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Painting Double Consciousness

BY ANNA-CATHARINA GEBBERS

SANG WOO KIM

Portrait of **SANG WOO KIM**. Photo by
Jang Dukhwa. Courtesy the artist.

“this sense of always
looking at one’s self through
the eyes of others”

I reach Sang Woo Kim on a video call at his studio in Hackney, London, where works destined for his solo booth with Herald St at Art Basel Hong Kong—his first solo presentation in Asia—still line the walls, awaiting collection in the coming days. It is an opportune moment to ask him about his choices of motifs, media, and materials.

Kim’s practice encompasses painting, installation, and pigment dye transfers that translate photographic imagery into painterly surfaces. His transmedial approach remains consistently figurative, placing him alongside a generation of artists whose work—in response to digital, social, and cultural upheavals—repoliticizes the figure and renders complex identities and societal tensions visible.

Eyes have become a central recurring element. Kim first became known for his self-portraits; in recent works, his own eyes appear alongside fragments of skin, isolated and cropped in condensed compositions. They look out and yet hold back at the same time; within them resides a presence that never fully reveals itself—a form of seeing that remains aware it is also always being seen.

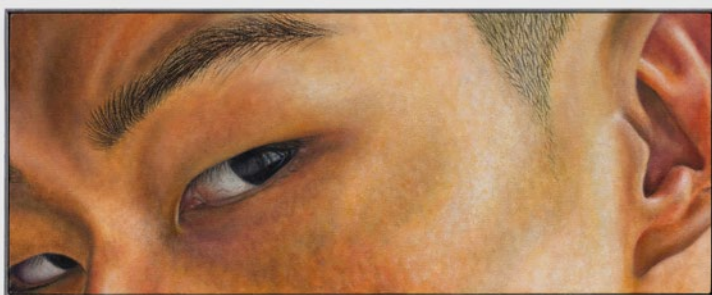
Interspersed among these new pieces are pigment dye transfer works. As he did for his first solo exhibition “The Seer, The Seen” at Herald St in 2024, Kim is planning to bring this photograph-based series into dialogue with his self-portraits. Based on composite images sourced from magazines, films, and friends’ phone libraries, these works are likewise dominated by eyes—either casual or openly appraising, with surprised, curious, or seductive gazes.

The Gaze

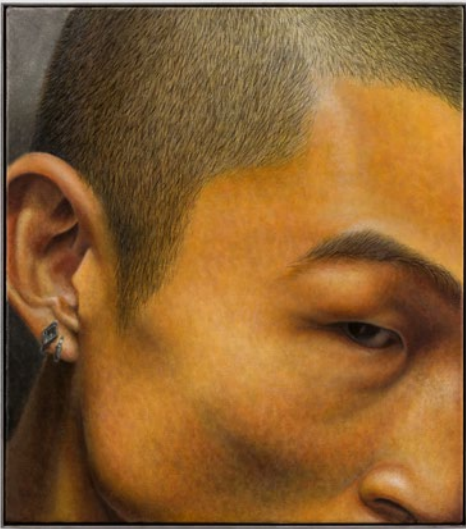
In Kim’s work, the gaze is not neutral but an event in which perception, projection, and power overlap. Born in Seoul and raised in a Korean household in London, he has contended with a racializing gaze that has marked his everyday life since childhood. Layered onto this are fetishizing gazes that have made him a sought-after model. Painting—and especially painting oneself—intensifies this exposure. He notes: “The most embarrassing idea, the one tied to your deepest insecurity, is often the most vulnerable; and therefore the most honest and pure.”

When his eyes look out from the canvas in recent works, they do so in a gesture of self-empowerment—a steadfast gaze that withstands those who render him Other. White viewers in London, Kim observes, often read this as a confident or even intimidating expression of identity—pride, sovereignty, defiance. By contrast, people of other races feel seen through his paintings. Kim explains: “They recognize someone like themselves—someone who had the same experiences of otherness growing up. They sense that there is someone speaking to what they’ve been living through.”

Korea, which he describes as his motherland, is where he most wants to exhibit next. “I’m really interested in how people of different backgrounds experience my work,” he says. “In Korea my works will likely be read completely differently.” And yet he suspects that something universal



SANG WOO KIM, *You’re looking at me 011*, 2026, oil on canvas, artist’s frame, 21 × 51 × 3 cm. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards. Courtesy the artist and Herald St, London/Bologna.



