people relies on.

Illuminating the ways in which Asian ceramics have been used as a stand in for Asian (female) flesh and Asian bodies, Lee’s work intervenes in the frequent substitution of Asian objects for Asian bodies in the American imaginary by referencing two figures of Asian objecthood: the coolie and the cyborg. Through these two figures, Lee links such substitutions to a history of labor exploitation and commodification under capitalist modernity. Each of these formations is gendered, manifesting differently but still interconnected. The heightened anthropomorphism of Lee’s vases causes them to become haunted by this condition of objecthood, registering both of these historical constructions.

If the primal example of racial objectification in United States history is the institution of chattel slavery, then the primal example for the Asian American lies in the labor largely used as its replacement following abolition: the 19th Century coolie. These laborers were an outlet for anxiety about the prospect of American modernization, and were transformed from human into machine, perfectly suited for capitalist production. There was a fixation on what Eric Hayot refers to as the coolie’s “impossible biology,” which was seen as impeccably tailored to the conditions of capitalist production. The coolie was thought to be biologically wired to withstand constant amounts of suffering due to his “absence of nerves,” and was able to subsist on rice alone, sharply decreasing the cost of his labor. His “lack of consciousness”

28 Cheng, 416.
and individuality allows him to circumvent the alienation of repetitive, low skill labor, more akin to machine than human. It was only through the loss of all individualism and degradation of his manhood that the white man could compete with the coolie.\textsuperscript{29}

If Lee’s vases are seen as anthropomorphic, their fractures, particularly the smaller cracks in the base of “peonies and butterflies” [fig. 3] could be seen as mirroring tropes of degeneration and degradation that were central to the figure of the coolie which began on the level on the Asian body but posed a threat to American society as a whole. The Chinese were thought to be particularly susceptible to diseases like small-pox, spread on the contaminated streets of Chinatown. Though it started from the Asian body, their degraded personhood posed the threat of American cultural and racial breakdown through contamination, often mirroring fears of degeneration caused by modernity.\textsuperscript{30} Because the coolie figure had an inhuman capacity for capitalist production, it meant that the American must shed their humanity in order to remain productive. This idea of a takeover of American labor and contamination of American culture by the Chinese immigrant was conflated with the decline of America on the global-capitalist stage. The fear of degeneration registered anxieties about the racial other in the period where the possibility of settler-colonial expansion had been exhausted.\textsuperscript{31} To contextualize this, the battle to keep out Asian laborers occurred simultaneously with the attempt to open up Chinese borders.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 53
to imperialist expansion. The United States was in a period of reconfiguring itself as an emerging imperialist power. The Asian laborers and the argument for their exclusion from the United States became a major rallying point for both mainstream politicians as well as leftist labor movements. It was adopted as both a national legislative policy, as well as a policy of the American Labor Federation (AFL) until the 1930’s.\textsuperscript{32} Trade unions were primary advocates for anti-Asian legislation, and the Asian laborer was often used to unify their internal conflicts.\textsuperscript{33}

More than just objectification, the creation of the coolie was the process of crafting a (degraded) Asian masculinity. The laborers were, of course, all male but were devoid of the typical masculine characteristics of white Americans.\textsuperscript{34} This is evident in a 1902 pamphlet published by the AFL titled, \textit{Some Reasons for Chinese Exclusion. Meat Versus Rice: American Manhood Against Asiatic Coolieism. Which Shall Survive?}, which frames the threat of Asian laborers both in terms of competing biological capacities as well as in terms of competing masculinities.\textsuperscript{35} The pamphlet says, “He [the Chinese man] is deficient in the higher moral qualities, individual trustworthiness, public spirit, sense of duty, and active courage, a group of qualities, perhaps best represented in our language by the word manliness…”\textsuperscript{36} The figure of the coolie is not only inhuman, but also devoid of manhood.

If the history of objectification via the coolie is present in Lee’s work, then it is possible to read the vases as representations of an emasculated and broken Asian

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 19-20.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 57.
\textsuperscript{34} Hayot, 103.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 102.
male. In the earlier discussed essay by Jeffrey Paul Chan and Frank Chin, “Racist Love,” one of the issues that lies at the center of the concept of the dual personality is that it robs the Asian American subject of manhood. They say, in their polemical and misogynistic language that, “On the simplest level, a man, in any culture, speaks for himself. Without a language of his own, he no longer is a man but a ventriloquist's dummy at worst and at best a parrot,” arguing that without manhood, one has no voice. Their essay is largely a critique of the emasculation of the Asian American man, and one could argue that Lee’s work is performing a similar critique. Yet, as many feminist critics have noted, Chin and Chan’s critique of Asian male emasculation reinforce gendered stereotypes. As David L. Eng says, completely buying into the framework put forward by Chin and Chan “with its doctrine of compulsory heterosexuality and cultural authenticity, mirrors at once the dominant heterosexist and racist structures through which the Asian American male is historically feminized and rendered self-hating in the first place.” It only substantiates the same sexist logic and patriarchal systems that enabled the substitution of Asian objects and the Asian female, which will be discussed below.

Additionally, Chin and Chan fail to properly historicize the emasculation of Asian American men and the ways in which the history of Asian American racialization and gendering are inseparable. As Lisa Lowe explains in Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics, citizenship was initially extended exclusively to white males, legally binding citizenship to white masculinity. When citizenship was later extended to black men, it became further tied to definitions of

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37 Chin and Chan, 77.
38 Eng, 21.
manhood, a legal basis for the exclusion of Asian Americans men from masculinity.\(^{39}\) On an economic level, the exclusion of Asian female immigration lead to a disproportionately high male population, leading Asian men to take up historically feminized professions in places like restaurants and laundromats. The existence of these “bachelor communities,” in combination with miscegenation laws, also meant that Asian American men were barred from heterosexual marriage, reproduction, and the nuclear family that all play a crucial part in figuring normative conceptions of masculinity.\(^{40}\)

Although Lee’s work resonates with Chin and Chan argument about the internalization of anti-Asian racism and the absence of Asian American interiority, I would argue that Lee’s work departs from Chin and Chan in their treatment of masculinity as central to the recuperation of an Asian American interiority. Where Chin and Chan seek to restore an Asian American masculinity as a means of restoring a fractured Asian American subjectivity, Lee embraces the fragmentation. He references the specific history of the Asian male emasculation through his evocation of the coolie, a history missing in Chin and Chan’s masculinist critique.

Returning to the figure of the coolie, it is necessary to underscore that the rhetoric surrounding the coolie was not simply a result of fearing the racial other, but perhaps more significantly a manifestation of anxieties about the reduction of the laboring body to machine under industrial modernization. The coolie is on one hand

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\(^{40}\) David L. Eng, 17-18.
fictional figure created by the whites, and on the other, an index of the effects of and anxieties about capitalist modernization. Hayot says:

The body of the Chinese worker was thus a figure for the age, an embodied metaphor for the changes prompted by modernization and the globalized trade and labor networks it permitted. In this sense, as [Colleen] Lye has written, “the historical emergence of Asiatic racial form [in the United States] can be read as the appearance of the otherness of western modernity to itself,” that is, of the distorted and fantastic face of modernity’s negative aspects, returning to the West from an “outside” that was very much an inside.41

This is to say that the figure of the Chinese laborer was manifested both on the level of the body and on the level of global movements of capital as a reflection of the experience of alienation and commodification of labor under capitalist modernity.

Lee’s forms register the coolie both as bodily and beyond the body. They reflect the myths of degeneration included in the figure of the coolie, but more than that, they reflect the history and contradictions of capitalist labor exploitation collapsed into this figure. These vases are not only degraded bodies, but also desired global commodities whose consumption is enabled by capitalist modernity. The very structures that enabled the consumption of Asian things and Asian spectacles also lead to feelings of alienation and anxieties that spawned the figure of the coolie. Lee’s form is making present the two sides of America’s engagement with Asia, prohibiting the separation between desirable Asian commodities and reproachable Asian bodies that enabled the simultaneous consumption of Asian goods with the rejection of Asian people. Though this may be the case, objectification as a result of fears of degeneration and commodification under modernity do not offer a sufficient explanation of these vases. Though they went hand in hand, this rhetoric is different

41 Hayot. 122.
from that which lead to the reduction of the Asian female body to object, and more specifically, to Asian porcelain.

Because of his use of the emphatically feminized form of the porcelain vase, Lee’s engagement with the objectification of the Asian cannot be fully explained as a reference to the emasculated figure of the coolie.\textsuperscript{42} It is a medium that evokes a feminized form of objecthood that is imbricated with tropes of fragility, submissiveness, and irresistibility. As Anne Anlin Cheng explains, references to Chinese porcelain “revives this long, expansive history of…the fraught amalgamation between inorganic commodity and Asiatic female flesh.”\textsuperscript{43} Lee’s use of Chinese porcelain strongly invokes Asian female flesh, and thus the highly masculine trope of the coolie cannot fully account for Lee’s work.

