

How and why did Byron Kim make this?

Kim says, “The most exciting part of making an artwork is coming up with a good idea.” With *Synecdoche*, his idea was to create “skin tone portraits,” capturing the skin color of individual people. He began the series in 1991 with portraits of his family and friends, including fellow artists. He also included a self-portrait. Then, he approached strangers in the park or at the library in New York City. He has since added to the work intermittently, most recently in 2017 when Kim made portraits of National Gallery of Art visitors and staff. There are more than 500 panels, and the artwork is ongoing.

To make the portraits at the National Gallery in its East Building atrium, Kim placed scotch tape on the person’s arm. He mixed a variety of colors—yellows, pinks, blues, purples—to find the flesh tone, dabbing paint on the tape as he went along. When satisfied with the match to the person’s skin color, he saved the mixed color in a pouch and wrote the person’s name on it. This process took about 20 to 30 minutes for each individual. Back in his studio, he mixed the oil paint with wax, and painted on an 8 x 10 inch wood panel. He then spread the paint with a palette knife to get a smooth surface.

The monochromatic panels are arranged in a grid, in alphabetical order by the first name of the person, who is identified on a wall label. Together, the range of colored panels varied—pinks, browns, yellows and cream tones—create a meaningful work of art.

Kim is fascinated by color—the way color can convey a meaning, the way it can be a metaphor, or symbol, and the way those meanings and metaphors of color can change in relationship to the other colors surrounding it. *Synecdoche* combines many ideas, including the absurdity of reducing an individual’s complex identity to skin color.

Reflecting on the way the work has grown and changed for more than twenty years, Kim said, “This work has come to recognize a kind of inclusiveness, which I didn’t expect when I first made it. It’s really important to keep our mind on that idea of including everybody, especially now.”