SANG WOO KIM, *The Corner 021*, 2026, oil and acrylic on canvas, artist's frame, 46 × 40 × 3 cm. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards. Courtesy the artist and Herald St, London/Bologna.

may underlie these varied readings: "The reclamation of my own image through the act of painting is also a kind of interrogation of the self in general. I want my work to challenge and unsettle viewers—like looking into a mirror and seeing themselves through the lens of another's fractured gaze."

His own gaze, as a Korean raised in London and working as a model, is shaped by a "double consciousness," which W. E. B. Du Bois described in 1903 as the feeling of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."¹ This internalization of racialized attributions imposed by others, with whiteness as norm and belonging denied, also resonates with Frantz Fanon's 1952 account of the racialized body. For Fanon, the body is not merely fixed by the paralyzing, petrifying gaze of the Other, as in Sartre, but "pathologized" to the point that it loses its sense of direction and orientation, producing an experience of fragmentation, disorientation, and non-belonging.²

This fragmentation is reflected in Kim's tightly cropped portraits, which isolate his eyes and their epicanthic folds, as well as his high cheekbones, features that have made him both a target of racist hostility and an object within the exoticizing, fetishizing body schema of the fashion world. His work moves between opacity and exhibitionism: between Édouard Glissant's right not to be fully understood³ and the systemically enforced "compulsion to transparency"⁴ intensified by social media, where intimacy becomes a resource, subjectivity a commodity, and the face a brand. Kim does not merely present the self in fragments; in his hyperrealistic paintings, he zooms into the skin's surface, probing its pores and scanning each hair follicle with near-surgical precision. With increasing confidence in his own vulnerability, he reveals more of himself.

What emerges is a painterly fascination with flesh and presence. Among the artists important to his

development are Jenny Saville, Lucian Freud, Matthew Barney, and Robert Rauschenberg—a combination that may seem surprising at first. Yet all four engage intensively with the human body—its physical presence, materiality, vulnerability, and transformation—albeit through markedly different media and discourses.

The Body

Kim's engagement with the body is grounded in painting, which he approaches in a way comparable to conceptual figurative painters of his own age, such as Anna Park, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Toyin Ojih Odutola, and Amoako Bofo. Like them, he combines representational imagery with analytical, political, and media-reflexive concerns. This is neither a return to tradition nor a counter-movement to abstraction, but a transhistorical engagement with image-making, identity, the body, technology, and social narrative. At stake are questions of representation, the materiality of the image, and the role of figuration in the image-saturated present.

For Kim, the figure is not merely a motif but an object of discourse. Through processes of deconstruction, fragmentation, layering, and reduction to generalized features, it is stripped of stable identity. In this sense, his portraits or self-portraits approach the *tronie* of Dutch Golden Age painting: not a specific likeness, but a quasi-fictional characterization of a type, such as "the Asian man," as well as of more abstract ideas. Kim sees himself in precisely this role when he is cast and staged according to type in fashion editorials.

The repeated cropping of his own face has become a stylistic hallmark in a practice that otherwise shifts from work to work. He deliberately varies his painting technique, experimenting with mood, process, and daily disposition. In doing so, he raises questions about representation: how does visibility function? Who is permitted to depict whom, and how? What is the

relationship between mediated images of a person and their identity?

As Stuart Hall has argued, identity, gender, race, body politics, and power structures are not just individual attributes but culturally coded formations.⁵ Kim's self-empowerment in relation to his own image, together with his engagement with social media and fashion imagery, points precisely to these mechanisms: identity is produced through images and their circulation, not outside them.

Within painting, Jenny Saville's fragmented, monumental bodies and Lucian Freud's unflinching, corporeally dense portraits exemplify the kinds of inquiries that interest Kim. How can skin, folds, flesh, tonal variation, and shadow be rendered through color, brushwork, facture, and composition in ways that affect the viewer both emotionally and intellectually? How can painting make physical touch perceptible through sight?

These are the questions Kim investigates when he documents every pore, crease, discoloration, sign of aging, and trace of bodily degeneration. His work asks what distinguishes a hyperrealist painting from a photograph, how photography can become painterly, and what painting can achieve that a digitally generated image in virtual space cannot. Does painting invite a more lingering gaze, and therefore a different way of seeing the depicted subject? Does photography, as an ostensibly documentary medium, function even more than painting as a space of psychic projection, shaped by trace, withdrawal, and self-staging?