We can see this link between vases and “Asiatic female flesh” throughout popular culture. Porcelain’s proliferation within mass culture – through spectacles of Asia and increased museum displays – caused it to become a common motif within literary fiction, typically as an object tied to fictitious origin stories stemming from orientalist visions of China. The shift of Chinese porcelain from a luxury commodity from China to a materialization of Chinese aesthetics, discussed in the previous

\textsuperscript{42} The Asian female is present, yet marginal, in the myth of the coolie as an object for the male subject. This can be seen in a series of lectures by Dr. John William Draper, a professor as New York University and prominent public intellectual, titled \textit{Thoughts on the Future of Civil Policy of America} (1865), in which he dedicated much attention to the threats of cross-cultural and racial interaction due to Chinese immigration. Draper argues that while the white man sees a woman as his partner, the Chinese man “makes her his toy” or “a slave of the man.” Additionally, the Asiatic favors polygamy, allowing one man to produce hundreds of children (Tchen, 192-3). These perceptions are in line with the understanding of the Asian laborer as biologically suited to capitalist production in the mere ability to mass produce offspring. On the flipside of this, it plays into tropes of the Asian woman as an object to the point where she is only a “toy.” This marginal present is not enough to account for specific form of objectification invoked in Lee’s vases.

\textsuperscript{43} Cheng., 431.
section, set the stage for its shift to a representation of exoticism and the conflation of Asian women and Asian porcelain. In literary fiction, these “exotic” objects were often presented as so desirable that they posed a threat to those who come close—fragile and profoundly beautiful, yet dangerously tempting, displaying a likeness to orientalist discourse surrounding Asian femininity.\textsuperscript{44} The popularized motif spread from mystery fiction to children stories and comedy, carrying its associations with it, but giving more emphasis on its fragility. Vases were to be handled with extreme care, and were broken out of the characters anger or more frequently as a comedic display of their carelessness. Only the most cultured and proper were qualified to handle such a delicate object.\textsuperscript{45}

An early literary example of the conflation of Asian porcelain with Asian women is a short story called “The Ming Vase” published in the \textit{New York Times} in 1888. This story is about a young man who is gifted a vase by his lover, Li-Chi, as a good luck charm to help him pass the provincial examinations. The protagonist later finds out that this vase is not merely an object, but is imbued with magical powers, allowing it to drive the narrative forward. The supernatural powers of the vase go so far to the point where the porcelain vase quite literally becomes the Asian female:

As he watched it [the vase] the ingratitude for failing to keep Li-Chi constantly in his thoughts overwhelmed him with remorse, and his memory brought back vividly the rich rose of her little features and odor of her tresses. Seizing the vase in both hands he pressed it to his forehead. It seemed to him that it grew warmer and warmer where it touched the brow, while to his hands it remained cool. Suddenly setting it down, it occurred to him that the opaque porcelain was darkened in one spot, just where he had placed his forehead. Gradually, as he gazed, his heart full of the memories of the happy past, the

\textsuperscript{44} Pearson, 73-74.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 77.
spot grew darker and clearer. Now it was an outline--now a woman’s face appeared. By the fortunate spirits of earth and heaven! It was Li-Chi herself, smiling that gentle, submissive smile he remembered from the last time he was permitted to see her face!

This conflation continues, when the protagonists lust and desire for his separated lover is redirected onto the vase, saying, “it had been a great deprivation during the weeks he passed mewed up in the scholar’s cell not to be able to see the vase, and, by a supreme effort of yearning, bring to its white sides an image of Li-Chi.” This is amplified with the revelation that the vase was actually crafted from porcelain made from “clay kneaded with the brain and bone of a famous lover of the time of Confucius.” Contrary to the animism of the vase, the humanity of the characters in this story is often diminished. For example, the protagonist’s father appoints a patron to help him prepare for his exams, who is described as “a descendant of the great Confucius, whose ancestry alone made him an object of veneration.”46 This patron is reduced to merely an object while the object has nearly transmuted into a human. In doing this, the vase takes center stage and is given agency over the human characters, sometimes literally becoming the humans, blurring the line between Asian bodies and Asian objects.47

The discursive echoes between Asian porcelain and Asian femininity are also seen in Frank Norris’ “After Strange Gods,” published four years prior to the *New York Times* short story, in 1884. This story is presented as an exact retelling of a love affair between a French sailor, Rouveroy, and a Chinese flower girl at the World’s Fair in Chicago, Lalo Da, as heard from a Chinese barber in Chinatown. The location

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47 Pierson, p. 65.
of the World’s Fair already situates Lalo Da’s character, because, as discussed above, these spectacles were responsible for turning Asian people and cultures into objects for white consumption. An immediate connection between the Asian female and Asian objects is established on the second page of story, where the narrator sums up Lalo Da by saying that “she was as pretty a little bit of bric-a-brac as ever evaded the Exclusion Act.” This sentence attests to the already established notions of the interchangeability of Chinese bodies and Chinese commodities. Her lack of humanity is further emphasized when the narrator says, she is “without consideration, comment, or compassion.”

Lalo Da contracts smallpox which threatens to deform her and turn her face into “a thing of horror,” presenting the Asian female as alluring, yet dangerous and diseased, echoing both associations of Asian porcelain and yellow peril rhetoric that posits Asians as posing the threat of degeneration. This would cause her to lose her desirability in the eyes of her French lover, preventing her escape from her forced return to rural China and marriage to “a coolie who worked in the tea fields, and who would whip her.”

The reference to the coolie is significant in that it is a prime figure of objectification of the Asian and the masculine counterpoint to the anthropomorphized vase. Her inevitable degeneration leads her no choice but to blind her lover with a poison received from a Chinese doctor as to prevent his escape. Ultimately, the two stay together and move to China, Lalo Da’s face “no longer the face of a human being” and Rouveroy blind and without completely sanity, posing the

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49 Ibid., 378, 376.
Asian female, like the Asian vase, as captivating but dangerous, threatening to
destroy those who come close.\textsuperscript{50}

Both of the above stories were published in the wake of the Page Act of 1875 – which effectively banned the immigration of any Asian women into the United States through discourse of prostitution and forced labor – and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882; a period that saw the height of “yellow peril” discourse, which posited the Asian as sick, degenerate, subhuman, a threat to American society and economic dominance. Much of this anti-Asian racism during this period came from anxieties about both Chinese labor in the United States, and United States expansion into Asian markets. On one hand, securing Asian markets and Asian commodities were crucial for the expansion of America as a global capitalist power, but on the other, the presence of actual Asia bodies seemed to threaten the racial and cultural identity of the country.\textsuperscript{51} These stories are emblematic of the ambivalence towards Asia during the time, and are haunted by the historical event of legislative racism and exclusion. There was a simultaneous fascination with Asia through consumption of commodities, spectacles, and fiction, and a rejection of Asian humanity. These stories served as a place for white Americans to work out anxieties about the simultaneous desire for Asian things and hatred of Asian bodies.

In its feminine references, Lee’s work seems to conjure another figure of Asian objectification, the cyborg. For Anne Anlin Cheng and Rachel C. Lee, the cyborg is the female counterpart of the at once animal and superhuman coolie, a figure who is

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 379; Lye., 48-9.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 55-58.
at once human and inhuman.\textsuperscript{52} Take for example Afong Moy, who was brought to New York in the 1830’s to be displayed on stages around the country as “the Chinese Woman.” Moy was described as an emphatic representation of Chinese beauty, with special attention drawn to her “monstrous small” feet. The most telling record of Moy is an 1835 lithograph of her sitting in the middle of what appears to be a parlor like room. Despite the insistence on her Chineseness, Moy’s surroundings are more akin to a Victorian era period room than a Chinese setting. Around her lay exotic objects from the orient, such as vases, Middle Eastern style curtains and tapestries; objects reflecting the tastes of the Western elite. But to the Western audience, the proximity of this foreign body to these foreign objects was enough to mark the scene as distinctly Asian. Her performance was simply to sit in this room silently and be watched.\textsuperscript{53} Moy was at once reduced to another exotic object among the vases and drapes she sat next to, yet she simultaneously animated the objects around her, as if they were an extension of her own living body. She was both inhuman, sharing a likeness to the exotic objects that surrounded her, and human, giving the scene life. She was at once flesh and object.

Thinking in terms of the cyborg enables us to view the Asian American in terms of hybridity and aggregated objectness rather than wholeness and humanity. Objecthood is already a precondition for the Asian American due to orientalist rhetoric that conjures the Asian subject not through their physical presence but through their likeness to exotic objects of consumption.\textsuperscript{54} If we embrace this state of


\textsuperscript{53} Tchen, 101-106.

