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Byron Kim by Adam Simon

A courtside conversation about patience and how to find something in nothing.

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Interview

Q

Byron Kim at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts. Courtesy Byron Kim, Photo by Sean Kenny.

Five bases a box of Byron Kim's work since I first included it in a show at Four Walls back in 1993 called *Sleeping With the Enemy*. The show was about painting and the ways in which painting was a medium that contradicted its insistence on autonomy. We had touch for about 5 years and then recommended at a party. Going to basketball games was a kind of ritual for us, and we talked about everything from painting to interviews at one-on-one or moves like that struck us as inscrutable.

Adam Simon:
Okay. This is going to be really hard for me. We're at the Northeast Conference championship game college basketball. LIU Blackbirds versus Fairleigh Dickinson Knights. We're sitting in the Blackbirds section that's wrong, and uh, I'm gone since some background. We started sitting in the LIU Blackbirds games around 2012 when somebody gave Windsor Monroe a ticket. Windsor Monroe is a painter, and he invited me to a bunch of games. Windsor and I and various friends. Uh, uh. Mr. G. Mary's just around the first basket. Byron and I have gone to about three of those games. We've been sitting in the same seats. Uh, uh. Mr. G. Mary's, right, after two minutes of play Mr. G. Mary's has 5 points, LIU has 2. Byron Jared Glassman is shooting two. Scored on his way to the basket. Byron's been sitting in the same seat for about 3 years. Maybe we should just concentrate on the game first.

Byron Kim:
Okay.

AS:
Why then maybe it's just down. It's incredibly noisy in here. The place is packed.

BK:
LIU. Uh, uh.

AS:
Was it okay to note we are that LIU is that also player halfway through the season, and I never looked like they would make it to the playoffs, but they kept winning their home games and somehow got to the championship.

BK:
What do you mean by question number two?

AS:
All right. I'm going to read the question. I can think of your project with the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, the Museum of Modern Art, National Gallery, and the Sunday Paintings series, where you make a painting of the sky every Sunday. Do you see them as little tiny projects or do they add and at some point?

BK:
I see the Sunday Paintings as a life-long project, which will end, you know, when I can't paint anymore. The other projects, I'm not sure. I'm still making somewhat quotidianly. Actually, I'm not sure about the ones. I suspect that that series will have an end point.

AS:
The Sunday Paintings require that you have to see the sky, right?

BK:
Right. So if there's a Sunday that, well, yeah. I can't imagine a instance where I can't see the sky. If I'm some sort of prisoner and can't see the sky, I'm not sure what I'm going to do. There's that verse Jean-Luc addressed to his Wood Wind quintet.

AS:
That's what I've done! That's what Jean-Sickleman does. And the thing about this team is that they play as well together that he can make the composition, and they can improvise within the composition. And I'm sure the four players on the team that can sense when he's going to throw the ball to them, nonetheless hand and feel.

BK:
I don't believe he has the most assists in the country. Jeremiah Ellis is Division 1.

AS:
Yeah. No, not just Division 1. It's in the whole country. So—

BK:
Uh-uh-uh. Allright, then we have to tackle this second question, otherwise—

AS:
Well, I have one more question about the first one, though. Can the Sunday Paintings be done from Indiana, looking out a window?

BK:
Yeah, I've done so many looking out windows as I have outside, however. I'm not looking out a window. I'm looking at a window and the window, you know, is an underlayment and part of the sky.

AS:
Conceivably, you could be on your deathbed.

BK:
Would be on my deathbed? Laughter! Somebody else could be mixing the color for me. Uhn. Yeah. Somebody else could be transcribing the words.

AS:
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BK:
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Uh-uh-uh. Allright, then we have to tackle this second question, otherwise—

**BK

Long Island University Dancers, Photo by Adam Simon

AS

Daughter! Again, the fact that this is an anecdote that you told me ends up being significant. There aren't that many people whom I know who have daughters who I know well enough to know that I know that they have been repeatedly defeated in conversation. Anyway, that's an aside. What I was thinking is that you took something—whatever the context of your conversation with your daughter was—and it was a conversation that was emotional and contentious. They you deflected it into something structured, repetitive, and with discreet elements—in other words, a chess game. Chess is always being used as a metaphor for life, but that's not what I'm talking about. I'm just saying—

BS

Well, it works, for instance, but part of the reason why I'm a visual artist—and maybe a lot of us are—is that, in the end, words are not completely adequate. It's kind of a cliché, but a lot of what I am trying to do is because I can't say it. As far as playing chess goes, I weren't very conscious of the metaphor. I was just playing chess because I was a kid and we were both smokers—and therefore we were both pretty unfamiliar with whether we won or lost. It turned out to be perfect, because we were physically matched. We did have conversations while we were playing, and the chess diffused the contentious part of the relationship.