Postconceptual

Painting is also the process through which, as Kim notes, he can almost meditatively forget himself. From there, his reflection on the body as an archive of social experience and an object of image politics extends into other media. His approach intersects with those of Matthew Barney

and Robert Rauschenberg, both key figures in the transgression of traditional art forms, and in what Peter Osborne has described as the postconceptual.⁶

Barney considers himself a sculptor, but his notion of material encompasses the body, movement, and action. His expanded concept of sculpture reaches into energetic, narrative, and performative systems, including film sequences, choreographed actions, and allegorical figures. Rauschenberg, who worked across a wide range of themes, styles, materials, and techniques, is regarded as a precursor to virtually all postwar movements since Abstract Expressionism.

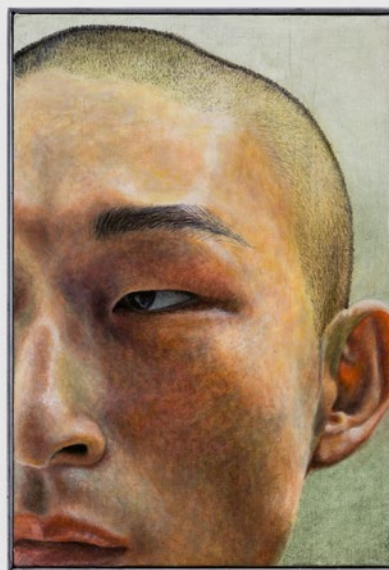
For both artists, the figure is a culturally shaped, medially constructed, and materially transformable assemblage. Barney works with his own physicality, treating bodily imagery as aesthetically and ideologically produced, and imagining flesh as mythic, ritualistic, and transformable. Rauschenberg, meanwhile, presents figures as part of a mediated stream of images and as carriers of collective experience and vulnerability. What is at stake is less anatomical depiction than the trace of an event, its perception, and the power structures inscribed within it.

The Staged Self

Like Kim, Barney worked successfully as a model during his studies, a fact he integrates into his work alongside his high-school career as a quarterback and wrestler. Kim is interested in this performative translation of biography: the way Barney mediates intimacy, publicity, and social critique through the body as both medium and material of artistic self-negotiation. Yet the two artists differ in how they mobilize embodiment in relation to personal and social power.

For Barney, the body functions as performative tool and mythological material; for Kim, it becomes a site through which to examine identity, hybridity, and digital

SANG WOO KIM, *Closer 027*, 2026, oil and acrylic on canvas, artist's frame, 31 × 22 × 3 cm. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards. Courtesy the artist and Herald St, London/Bologna.



self-representation. In both practices, the corporeal is an epistemic instrument. Both artists transform fashion's regimes of the gaze, surface aesthetics, repetition, staging, and brand identity into conceptual image critique. Yet unlike Barney, who constructs monumental, iconic, and highly stylized visual worlds, inserting himself into his tableaux with near-editorial precision and incorporating fashion aesthetics into mythological systems, Kim deconstructs the perfect image those codes demand, foregrounding the tension between intimacy and public display. While Barney stages himself as a mythological figure, Kim returns to his face and body as recurring motifs through which to examine the construction of selfhood and authenticity. He presents himself as vulnerable, fragmented, and hybrid. Even when his gaze appears neutral, almost cool, it does not keep us at a distance; rather, the canvas seems to become a membrane through which we might slip, to momentarily inhabit his skin.

Such a gaze, which invites a form of bodily projection, is itself an act of staging and autofiction. Kim uses self-representation as an aesthetic strategy, either by refracting his biography through self-portraiture or, as in his latest series *Character Study*, superimposing his own likeness onto the white Western film heroes and art-historical figures who shaped his cultural socialization in London. In so doing, he points simultaneously to the historical and systemic erasure, as well as the distorted representation, of figures in Western films whose physiognomy resembles his own.

Resistance vs. Belonging

Kim condenses his engagement with body, identity, and image circulation in his cycle of pigment dye transfers, sourcing material from social media, magazines, and friends' phones. Removed from their original contexts, these images are recombined through the artist's interventions. The technique, which Kim discovered through Rauschenberg, involves applying solvents to prepare the canvas before the printed image is transferred and rubbed into the new surface.

Like Rauschenberg, Kim combines mass-distributed imagery with individual gesture. In his "transfers," Rauschenberg recycled America's collective memory, using images found in print media to construct alternative narratives that break from linear history. Kim, in turn, works with fragments of a collective memory accumulated in the endless stream of social media, where the sheer volume of images renders them increasingly incomprehensible to human perception, dissolving into a white noise of pictures. Through vertically stacked arrangements of clearly separated rectangular images, he suggests a temporal structure, a sequence, or perhaps a processual identity continually reforming itself, image by image. The works also make visible the power dynamics embedded in this circulation: the images that bombard us every day do not simply pass before our eyes, but enter consciousness and shape perception.