\textsuperscript{54} Cheng, 416.
inbetweeness, as Lee is doing, we can avoid “a rhetorical move that putatively returns the extracted body part to the violated racialized whole—a move that naturalizes a prior state of organic intactness and individuality to the racialized body.”55 That is to say that re-humanizing the dehumanized subject and restoring their wholeness relies upon the preconception that there is a whole, unfragmented subject to begin with and reiterates the binary between human and object. Lee’s fracturing of the vases suggests a critique of the fragmentation in that they reflect a broken state, a damaged psyche, and the conflation of Asian objects and Asian bodies, but rather than drawing attention to this condition in order to reconcile the damage and strive towards a cohesive whole, the vases relish their fragmented state. Lee fires and glazes the vases after breaking them; his work is already fragmented from the beginning. They cannot be put back together to restore a cohesive whole, as it was solidified in the kiln as a fractured form. There is no extracted part that can fill the gaps in the vases. Additionally, there is no possible reconciliation between the body and the psyche in his work, as the violent fractures that expose both interior and exterior suggest that the damage has penetrated the interior. The objecthood assigned to the racialized body is inescapable and restoring humanity to the subject whose humanity has been diminished is not a possibility for Lee’s work.

Residing in the realm of fragmentation, Lee’s vases allow us to examine the intricacies of racialization in the relationship between objecthood and personhood. In embracing this aggregate objectness, we are not just widening exclusionary categories of humanity or striving for an impossible wholeness, but are challenge our

55 Lee, 7.
conceptions about agency, individualism, and personhood in a way that returning to
an illusion of wholeness cannot. Arguing that the racialized body has simply been
robbed of a universal humanity – a humanity that white bodies inherently have –
views racialization as a lack that can be restored if we look beyond the superficiality
of racial difference. This logic not only ignores the psychological trauma of racism
and living in a fractured state but also necessitates a return to the categories that
justify the subjugation and persecution of racial minorities, in which race is used as a
justification for the exclusion of the racial other from humanity and therefore from
universal human rights. These are the same categories that enabled the creation of the
coolie as an inhuman embodiment of the dark side of modernity. Rather than reifying
that which has been used as a tool for racial violence, the cyborg allows us to break
apart the very terms that have turned the Asian body into an object.

Lee’s anthropomorphic forms set up a complex relationship between object
and human. Their form and engagement with the affinity between porcelain and
female flesh reverse the typical process of reducing the racialized body to object, but
rather begins from the object to conjure the human, but only so that it can reject this
humanness. They are presenting a dynamic that is, as Anne Cheng puts it, “not simply
one of an object refusing the human but an object that does so by mirroring the
inhumanness of the human.”56 In other words, these fractured forms do not simply
hold Asian femininity as their referent, invoking it in order to restore its stolen
humanity, but rather invoke the Asian female as simultaneously human and object, as
a cyborg-like formation. What is at stake in Lee’s work is not that it reveals the true

56 Cheng, 435.
humanity that lies behind the object or to restore a loss. Rather, it gives us a place to rethink the dichotomy between human and object and instead think in terms of “living and living as thing.”

These vases, in their conjuring and rejection of humanity, move far beyond the level of Lee as an individual. Though violently fractured, they are not merely lamenting the tragic state of Asian American subjectivity, rather, they are prompting a rethinking of the socio-historical shaping of Asian American identity in a different vocabulary; one that does not simply try to reverse, and ultimately reiterate, the damage. These anthropomorphic objects necessitate that viewer look down upon them as a spectator looking down upon a wounded subject, complicit and unable to recuperate the damage through their passive gaze. The smashed porcelain summons histories of objects and bodies that must be used to make sense of their damaged state.

57 Ibid., 441.
THE SKIN PAINTINGS OF BYRON KIM

The controversial Whitney Biennial of 1993 saw an unprecedented number of queer, non-white, and female artists, organizing itself around themes of identity and community. The 1993 Biennial occurred at the peak of multiculturalism in art and was meant to be, as Whitney director David Ross said, a “site of contest of values and ideas essential to a peaceful society; to serve as common ground for many intersecting communities.” The new director sought to make the exhibition more inclusive after pressure from different organizations, such as the Asian American arts collective Godzilla, to address the historical underrepresentation of non-white and female artists in these biennials. The work in the exhibition was far more diverse in medium than previous years, primarily consisting of installation, video art, and performance such as Charles Ray’s 45-foot Firetruck which greeted the exhibition viewers outside the museum entrance and George Holliday’s video recording of the beating of Rodney King. The works addressed a multiplicity of issues including, but not limited to, race, AIDS, class, the body, and the institution. Despite the inclusion of artists typically absent from this sort of mainstream exhibition, their artwork was confined by the multiculturalist notions of marginalized art discussed in the introduction. It was shallowly read through reductive conceptions of identity with little attention given to the artworks as artworks. For example, artist Glenn Ligon displayed work in both the 1991 and 1993 Whitney Biennial that addressed similar

issues and was meant to evoke similar questions, yet he said that discussions of his work in the 1991 Biennial “were in terms of painting, not multicultural issues. In that way, the 1991 Biennial allowed the work more breathing space. Because the discussion around the ‘93 Biennial became so focused on multiculturalism, no other reading of the work was possible.”

Confined by the exhibition organizers’ attempt to make the artwork legible as a “common ground” between diverse communities and cultures, the terms of discussion shifted from the form of the artwork to pure content – this content being the identity of the marginalized artist. The organizers’ insistence on a specific multiculturalist reading of the artwork, one that gave it preassigned meaning, and the subsequent backlash that was waged at the artwork, rather than the structure of the exhibition, regularly summoned the racialized body of the artist-of-color as a tool to make the content of the work legible at the expense of a rigorous, object-centered discussions of the work.

The confinement of the terms in which the artwork could be read began in the opening essay of the exhibition catalog by lead curator Elizabeth Sussman titled “Coming Together in Parts: Positive Power in the Art of the Nineties.” Wary of alienating the primary audience of the exhibition – those firmly situated within the art world and responsible for maintaining its exclusivity – Sussman attempted to neutralize the more threatening institutional critiques forwarded by the artwork and incorporate it into conventional ideas about art, stating that, “For although sexual, ethnic, and gendered subjects motivate the content of recent art, these identities

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fragment but do not destroy the social fabric.”\textsuperscript{61} She goes on to invite attendees to view these “unconventional” artworks, yet avoided any substantial discussion of race and neglected to provide the viewer with a means of navigating the exhibition apart from a multicultural celebration of the artists’ identity.\textsuperscript{62} Rather than recognize that much of the art in the exhibition contested the conventional values against which art is measured, Sussman attempted to defend the work by assimilating it into traditional conceptions of art, saying, “despite a widespread belief to the contrary, art committed to ideas is not lacking in what are thought of as the traditional aesthetic qualities, for instance, sensuality, contradiction, visual pleasure, humor, ambiguity, desire, or metaphor.”\textsuperscript{63} Not only did this further neutralize the critical interventions of the work, but also reaffirmed the very values typically used to exclude artists of color.

Despite this defense of the value of the art, Sussman, and the other organizers, clearly lacked confidence in their quality as artworks, as evident in the lengthy artist statements and heavy-handed curation that mediated the work, telling the viewers how they should read it and what they are supposed to get from it rather than giving them the tools to engage with the work on their own.\textsuperscript{64} An example of this is a description of Lorna Simpson’s installation \textit{Hypothetical?} in Thelma Golden’s exhibition essay “What’s White..?,” emblematic of the framing of the artwork in the Biennial. Every formal characteristic she invokes is quickly tied down to a specific signified meaning, leaving no room for a multiplicity of meanings. Concluding her

\textsuperscript{62} Min, 47.
\textsuperscript{63} Sussman, 14.
discussion of the piece, she says, “Flanking this text, which Simpson leaves in its original newsprint form, are a photograph of a pair of lips and on the opposite wall a configuration of trumpet mouthpieces. Filling the room is the sound of a modulating breath that links the lips to the mouthpiece—the indication of the sound before the fury.”

Rather than leaving any ambiguity in the work, Golden reduces it to a singular reading without formal or conceptual contradiction or complexity. As Miwon Kwon says, “…because of the way that the works are framed, the complex works—like Lorna Simpson’s—fade out or get reduced. They get assimilated into this pluralist, multiculturalist project, and you can’t see her work being more than an expressionistic politics of a black woman artist with anger.” Instead of allowing the form to speak for itself, the heavy mediation shaped the terms of discussion and preassigned the artwork specific meaning that allowed the viewer to disregard form in the process of understanding the work.

