

You are looking at a high resolution digital photograph of *Synecdoche*, a work of art made beginning in 1991, and continuing through the present, by the Korean-American artist Byron Kim.

What is a “synecdoche”?

Byron Kim was born in 1961 in La Jolla, California, and now lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. He majored in English literature in college, and this close study of language has informed his art. He describes himself as a “text painter without any text,” a comment that highlights the importance of words and ideas in his artistic process.

Synecdoche comes from the Greek for “simultaneous understanding.” It refers to a figure of speech that takes a part of something to stand for the whole—or the whole to stand for its parts. For example, “all hands on deck” or “all feet to the dance floor” are expressions using a synecdoche, where hands and feet stand for whole people. Writers use this literary device to heighten description, add symbolism or metaphor, or enrich the voice of a character.

This work of art by Byron Kim looks at the relationship between parts and whole. The parts are hundreds of rectangular panels that he calls “skin tone portraits.” Each one represents one person’s skin color. When displayed together, new meanings and interpretations form. Kim said, “I wanted to concentrate on something very small to evoke something very large.”

With *Synecdoche*, Kim explores the issues of race, representation, and identity as well as the meaning of individual and group portraits. Kim is not trying to put forth an “answer” or single message; his work invites us to think, reflect, and ask more questions. By isolating a part—an individual’s skin tone—and then combining it with others, *Synecdoche* invites big questions, like: What are the limits of representation? How and why do we categorize people, in our community and in our world?