AS

All right, halftime is over.

BS

Do you feel comfortable with a four-point lead at halftime?

AS

Not because the last game I saw at—which was the quarterfinals—they were behind by about twelve points at halftime.

BS

You're crazy, man. Your pointers in a game like this is nothing.

AS

I don't mean that I know they're going to win, I just mean that—

BS

You feel better than if they were down by twelve, is what you're saying.

AS

Yeah, that's what I'm saying, master of the obvious.

BS

I have no idea who's gonna win this game. It might come down to getting fouled out.

AS

LIU's points are because they have the home-court advantage. They tend to get fouled a lot. There reason for home court is so that people trying to stop him

BS

Well, I think if he controls the boards, that's gonna be key. Such a feel-good game.

AS

Yeah. They got two incredibly athletic players, Jamal Chiasserene and C.J. Garner. And they can just weave their way through the defense better than anybody whom I've seen out there.

BS

I have to say though, St. Mary's has so much size, compared to LIU.

AS

But every team they've played against has had more size than they have.

BS

Yeah, I know. But the last team we saw there was play pathetic. They had no athleticism, no talent.

AS

Yeah, also, all of St. Mary's biggest players have been sitting on the bench except one, I think.

BS

Right.

AS

You know what I see just thinking? If this works, maybe it will open a little more opportunity for some of the Division III teams. Maybe Sonsacre should interview Rochelle Feinstein at a boxing match, for instance.

BS

You'd be the person to do that. It's interesting that they're running a play at half-court, when LIU's—

AS

Yeah, that's all about 7' 6 looks ceremonial.

BS

They're well-coached.

AS

Well, Mr. St Mary's has won their last nine games. Oh, uh, he stopped from Both teams are having a little trouble getting into the half-court game.

BS

This game has two exceptional point guards, I have to say.

AS

Yeah, that's right cat! You don't have to call that. He flopped! Both teams are going to start flopping now.

BS

I'm not so sure about Jason Brickman's kicks.

AS

His kicks?

BS

Sneakers.

AS

The orange sneakers? It's kind of a trademark. He always has them.

Eric Mackintosh against Mr. St. Mary's Mountaineers, Photo by Adam Simon

AS

Look! He takes one of the board, and they send in Booker and he hits a couple of threes, that's it.

BS

C.J. Garner! That guy flies through the air! You know whom I would have loved to have interviewed? In the early '90s I met this Austrian artist in Vienna who was a professional gambler and a painter. He said, in gambling, he would go to casinos and get and was making really good money. I was just thinking about the time when you came to my studio and looked at my paintings and told me I always told you I'd teach painting. When I understand not so you giving me marketing advice, but you, Adam Simon, as a guy who has been successful in a lot of different worlds. I understand that, but still, to have the capacity to do that is still confounding to me. It's something you do well, but I don't.

AS

You just told me that you met an artist in the early '90s who was successful at gambling and painting. I don't need marketing advice but what made you think that I wasn't giving you marketing advice?

BS

That's what you said at the time. You said, "I know this sounds like I'm giving you marketing advice, but that's not what it is."

AS

It's possible that I was lying to you.

BS

I don't believe that the reason you have, you know, six sits paintings in your studio right now, and had twelve closely aligned paintings in your show, is about marketing.

AS

You're probably ninety percent right about that. I'm not saying that what I was giving you was purely marketing advice but, you know, if we don't talk in, you know terms, like you just did, about getting work out there, it's all about—

BS

Whoa! Go Jason. Oh, very nice!

AS

That's pretty serious; an eleven-point lead is pretty serious. Anyway, I'm sure you're right that I weren't giving you purely marketing advice. I think I was thinking about getting your work out there, which I don't necessarily think of as marketing. But in the end, what we do has to communicate something to people and, you know, it's not that you're not communicating something. It's just that you're not communicate it without compromising your message, the better.

BS

So, doing ten of something communicates better than doing one only?