This mediation did not just prohibit a substantial engagement with the interplay between the form and content of the work, but also centered the artist’s body as a means of understanding it. As such, the viewer was inevitably directed to read the artwork autobiographically – as a mere reflection of the artist’s identity and experience. Additionally, many of the artworks in the exhibition required a prerequisite knowledge of the structures of power and histories they were engaging with, but the information provided by the organizers, most of whom were ill-equipped to deal with issues of race, was not the right type of information to engage with the

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artwork beyond the identity of the individual artist and therefore left the burden of educating the viewer on the broader structural issues addressed to the artists themselves. The critics, lacking the knowledge to properly engage with the work, blamed their failure to comprehend the works’ more nuanced propositions on the weakness of the work and lamented their supposed singular, heavy-handed political messages. The curators, rather than taking on this burden, tried to shift it from the artist to the viewer by providing a reading room full of reference books on critical race studies and postcolonial theory, which only substantiated the critics’ impression that the works was overly political, and its form could not speak for itself. This additional form of mediation further implied that the work itself could not stand alone as art and could only be read through these inaccessible reference books. As a result, critics and viewers were able to attribute their own inability, and the inability of traditional art-historical methods, to engage with the artwork in a non-superficial way to the shortcomings of the artwork. Both the curators’ and critics’ unwillingness to reflect on their lack of knowledge meant that the artworks were approached through the easiest entry-point: the racialized body of the artist of color.\textsuperscript{67}

The Biennial was widely attacked by critics, but the criticism was typically misguided, aimed at the artwork rather than the superficial intentions and failings of the Whitney and the exhibition organizers. Though the work addressed a diverse array of issues in disparate ways, many critics saw the works as tainted by its political content, either because it disturbed the autonomy of art or because the political content was too heavy-handed and should only be advanced through its form. This

\textsuperscript{67} Min, 52.
relied on conventional art historical standards that view form and content as separate rather than interdependent. Rather than object-centered discussions of the artworks that paid attention to the interplay between content and form or the multiplicity of issues addressed, critics dismissed art that broached political issues as mere wallowing in self-pity. For instance *Washington Post* critic Paul Richard stated that the Biennial’s “single theme is Victim Chic” and *Time Magazine* critic Robert Hughes deemed it “a fiesta of whining” with artwork that only dealt with trite arguments such as “racism is wrong.” A particularly aggressive response to this exhibition can be seen in a review by John Leo in which he describes the exhibition as “yet another politically correct art show meant to frighten white folks (and of course, the male folks and the straight folks),” and goes on to say that, “almost any angry sentiment seems to qualify as art.” Struggling to hide their own racism, these critics lamented the supposed condescension – coming from what they saw as cliché arguments against discrimination – and political correctness of the art presented in the Biennial, and failed to engage with the artworks as serious artworks.

These reviews rarely looked beyond the content of the artwork – content that posed a threat to people like them – only bringing up its formal character in order to dismiss it as poor, subsequently disqualifying the artwork as a whole. LA Times critic Christopher Knight’s review of the exhibition is emblematic:

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Gary Simmons has placed a row of gilded Nikes and Reeboks on a white stage before the black bars denoting a police line-up, providing a flat-footed description of the familiar casting of young African-American men as either basketball stars or criminals.

Janine Antoni has gnawed at huge blocks of chocolate and lard, transforming the epic social trauma of Joseph Beuys’ sculpture into an artistic treatise on bulimia.

Renee Green has made a study room, filled with shelves and books and cubicles, in which you can learn to decode the ever-shifting semiotics of street language.\(^72\)

After an unflattering description of each artwork, Knight, working with similar assumptions as the organizers, makes a sudden jump to assigning a fixed and reductive meaning to each piece as if form is not necessary to understanding the artwork as a whole. Any nuance or artistic engagements within the works are subordinated in favor of only other-than-art meaning. This allowed these critics to (poorly) mask their own racism and neutralize the serious institutional critiques launched at the hegemonic art world by throwing out the artworks wholesale for their supposed lack of formal quality.\(^73\)

Though it may seem that an exhibition of this sort would have the potential to undermine and reshape the institutional constraints of art, it was destined to fail from the beginning. The organizers refused to think beyond the traditional values of art rooted in the historically exclusive art world and were unwilling to allow the artworks

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\(^72\) Christopher Knight, “ART REVIEW : Crushed by Its Good Intentions : Under the banner of opening up the institutional art world to expansive diversity, the Whitney Biennial has in fact perversely narrowed its scope to an almost excruciating degree,” Los Angeles Times, March 10, 1993. http://articles.latimes.com/1993-03-10/entertainment/ca-1335_1_art-world

\(^73\) Min, 49.
to speak for themselves. The exhibition organizers’ lack of confidence in the artwork – evident through the lengthy artist statements and heavy mediation of the work – propagated a fixed and reductive way of reading artwork by marginalized artists as purely content – content that is read as a reflection of the artists identity and community, a tendency that continues to shape the reception of ethnic art today. Despite the failures of the Biennial, it raised many difficult questions about the limitations and possibilities of displaying ethnic art within a highly exclusive art world. The organizers clearly did not provide the right kind of information to engage with the artwork, but would it have been better off with no information at all? Even without heavy mediation, ethnic art still tends to be read through the identity and body of the artist. Additionally, how can one provide viewers with the tools and information to draw meaning from the work without confining it to a singular meaning? How can one engage with artwork that deals with the identity, potentially sourced from the artist’s experience of marginalization, without reverting to fixed notions of identity or confining it to purely content? These questions have no simple answer, but must be kept in mind when reading ethnic art.

It was in the context of the 1993 Biennale that the young Korean American artist Byron Kim premiered his groundbreaking work *Synecdoche* [fig. 6], an ongoing series originally consisting of 204 monochromatic canvases rendered in paint mixed with wax, a strategy that gives the paintings a tactile, flesh-like character. Each 8 x 10-inch canvas, which mirrors the dimensions of a portrait, is painted to match the skin color of individuals Kim met outside of the Brooklyn Public Library. The canvases are arranged in a tight grid alphabetized by the subject’s first name, with a
corresponding list of names on the wall. The context in which this piece was originally displayed shaped its reception, leading it, along with many other works at the Biennial, to be largely overlooked as formally and conceptually shallow. Kim’s work blends the contradictory conventions of the abstract and the referential, directly raising questions about the interplay between form and content, but the Biennial’s rigid distinction between form and content overshadowed this.\textsuperscript{74} Positive reviews of \textit{Synecdoche} read it as a nauseatingly utopian celebration of diversity. A \textit{Washington Post} review of Kim’s oeuvre says, “Scandinavian paleness, Ethiopian darkness, Puerto Rican duskiness -- you'd look upon these hues and think: Diversity is lovely, bigotry preposterous, and social hierarchies that depend upon the hue of a patch of epidermis make no sense at all. And probably you'd smile.”\textsuperscript{75} This reading may as well be a description of a stock image of people from different races holding hands, taking no note of the form of \textit{Synecdoche}. The more critical reviews of \textit{Synecdoche} that do recognize its engagements with the formal conventions of abstract art and colorfield painting are disappointingly shallow. An \textit{LA Times} review of the Biennial reads, “Byron Kim paints monochrome canvases, in the great tradition of Modernist abstraction, but with a difference: The colored pigment on the surface of his otherwise formalist paintings is--yes!--skin color.”\textsuperscript{76} Even though the form of modern abstraction and the content of skin color are both recognized, they are treated as two discrete, rather than interdependent, elements of the work. Though abstract paintings

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 50-1.  
\textsuperscript{76} Knight.
and paintings about race are in no way novel, this dismissive review fails to recognize how Kim’s insertion of the “content” of race critically intervenes in the tradition of abstract painting – a convention that is supposed to have no content beyond its form – and Kim’s adoption of the form of abstract painting makes critical interventions into conceptions of race and community.

Though not recognized at the time, *Synecdoche* is responding to many of the issues that arose from the Biennial, namely the uncritical assimilation of ethnic art into the traditional values of art and the uneven binary between form and content that reduce ethnic art to only content. More so than most of the art in the Biennial, the form of Kim’s work fits into the conventional standards of 20th century art, and especially modernism, through its emphasis on the grid, monochrome, and seriality. Yet Kim also disrupts notions of formal autonomy by depicting a material referent in the medium of abstraction, an emphatically pure form. This means that the artwork appears approachable through traditional art-historical methods, but quickly reveals that these methods cannot account for the work as a whole because the content of the piece is both its form, abstract painting, and something external to art, race. By linking questions of race and self-referential art – which I will discuss further in the following sections – Kim shows that painting, like race, is socially and historically conditioned, requiring a reexamination of the traditional values of art that this exhibition failed to move beyond.
Though Kim’s work does make interventions into the cultural production of race and community, it is far more conceptually complex than a simple celebration of diversity and inclusion. Moreover, these interventions rely on an engagement with the traditions of Abstract Expressionism and color field painting, particularly with the work of artists such as Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, Agnes Martin, and Brice Marden. The interplay between the abstract form and racialized content of Kim’s paintings makes critical interventions into the conventions of Modernist Abstraction, while also forcing a rethinking of race as abstraction.
Part I: Race as Abstraction

Byron Kim works within the formal conventions of abstract painting but pushes back against the rigid boundary between form and content that is so central to its practice, a boundary that enabled organizers and critics of the Whitney Biennial to disregard form and read the work as unadorned meaning or content. His work explicitly includes markers of race, content from the material world that is meant to be completely absent in abstraction. In doing this, Kim is making interventions into the traditions of abstraction by disrupting its claim at autonomy and universality, and, perhaps more significantly, drawing an analogy between abstraction in painting and race as abstraction.