The dye transfer technique lends the photographs a painterly, displaced quality. Through color, Kim translates the material into a post-digital register, preventing the works from appearing merely nostalgic. Their precision and transparency create a gap between image and representation. This distance acts as a metaphor for the instability of identity as it unfolds between body, surface, digital circulation, self-image, and the external gaze.

Where Kim's eyes dominate his self-portraits, in the pigment dye transfers, the depicted eyes belong to others. They, too, look out at the viewer, or away in ostracism, suggesting how deeply Kim has felt such gazes himself. Sartre described the gaze of the Other as the moment in which the subject becomes an object. In Kim's work, this dynamic is charged by racialized experience: the need to remain alert to potential threat while simultaneously seeking belonging.

In this sense, the almost incantatory calm of his works is also a form of resistance. Kim has been developing ideas that would extend his concerns with race, assimilation, discrimination, and reclamation into



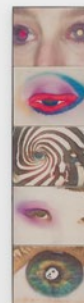
SANG WOO KIM, *Ways of Seeing 025*, 2026, pigment dye transfer on canvas, artist's frame, 165 × 32 × 3 cm. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards. Courtesy the artist and Herald St, London/Bologna.

sculpture, performance, or AI. The medium is not decisive. "Art," Kim tells me in our next meeting, held in person, in the Berlin sun, "is about being able to create your own language in order to perhaps have a lingua franca with those who might come to speak it with you."

Kim treats his face and body as politically and socially coded sites of experience and action, where visibility, power, and representation are continuously negotiated. His appearance becomes a medium of artistic self-negotiation: a locus of memory, projection, and attribution. This exposure, and the struggle to control one's own image, are accompanied by a vulnerability that reaches the viewer. At the same time, the repeated presence of his own face, as medium, material, and image, comes to resemble a conceptual brand, through which Kim reflects on market-driven economies of selfhood.

On the occasion of his presentation in Hong Kong, Kim wrote on Instagram: "Growing up in the UK feeling Othered with a lost sense of belonging, I felt a familiarity I have never experienced anywhere else . . . Even though I am bilingual and fluent in Korean, I still feel Othered in my motherland due to cultural differences . . . In Hong Kong, that tension softened to my surprise, something in me settled . . . This journey to belong continues but a shift has occurred and I am intrigued to see how this will inform my practice."

Sang Woo Kim invites us into an experience in which belonging is not given but remains precarious, perhaps akin to the experience of moving through the world, never arriving at a fixed place. As Fanon writes: "I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other... and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea... I was responsible for my body, for my race, for my ancestors."⁷



SANG WOO KIM, *Ways of Seeing 027*, 2026, pigment dye transfer on canvas, artist's frame, 155 × 41.5 × 3 cm. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards. Courtesy the artist and Herald St, London/Bologna.

1 W. E. B. Du Bois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," in *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards, Oxford World's Classics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8.

2 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986).

3 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

4 Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

5 The sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall describes representation as the "active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping: not merely the transmitting of an already-existing meaning, but the more active labour of making things mean." Stuart Hall, "The Rediscovery of Ideology: Return of the repressed in Media Studies," in *Culture, Society and the Media*, ed. Tony Bennett, James Curran, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Woollacott (London: Routledge, 1982), 64.

6 Peter Osborne, "Conceptual Art is Postconceptual," lecture, Villa Sucota, Como, Italy, 2010; Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All. Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 176.

7 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112.

SANG WOO KIM (b. 1994, Seoul) is a London-based artist working across painting and installation. He studied at Central Saint Martins, London, and has presented solo exhibitions at Herald St, London, and Galerie Sébastien Bertrand, Geneva, among others. Recent group exhibitions include AMA Venezia, Venice; MAMCO, Geneva; and X-Museum, Beijing.

ANNA-CATHARINA GEBBERS is a curator, author, and scholar specializing in art, German studies, philosophy, and sociology. She is known for her transdisciplinary approach and long-standing commitment to contemporary art, with a particular focus on contemporary art in Asia and its broader social, cultural, and political contexts. She is a curator at the Hamburger Bahnhof – National Gallery of Contemporary Art in Berlin, where she has organized numerous thematic group exhibitions as well as major institutional solo debuts by artists such as Anne Imhof and Klára Hosnedlová. She serves on numerous juries, writes for publications and magazines, and teaches at institutions including the Free University of Berlin, where she is a member of the Temporal Communities Cluster of Excellence, and serves on numerous juries.