AS

Not always. I'm not sure I said make ten of everything. If I said that in your studio, I must have felt at that moment that a series of these works would communicate what you were trying to say better than one of each.

BS

Actually, to me, the real question is—

AS

Wait. Finish that thought. You almost said you agreed.

BS

I do agree. I agree that it is better to have ten than to have one. But I think something is—I don't know how you do it. Because, what happens to the element of discovery? Where does that happen?

AS

I spoke. It's impossible for me to do anything if that element is missing. Maybe it's just a matter of suits, because during the ten or even twenty—I don't remember how many I did—I was still discovering something about it. I know what you mean because the artworks I've discovered something in the first one, but, see, here's a perfect example. After three years or a little longer of painting skin paintings, I ended up kind of avoiding it and shunning it, because people knew me as "the skin guy" I was a little sick of it. I was a little sick of it myself, and I felt like I'd exhausted it. I was starting to think about it all over again in a completely different light. It's become really interesting to me again. Twenty years later it's a completely different thing because I'm not the same person and I can't imagine doing without having done so much of it back then. Do you know what I'm saying? That series almost ended at twelve panels, except that Paul Bloodgood came to my studio and sort of demanded that I make 200.

BS

Really? Was he the same one who told you to paint duplicates?

AS

No, that was Tom Burckhardt. That was purely—I wouldn't say marketing—but that was a purely sort of pragmatic, even financial concern.

BS

Actually, you know, it's kind of a ridiculous. I'm sort of being a little disingenuous, because I actually have a series of... Uh-oh, LIU is so pumped!

Adam Simon, Meet The WUFO 2003, 6 x 6 inches, acrylic on aluminum. Photo by Adam Simon, Courtesy of the artist.

BS

By Dickens, they're up by thirteen.

AS

I must have made about forty Steel This Art paintings, so—

BS

Only forty? I thought more than that by now.

AS

Yeah, around forty. I'm also thinking that repetition is going to figure prominently in my show at Studio 10.

BS

Where's the show?

AS

Not until February 2004.

BS

That's eleven months away!

AS

You know what's weird about doing this? I just realized that one of the paintings I'm doing for the show is something I started a year and a half ago. I think. You're just taking it in, just absorbing. It's actually kind of astonishing to sit here and try to think while watching a basketball game.

BS

Yeah, well the problem is multitasking. If you were forcing me to think about something, I'd perform even better than more than—but wouldn't be very hard. Or whether you know, how much the media game is affecting each team.

AS

This is highly dispassionate.

BS

Yeah, well you're a fucking weirdo, man. I wouldn't have—

AS

I get tired of reading artists' interviews. I know I wanted to do one with you. I just didn't want to do it the usual way.

BS

The problem with this is that no one's going to get the flavor, how loud it is in here, and how incredibly hard it is to have a real conversation when you're at a championship basketball game.

AS

The mindfuckly split that we're kind of having to do here watching the game and trying to have a conversation about something more important than I had to you, except that it's kind of a dumb question. What does it mean to be a conceptual painter? I think it's a ridiculous term, and I don't really like it very much. But I can ask, so what does that split? Isn't it sort of a similar split?

BS

For some reason, when you say conceptual painter, it reminds me of Ad Reinhardt. I also disagree a little bit with that term, just because it's so awkward sounding.

AS

It sure seems to fit, right?

BS

Nevertheless, when you say it, I think of Reinhardt because, for me, his black paintings were so deeply serious, and he was so insistent that they were about nothing essentially. At the same time, I think that they were an incredibly serious joke. The only way that I can get there is through his political cartoons.

AS

Why do you think they were an elaborate joke? They're so beautiful.

BS

Wow, that was a crazy shot! It hit the bottom of the rim. It was like a weird playground thing.

AS

Yeah, that's what I meant by the joke: the guy spent the last ten years of his life making only by-only inch-square black paintings.

BS

Right.

AS

That's totally ... serious? It is totally serious!

BS

Actually, you know what the real joke was? The real joke was when a museum—I think it was the Guggenheim—tried to send one back because it was so fragile and it was falling apart. The guy, the curator, called him and he said, "Hey, we just want that one back!" And he said something like, "But I could give you another one; they're all the same."

AS

One of my favorite quotations by him is, "This is much too serious to be taken seriously."

BS

That's a great line.

Adam Simon's Swipe is on view at Bowlby, 10 until March 2.

swipe painting basketball

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