Though it may seem like the colorfield paintings of Mark Rothko and the other canonical Abstract Expressionists are the primary reference point for Kim’s practice, his work is actually more closely in conversation with Ad Reinhardt (1913-67), an American painter affiliated with, but already responding to Abstract Expressionism and New York School painting. Reinhardt’s shift to formulaic, impersonal painting and emphasis on spectatorship lead him to be retroactively assigned the role of a bridge figure between Abstract Expressionism and Conceptual and Minimalist art. Kim expands on Reinhardt’s emphasis on spectatorship while disrupting his claims at artistic purity.

In 1992, Byron Kim wrote an essay in the Asian American art publication Godzilla titled “An Attempt at Dogma” – a direct reference to Reinhardt’s ‘art-as-art’ dogma – that contested the conceptions of Modernist Abstraction central to the practices of both Reinhardt and the New York School. He began by highlighting the
uneven relationship between form and content in the history of abstract painting, where the only content of the painting is meant to be its form. Though he embraces abstraction, he drew attention to two major flaws within the Western abstract tradition. The first is the assumed universality and social transcendence of abstract art; that, to use Reinhardt’s words, art can be “emptied, purified of all other-than-art meanings,” or for the New York School, that the meaning of their art is untouched by the social world and transcends any individual or societal boundaries. Kim saw that the very possibility of making pure art requires a certain social status, that is, claims of universality and transcendence of the social is a privilege. This was clearly visible in the reception of the Whitney Biennial, where ethnic art was never read as universal or autonomous, but as purely content with only “other-than-art” meaning. His second issue is the failure to grapple with the elitist, all white, almost entirely male make-up of the masters of the abstract tradition. “An Attempt at Dogma” articulated the concerns that would drive Kim’s artistic practices for the next decade.

The claims of universality and formal autonomy that Kim’s work responds to were central to the practice of Ad Reinhardt and the New York School of Painting. The New York School, most closely associated with artists such as Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko, was understood in popular culture as an unmediated externalization of the individual’s psyche through non-objective compositions that emphasize only the gesture or action of painting as expression. Because this process of painting was meant to directly tap into the deepest essence of the human through the individual, it claimed to be an objective and universal

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reflection of broader cultural and societal truths that transcend the individual. The art historical understanding of Abstract Expressionism, forwarded by art critic Clement Greenberg, one of the primary proponents of the New York School, similarly foregrounded the artistic purity of Abstract Expressionism, seeing its medium-specificity as a way of protecting the avant-garde from commodification under capitalism. The goal of medium-specificity was to radically refine the medium of painting to its most essential characteristic: flatness, as epitomized by Jackson Pollack’s all-over compositions. This meant that painting should be all form with no content, achieved through compositions which encompass the entirety of the canvas with no focal point, allowing them to oscillate between foreground and background. It also meant it must be shorn of any referent from the material world and be experienced purely through eyesight, allowing the painting, as sourced from the artist’s emotions, to transcend the individual and communicate a societal truth through its role as the ultimate expression of modernity.  

Reinhardt built on many of the formal and aesthetic conventions of Abstract Expressionism and the New York school through his self-referential and non-compositional paintings, sharing a concern with the purity of painting. In 1957, Reinhardt wrote “Twelve Rules for a New Academy,” which critiqued the abstract art developing in Europe at the time, arguing that, similarly to Greenberg, abstract art must retain its aesthetic purity and ensure that it is “‘out of time,’...art emptied and purified of all other-than-art meanings.” As such, it “cannot be ‘used’ in education, communication, perception, foreign relations, etc.” He saw the goal of painting to

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recognize and subsequently rid itself of everything that it is not, which meant absolving itself of anything referential, objective, or expressionist, as well as separating itself from other forms of art, which he would later refer to as “art-as-art dogma.”

Where Reinhardt builds on the Abstract tradition in his attempt to make an ultimate artwork that is “out-of-time,” Kim very consciously and explicitly describes his process as copying canonical artists. In doing this, Kim is firmly situating himself within time, or more specifically, within the history of abstract art. The ambitious assertions made by Reinhardt and countless others disregard the formal, historical, and social trends that shaped their artwork, situating the artwork as outside of history. Kim’s self-aware process of copying rejects originality and draws attention to the prerequisite privilege to make claims of innovation and creativity, something that is implied in the understood objectivity and universality of the Abstract Expressionists, in order to both dismiss them and push back against the exclusivity of the Modernist abstraction.

Though Reinhardt and Greenberg shared a similar goal of purifying painting, Reinhardt saw Greenberg and the New York School as failing in their project. He saw the purported myth of self-expression and elevation of the individual in Abstract Expressionism as corrupting the purity of painting. As such, he disavowed the ideas of autonomous, unmediated action painting sourced from the individual in favor of a more formalist approach in which the artist was anonymous and the viewer.

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80 Min, 105.
privileged. Where Greenberg paid no attention to the spectator, Reinhardt’s paintings centered an understanding of the process of viewing as constantly in flux. Yet even though Reinhardt departs from Abstract Expressionism in this way, he did so because he felt it did not properly uphold the autonomy of art and the purity of form. Kim expands on this same concern with the fluidity of spectatorship but includes other-than-art content in order to disrupt claims at autonomy, using methods central to abstract painting to address broader social concerns.

In order to understand Kim’s art historical engagements, it is first necessary to further explain Reinhardt’s formal and conceptual practices. Reinhardt enacted his paradigm for the new academy through his series of black paintings [fig. 7], which he saw as the culmination of abstract painting, or as he said, “the ultimate paintings.” Reinhardt believed that a color in painting was not just a visual hue, but carried with it certain associations and external significations – a key point that Kim extends in his practice – and wished to explore this by painting total blackness. Each painting was done on a large, 60 X 60-inch canvas with compositions that consist of a grid of nine matte-black squares, each slightly varying in their shade. The matte paint was meant to prevent any reflection in art that could distract from the painting itself. Though they initially appear to be monochromatic canvases completely devoid of color, as one views the paintings, the subtle differences in shade become apparent, redirecting the action from the gesture of the painter – in a Jackson Pollock painting for instance – to the perception of the viewer. Their complete lack of color is supposed to reflect a

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state of total darkness, and this absence is supposed to open up a space for the viewer to explore and disavow the empirical, scientific truth of color.  

Byron Kim deploys similar formal strategies and explores many of the same theoretical concerns as Reinhardt but extends the concerns with the external significations of color and fluidity of perception from the realm of painting into the social world. Like Reinhardt’s black paintings, Kim’s *Synecdoche* also uses a constantly shifting grid of monochrome boxes, placing varying skin tones adjacent to each other. On one hand, this work privileges the act of spectatorship as dynamic and

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82 Tsai, 33; Corris, 75.
subjective in a similar way to Reinhardt’s black paintings. This is an ongoing series, meaning that the meaning of each discrete unit and the work as a whole constantly shifts as it grows and is rearranged. Both works foreground absence. While Reinhardt creates an absence of color, self-contained within the painting, that causes the essence of the painting – its blackness – to dematerialize upon prolonged viewing, Kim creates an absence through the distance between the material reality of the monochromatic canvases and their actual referent. In both, this absence opens up a space to examine how the meaning or significance of a color fluctuates relative to its surroundings, questioning the idea of color as pure, objective fact, and highlighting an understanding of perception as the recognition of difference. While in Reinhardt’s paintings, absence is only supposed to intensify the self-reflexivity and material presence of the painting, in Kim’s work, the portrayal of an explicit referent in what appears to be an abstract painting – a choice that Reinhardt would not only see as aesthetically poor but also ethically corrupt83 – demonstrates that these concerns are not limited to painting alone. In this way, Kim completely rejects and even breaks apart the possibility of Reinhardt’s call for “art-as-art.” Kim’s work demonstrates that it is not just in painting that a color is not simply a color.

In some sense, abstraction is the content and form of both Kim and Reinhardt’s paintings. For Reinhardt, this is because the only content of its painting is its form, but for Kim, the abstraction is multilayered. On one level, he is departing from self-referentiality and adding the key component of race, breaking with the conventions of abstraction by blurring content and form. Yet, on another level, even if

83 Corris, 82.
this appears to be a departure from self-referentiality, the content he is depicting, race, is already an abstraction, an empty form. He is not disposing of self-referentiality, but rather opening up the circular process of it, effectively placing race and abstract painting as analogous, using one form of abstraction to point to another. Just as the non-compositional canvas is a radical flattening of painting, emptying it of all but its most essential characteristics so that it only refers back to its own materiality, skin color as a marker for race is a flattening of bodies and the social and historical forces of racialization that shape them. If Reinhardt’s paintings force the viewer to rethink the absence of color as not fixed reality but fluid, Kim’s paintings force the viewer to rethink the empirical reality of color, and color as race, as constantly in flux. Abstract painting is defined by what it is not and relies on the elimination of the separation between surface and depth or foreground and background. The paint is the surface of the canvas just as the skin is the surface of the body. In both there is nothing beyond surface, only understood in opposition to what it is not. The reduction of the body to a flat monochromatic canvas is not just commenting that race is skin deep – that skin color is superficial, and humans are all the same on the inside – but that the racialized body as a whole is abstracted into skin, pure surface with no accessible depth.

Kim’s analogy between race and abstraction sits in opposition to multiculturalist projects, such as the 1993 Whitney Biennial, that rely on race as depth, as content. They claim to move past objectification and exclusion without reexamining the structures that shape them and the role institutions such as the Whitney play in these structures. These kinds of projects treat ethnicity as what Rey Chow calls, “a thematic concern,” relying on an understanding of ethnicity as a
universal condition sourced from a socially formed culture, separate from capitalism and commodification, and performed by the individual. Viewing ethnicity this way means that at best it is recognized as merely interesting, yet easily dismissed as already known or culturally specific, failing to make any interventions into the framework of ethnicity or representation. This sort of understanding of ethnicity, with its understanding of ethnicity as a universal condition, produces a wholistic human subject that an understanding of race as abstraction, and the racialized body as pure surface, will not allow. This analogy and its incompatibility with the liberal embrace of inclusive representation is articulated by Fredrick Jameson in *On Cultural Studies*:

…the group as such is necessarily an imaginary entity, in the sense in which no individual mind is able to intuit it concretely. The group must be abstracted, or fantasized, on the basis of discrete individual contact and experiences which can never be generalized in anything but abusive fashion. The relations between groups are always stereotypical insofar as they must always involve collective abstractions of the other group, no matter how sanitized, no matter how liberally censored and imbued with respect…The liberal solution to this dilemma—doing away with the stereotypes or pretending they don’t exist—is not possible…

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84 In *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Rey Chow argues that representation and objectification cannot be separated. She delineates the two main paradigms for ethnicity in modernity: the universal, and the oppositional, which sees ethnicity within broader networks of power and something that has been a source of oppression, both of which produce a human subject and fail to recognize that this humanity “is itself firmly subsumed under the process of commodification and its asymmetrical distribution of power” (31-2). From this, she describes two understandings of the relationship between ethnicity and representation: as a thematic concern and as resistance. Treated as resistance, it assumes some sort of empowered agency that “has become so formulaic that it is often incompetent to bring about any substantive intervention.” What is missing from both is an understanding of the relationship between that addresses the materiality of both ethnicity and representation (51-2).  
That is to say that interaction with the other inevitably involves abstracting the other into pure surface, derived from individual experience and preconceived social and historical forces, which results in a confrontation between the two exteriors. In pushing against this flattening or stereotypical representation, one cannot avoid replacing the negative stereotype with the positive, as seen in the Biennial where diversity and inclusion was accompanied by a reduction of ethnic art to the body of the artist as a stand-in for an already known identity and culture, ensuring that the structure of representation, and those who control it, remain the same. As Rey Chow explains, and Kim reaffirms by making race and abstract painting analogous, misrepresentation cannot be replaced with accurate representation because, by nature, representation always relies on reductions and generalizations of the other. This is not to say that there is no acceptable form of representation. Nor that all stereotypes are equally insidious, as this depends on the power differentials behind them and the party who controls them. Kim is not only suggesting that race, like color, is an abstraction, and therefore a reduction, but further suggests that the adequate response to such abstraction is not the substitution of better, fuller, more accurate and less reductive representations. Rather, the impossibility of such representations must be recognized, and for Kim, the response is a recognition and embrace of this abstraction, a doubling down on it.86

Kim will push these arguments further in Grey-Green, the work he outlines in “An Attempt at Dogma,” challenging notions of universality and artistic purity in

86 Chow., 59-60.
order to force an examination of the discrepancy between readings of Modernist abstraction and ethnic art.

**Part II: “Why are you making abstract paintings?”**

I’d like to make some large paintings exactly like Brice Marden’s “Grove Group.” And I mean exactly like his (beeswax, talcum, palette knife, green-gray, blue-gray) except that I painted them. These paintings would respond directly to those who ask me, “Why are you making abstract paintings?” The “you” meaning Asian-American-artist, artist-of-color, artist-with-something-to-say. Of course, my intention would be to make this line of questioning the inevitable content of the painting, one that would dominate the ostensible, conventionally romantic content.⁸⁷

In the mid-1990’s, Byron Kim fulfilled his goal set in “An Attempt at Dogma” of exactly replicating Brice Marden’s (b. 1938) *Grove Group* [fig. 8] with his *Grey-Green* series [fig. 9]. *Grove Group* is a series of five blue, green, or grey monochromatic canvases displayed either as a single panel or subdivided into two or three. Each 72 x 108-inch painting is based on a grove of olive trees that Marden observed while spending time on the Greek Island of Hydra, where he kept a journal of his observations that he later used as the basis for this series. The paintings are done using Marden’s characteristic mix of wax, oil paint, and talcum, giving the pigment a soft, fleshy appearance. More in line with the individual, gestural paintings of the Abstract Expressionists than the anonymous, impersonal paintings of Marden’s Minimalist contemporaries, the artists hand is visible upon closer viewing through the subtle ridges left by the palette knife. Though referential in their titles, the stripped down, completely abstract canvases are meant to capture the spirit or atmosphere of highly emotional and personal experiences transmitted to the viewer through the

⁸⁷ Kim, “An Attempt at Dogma.”
essence of color alone, suggesting infinite possibilities in their perception. Marden felt that his practice was in line with Transcendentalism, as he saw himself as becoming part of nature, absorbing it in order to actualize it through art.\textsuperscript{88}

Kim’s \textit{Grey-Green} series is a direct copy of \textit{Grove Group}, consisting of ten monochromatic canvases painted in oil paint mixed with wax, each depicting the celadon glaze of a Koryŏ Dynasty Korean ceramic. Each painting is rendered on a heroic, 84 x 72-inch canvas. This series rhymes with Marden’s in the color pallets, materials used, and even the alliteration in the title. Though not enough to break the illusion of flatness, the tones of the canvas slightly fluctuate to reflect the delicate variations in the celadon glaze. Like Marden, Kim sought to capture the “spirit” and emotional content behind the content, allowing the paintings to exist on their own rather than simply reflecting their material referent. They only depart from Marden’s paintings in that rather than depicting nature, Kim depicts culture – that is, each canvas depicts the celadon glaze from various Koryŏ Dynasty ceramics. Despite these minimal changes to the form of \textit{Grove Group}, this singular departure from Marden’s work completely shifts the meaning and readings of Kim’s series, acting not as an extension of its predecessor, but rather a retort to it. Kim is invested in making a piece that responds to the question of “why are you making abstract painting?” because working in the medium of abstraction as a non-white artist requires regular justification. Abstract painting is highly exclusive, and relies on myths of universality or anonymity, where ethnic art is always going to be read as particular, culturally specific. The contrast between pure form and expected content – Kim’s identity –

leads the multicultural critic to demand an explanation from Kim. If *Grey-Green* is Kim’s response to this question, it requires an examination of his retort and of why he would choose a marker of his racial and cultural identity as the subject matter for this series.

*Figure 8:* Brice Marden, *Grove Group I*, 1972-3. Oil and wax on canvas, 69" x 8'9"; Copyright the artist.

*Figure 9:* Byron Kim, *Koryo Dynasty Cup with Dragon Head Handle*, 1994. Oil on linen, 84" x 72"; Collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, Twentieth-Century Discretionary Fund.
Kim says that he came to this series after dropping a Koryŏ Dynasty cup gifted to him by his parents. When observing the shattered fragments on his studio floor, he saw that the striking celadon glaze acted as the skin of the lackluster, cement-like body of the cup similarly to how paint acts as the skin of the canvas. He felt that this 800-year-old object held an “out-of-time,” ineffable beauty but, he could not quite grasp why so much value was placed on this object. This led him to consider how the value placed on this celadon glaze in Korean culture resonated with the value placed on abstract paintings in Western art. Both Koryŏ ceramics and abstract paintings seem to hold a transcendent beauty, but he recognized that they are culturally and socially specific. In an interview with Phyllis Rosenzweig, Kim said that, “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.”

This connection between the socially constructed value of these two disparate mediums allowed him to further question and deconstruct the autonomy of Modernist Abstraction and the cultural associations of color.

In the descriptive titles and explicit goal of copying Marden, *Grey-Green* can be seen as responding to the question of “why are you making abstract painting?” by adding multiple level of referentiality to the series in both the Koryo Dynasty vases and the Marden series, prohibiting a reading of this piece as a transparent reflection of Kim’s identity. He provides the viewer with a wealth of information to make sense of the content of these pieces, with titles that cite specific formal characteristics of his referents, but rather than tie it down to a singular meaning, this referentiality evokes

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larger questions of the interplay between Kim’s choice of medium, process of copying, and the decision to depict Korean ceramics. Confronted with *Grey-Green*, a viewer may be tempted to make sense of the monochrome canvases simply as an extension of Kim’s Korean identity, viewing this work as a direct reflection of his racial identity in a similar way to the critics of the Whitney Biennial. Yet this type of reading requires the viewer to ignore Kim’s deliberate nod to Marden. The intertextuality of this piece puts the viewer in a difficult spot where they are forced to examine the relationship between this painting and Marden’s, reminding the viewer that we would never read Marden’s paintings to be about his identity.

By (re)painting Marden’s work, Kim is opening up a space to examine the discrepancy between readings of the two works. Why is it that Marden, who is using the same aesthetic and conceptual frameworks as Abstract Expressionism 30 years after the New York School, is not charged with allegations of copying or working in a medium that has already been exhausted, while Kim must defend his use of abstraction? Marden’s work was said by critic Roberta Smith to have “kept painting alive by pitting ‘what you see’ – the indisputable facts of the medium – against a host of poetic intangibles,”90 and was described in 2006 by the *New Yorker* critic Peter Schjeldahl as, “the most profound abstract painter of the past four decades.” If both Marden and Kim’s use of abstraction and engagement with Abstract Expressionism is somewhat anachronistic, why is it that Marden’s work can be read as profound and original while Kim must constantly justify his use of abstract painting? Kim’s explicit

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claims of copying raise a comparison between his work and Marden’s, leading to questions of originality and uneven expectations placed on Kim as an artist of color.

Another possible response to the question of “why are you making abstract painting?” put forward by this piece is that it plays with the expectation that art produced by artists of color must be legible through race, satirically performing the work of the multicultural art critic for them, centering this form of spectatorship as the main content of the series. Its racialized content makes its abstracted form approachable, but quickly intervenes in the process of meaning making. In *Synecdoche*, the distance between the monochromatic canvas and the implied human subject creates a space to mediate and question the assigning of meaning and information to color. It makes the viewer aware of their movement from skin to the person and subsequently the identity of the artist. *Grey-Green* further intervenes in this process by inserting a physical object, the Koryŏ dynasty ceramic, in this chain of associations. He does not leave the viewer grasping for a point of entry as he includes explicitly informative and referential titles, such as *Koryŏ Green Glaze #2* or *Korean Koryŏ Dynasty Cup with Dragon Head Handle*, pointing the viewer directly to the material referent. This means that one will move from the form of the monochromatic painting to the glaze or skin of the ceramic to another type of form in the object itself, and from the object to the meaning and significance of the object, which will inevitably be tied back to Kim’s Korean American identity. In doing this, he is making a process of spectatorship that immediately jumps from the artwork to the artists body less ambiguous, slowing it down by forcing the viewer to first examine the immediate material referents as artistic forms before moving to their social and
cultural associations. A multiculturalist reading of the artwork is inevitably going to return to Kim’s body and identity, but his informative titles at least temporarily redirect them to the literal object, forcing the viewer to question why they are able to so easily and logically move from the racialized object to the racialized body, making visible the problematic process of invoking the racialized body through the racialized object. This provokes a meta-exploration of the dismissal of form in favor of identitarian readings of ethnic art by explicating the material referent of the piece and making its primary content the process of viewership.

Kim’s rendering of a marker of Korean culture and identity draws up the question of why abstract paintings created by white artists is read in terms of universality and transcendent emotion rather than in terms of whiteness. Both Kim and Marden’s paintings are particular, but Marden’s particularity is whiteness, allowing it to be read as universal. Marden extends traditions of Abstract Expressionism to depict the essence of the Greek landscape, which could be read as referring to the origin of Western civilization. Abstract Expressionists, Barnett Newman in particular, were highly concerned with origins and the subconscious as a means of tapping into the primordial essence of man. The grove is entrenched in Greek mythology and ties to the birth of Pegasus, whose hooves marked the ground, creating the spring of Hippocrates – the source of poetic inspiration – and giving rise to a sacred grove which became the meeting place of the muses and origin of the word museum.91 This return to Western mythological origins is universalizing, read

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as a precursor to modernity as a whole, and with it, creativity and emotion. Additionally, Marden’s work uses talcum powder, derived from talc – a material used in many cosmetic products and that’s most useful property in commercial use is its pure whiteness. Though absent in readings of Marden’s work, this could be seen as giving it another secret marker of whiteness in his work. Kim’s work intervenes in the anonymity of whiteness in Modernist Abstraction because, despite its formal similarities to Marden’s work, it is never read as universal, only as particular.

The choice of Brice Marden is of special significance to the guiding question of Grey-Green because of Marden’s claim that Asian aesthetics, particularly Chinese calligraphy, serve as a key inspiration for his later works and as a way for him to collapse his bodily presence into the work. His most famous series, Cold Mountain [fig. 9] (1989-1991), is inspired by the work of Tang Dynasty poet Han Shan, whose name transliterates to Cold Mountain. In describing his process for creating the series, he says, “I found a book by Han Shan, or Cold Mountain, translated by a poet named Red Pine and printing the poems in Chinese as well. I basically took the Cold Mountain paintings from that Chinese form. All the time I was making the paintings, I was reading the poems…” In this, he is taking Shan’s poetry – a text with tangible meaning – and turns it into abstract line drawings. Despite this long preoccupation with Asia as source material for abstraction, Marden is not forced to respond to questions of “why are you so obsessed with Asian culture, philosophy, and aesthetics?

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Why are you, an abstract painter with no knowledge of the Chinese language, trying to paint Chinese calligraphy?” In stark contrast to the line of questioning centered in Kim’s work, these questions remain absent in Marden’s work. By putting his own work against Marden’s – work that is meant to stress a bodily presence – Kim makes apparent the uneven constraints placed upon non-white artists, leading to a discussion of the disparate ways in which the body is present in his work, as a non-white artist, compared to Marden’s.

Marden’s fixation on Asia evades criticism partially due to its position within the long legacy of Orientalism in the American avant-garde, from the Transcendentalist figures of Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who saw Asia as a Transcendentalist ideal, to the poet Ezra Pound, who looked to China and

Figure 10: Brice Marden, Zen Study 6 (Early State) from Cold Mountain Series, 1990. Etching and aquatint on paper, 28.4” x 35.4”; copyright the artist.
Chinese philosophy for poetic innovation. These figures fixated their gaze on the Orient to establish themselves within America and imagined an American Renaissance through the melding of Asia and America.\(^{94}\) They serve as major influences to Marden’s work, who also looks to a fantasy of Asia to seek something new. Marden and Ezra Pound both place Western values onto Chinese characters, not unlike those placed on Modernist Abstraction, taking this language from the mouths of Asian people and arguing for its transcendent quality. Pound, who himself lacked proficiency in the Chinese language, said a friend with no knowledge of the language “was able to read the Chinese radicals and many compound signs almost at pleasure. He was used to consider all life and nature in the terms of planes and of bounding lines.”\(^{95}\)

Marden, and his predecessors, disregard Chinese writing as a linguistic form that exists in the present and is essentially imbued with preassigned meaning. They saw the unfamiliar past as a way to reinvigorate their artistic practice in the present, and when asked about their engagement with Asia, described it as simply “useful.”\(^{96}\)

Rey Chow’s reading of Jacques Derrida’s fetishization of the Chinese language can be applied to Marden’s work to better understand how he is able to hollow out the Chinese language and use it to accentuate a bodily presence in his work. For Derrida, Chinese acts a counterpoint to logocentrism – Western languages that separates writing from phonetic language, viewing writing as a sign of speech which is already a sign – because it is ideographic and non-linguistic and, therefore,

\(^{95}\) Ezra Pound in Park, 34.
able to directly convey ideas. This is not only a false (yet incredibly common) misunderstanding of the Chinese language but a fundamentally flawed idea because, as linguistic scholar John DeFrancis argues, “There never has been, and never can be, such a thing as an ideographic system of writing.” Rey Chow points out that this understanding of Chinese writing as non-phonetic relies on the reduction of Asian to a manifestation of difference and celebratory extension of the trite stereotype of the “inscrutable Chinese.” She says:

Chinese can enjoy this privileged status [ideographic rather than logocentric] precisely because it is treated as an exterior that is emptied of all of its grammar, syntax, sound, history, and actual speakers—all the linguistic elements that would have ontologized it with substance and rendered it a real, temporally present language like Western languages. Strictly speaking, therefore, the silent graphicity of Chinese writing is both inscrutable and very scrutable: though Westerners such as Derrida may not actually be able to read it, they nonetheless proceed to do so by inscribing it with a new kind of theorizing (speculation), a new kind of intelligibility. The inscrutable Chinese ideogram has led to a new scrutability, a new insight that remains Western and that becomes, thereafter, global.

This very idea of Chinese as “scrutable and very scrutable” is essential to Marden’s calligraphy-based practice. The (mis)understanding of Chinese as ideographic allows him to bring the language together with abstraction, emptying it of its pre-established referentiality, history, and cultural significance, reducing it to pure surface in order to receive meaning through eye-sight alone. Like the Whitney critics and organizers who upheld a binary between content and form, Marden refuses to take form and

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97 Chow, 61.
99 Chow, 65.
content as interdependent, acting upon an understanding that Chinese is not a system of signification, a language, but an abstract form with no content outside of its form.

Though Marden’s use of the Chinese language relies on similar fallacies as Derrida’s, it is deployed to different ends, which is where its significance to Kim’s project lies. For Marden this emptied writing becomes a means for him to collapse his body into the painting. This is evident in the intensification of the presence of the artist’s hand in *Grove Group*, where he relied on the ridges left by the pallet knife to demonstrate the physicality of his process, and the corporeal dimensions of his canvases, about which Marden says, “The sizes usually relate closely to the human size. I mean they’re usually around six feet or so. I’m human size.” He feels that painting, and its ability to convey feelings, is all about physicality and that his monochromes did not sufficiently achieve this, resulting in the shift towards line drawings that formally and conceptually recall Pollock. By viewing the Chinese language as ideographic, Marden was able to place the values of Western abstraction onto it, seeing it as the perfect means to inject his body into the canvas and reinvigorate his process. He says, “Calligraphy is very personal and physical. It’s not a technique or an ideology; it’s a form of pure expression. Each time a calligrapher makes a mark, it will be distinctive because he has a particular physicality. Great artists exploit this; their thinking and their physicality become one. Paintings are physical. So is the act of creating them. This physicality should be emphasized. If you’re not working with preconceived forms and thinking, then you can concentrate

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on expression.” By detaching calligraphy from both its semantic function as a language and its historical, cultural, and social contexts, Marden turns it into a form of “pure expression,” which for him means a mark of his own physical presence.

Despite his insistence on the bodily presence in his work, through both the influence of Pollock and calligraphy, Marden’s body is not present in the same way that Kim’s is. While Marden makes an effort to stress the physicality of his process as something personal and emotional, through his line drawings and the uneven surface of his monochromes, in order to evoke a bodily presence that is not particular, Kim makes no attempt to show the physicality of his process, yet his body is summoned against his control as a means to comprehend his work. Where Marden can voluntarily exploit a fantasy of Asian culture to inspire his work, a fantasy of Asian culture is always present in Kim’s work through the inevitable presence of the body of the racialized artist as a stand-in for identity, culture, and experience. Marden has the privilege of invoking a bodily presence that is not particular and concretely defined, one that (Marden claims) can be universally identified with due to the relative anonymity of the abstract compositions. On the contrary, Kim’s abstract compositions, however anonymous and impersonal they may appear, still invoke a predefined bodily presence fixed by notions of racialized identity. It is deindividualized from Kim’s own body, in that it is a stand in for conceptions of Asianess more broadly, but always remains specific and particular. At point of most

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102 Marden in Sniff, 39.
essential difference, Marden’s bodily presence is sourced from the paintings as opposed to Kim’s which is sourced directly from his body itself.

Part III: Relishing the Fragment

In moving from skin color to Koryŏ Dynasty ceramics, Kim is painting a different type of skin. As discussed earlier, Kim recognized that celadon glaze functions as the skin of the ceramic object just as pain functions as the skin of the canvas. This connection gave Kim a means to further explore and extend formal and conceptual concerns raised by Synecdoche. Synecdoche suggests that race is a synecdoche, skin standing in for the whole person. Grey-Green suggests that celadon – the name of the type of glaze – similarly stands in for the whole category of object, but takes it further by suggesting that Korean ceramics are standing in for Korean culture and Korean culture is standing in for Kim. The choice of this medium extends the connection between the skin of an abstract painting and skin of the racialized body, made in Synecdoche, to the celadon skin of the ceramic object as another analogous form of abstraction. This evokes the uncomfortable relationship between the racialized object and racialized body.

If Synecdoche, in its reduction of racialized bodies to flat, monochrome canvases that resembles paint samples, could be read as further objectifying and fragmenting the already dehumanized body, then Grey-Green could be read as amplifying this by substituting the objectified body with the actual object. I would like to argue that Kim makes no attempt to restore coherence to the racialized subject or expose the fallacy behind the lack of humanity. If this is the case, why would Kim extend the process of dehumanization rather than work against it?
This doubling down on the what Juliana Chang calls the “racial inhuman” is in fact a way to break open and counter hegemony, a way to launch an interrogation of the terms of dominant forms of humanity which exclude the racialized other. As Chang explains, the insistence on the superficiality of race and sentimental affirmation of a universalizing humanity is itself a mechanism for reaffirming hegemonic ideology. It not only shuts down any critical conversation of the terms of humanity, but also “enacts an inhuman cruelty by traumatically nullifying the psychic realities of racial subalterns.”103 The project of restoring humanity requires an acceptance of the terms that justify violence against racialized subjects and locate the issue of marginalization at a lack. Much more generative is the understanding of the issue behind the racial inhuman not as a lack, but of an excess; one that the binary terms of humanism cannot account for, requiring us to move beyond them.104

In *Grey-Green*, Kim is not trying to uncover a truth or bring to illuminate the humanity of the racialized other – which risks reproducing the violence of humanist rhetoric – rather he is embracing a fragmented state, one that enables a rethinking of the categories of both race and human. He makes his referents explicit but only as a means to amplify their absence, prohibiting the objects’ recuperation and restoration from their abstracted form. Each painting is only a fragment of their original form, but a fragment that is decontextualized and condensed to the point where it cannot be returned to any coherent whole. In its fragmented state, *Grey-Green* provides a surplus of meaning – the engagement with Modernist abstraction, intentional copying

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104 Ibid., 13-14.
of Brice Marden’s paintings, descriptive titles pointing to the ceramic objects, and the link between Kim’s Korean American identity and the object – resulting in an uncategorizable excess; one that destabilizes the boundaries of abstract painting, race, object, and human.
CONCLUSION

Neither the work of Byron Kim nor Steven Young Lee attempts to restore a violated Asian American identity or widen the barriers of representation for their own inclusion. Rather, they embrace a state of fragmentation and their position on the periphery as a means to deconstruct the categories that enable a reduction of ethnic art to pure body. Much more generative than advocating for inclusion and better representation, this refusal to move beyond objectification and dehumanization allows us to critically engage with the terms of hegemony, viewing art as a means of critical engagement with the realities of Asian American racialization.

The body of the racialized artist is inevitably summoned in readings of ethnic art, but both Lee and Kim intervene in this process. There is already a bodily presence in Lee’s vases – one which he invites through heightening the anthropomorphism of his work, but the body invoked is not Lee’s body. Rather, it is the inhuman and superhuman body of the coolie, the anthropomorphized object and objectified body of the cyborg. In doing this, Lee forces the viewer to see the historical forms of Asian objecthood that haunt the process of viewing Asian American art and enable the movement from Asian art and Asian objects to the Asian body. The bodily presence in Kim’s paintings functions differently. In a sense, his perfect monochromes eliminate his body, but Kim anticipates the summoning of his body as a means to explain his work. From here, he mediates this process of conjuring the racialized body of the artist, making the viewer aware of their movement from racialized object to racialized body. In putting his work in conversation with Brice Marden, a white artist who attempts to stress the physicality and bodily presence in his work, Kim
illuminates the uneven constraints placed upon artists of color. While the white body is presence only as a means of transcending the social and stressing the pure expression of the work, the racialized body is used against the will of the artist of color to constraint the meaning of the work to a particular, preassigned conception of racialized identity and experience. Though the corporeal presence operates differently in the work of these two artists, both denaturalize readings of ethnic art as direct reflections of an individualized body and experience that is disconnected from social and historical forces.

Though disparate mediums, these two artists collapse the categories of surface and depth on a formal and psychic level. Lee does this through violently fracturing his vases, making both their exterior and interior simultaneously visible and undifferentiated. In doing this, he explicates the internalization of racist stereotypes and shows how this internalization works to move racial oppression from a socio-historically struggle to one that takes place on the level of the individual psyche. Kim takes this collapse even further through his use of the monochrome, completely doing away with depth, turning his material referents into pure surface. His combination of racialized referents and flat canvases place race analogous to abstract painting – race as the reduction of the racialized body to pure surface. By blurring the binary between surface and depth, these artists open up a space to deconstruct multiculturalist readings of art that rely on race as depth, as content for the work. They force us to rethink conceptions of racial representation as the representation of an authentic interior – a conception that inevitably produces a wholistic human subject – because there is no untouched interior, no true depth to be represented in the artwork. Rather,
we must recognize the impossibility of authentic representation. In collapsing surface
and depth and embracing this fragmented state of being, Steven Young Lee and
Byron Kim not only open up a space to deconstruct multiculturalist readings of art,
but more significantly, to rethink the hegemonic categories of humanity, objecthood,
and race that have been used historically as a means to justify racist exclusion and
violence.
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