Kim Guiline
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Selected works: 1967–2008

essay by Adrian Kohn

LEHMANN MAUPIN
How a red painting by Kim Guiline actually looks—come to that, how red itself does

by Adrian Kohn
Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Boston
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by Adrian Kohn, Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Boston

“Painting is seeing, a perceptual phenomenon.”
Kim Guiline, in an interview for the 2014 Busan Biennale

All I’m saying is that for me, knowing little or frankly closer to zilch about their artworld context, their maker’s life, their maker’s political and literary and philosophical interests … (usually you’ll hear at length on each when writers turn paint into text), the thing about Kim’s works is how, for once, I can truly have a look at them. Like one from 1987–88 (fig. 1, pg. 42). You get to get stuck standing there just beholding color. So after what—thirty? fifty? seventy?—years of seeing it (and for that very reason, precisely because of its supposed familiarity, in fact almost always not seeing it), you find yourself wide-eyedly blinking and double-taking at plain old red. I mean, it may well be that quite a nice part of life is having the chance to watch red simply doing what it does. One thing, though. From here on out let me call red 빨강—in Roman letters ppalgang, which to my unaccustomed ear/brain sounds like “py-gahng”—not as a glibly exoticizing and contrived gesture by a non-native-speaker, I hope, but rather as a makeshift device for rendering the noun strange to those of us who don’t know Korean. After all, if you read red or hear someone utter “red,” I think you think you grasp what’s being said: The color referred to is abstract and theoretical, a mere concept, and so commonplace that you don’t bother to go through the hassle of imagining it in your mind’s eye. Whereas as I read 빨강 and hear pygahng, I figure I’d better keep staring at the color in question because its name stays unmistakably unclear, and usefully so. It’s different from how red/“red” often comes off as being perfectly clear, even though, whether as a word or an idea, envisioned or not, it’s very unlike the way the color shows up in the world as light or as physical stuff. As in the painting by Kim we’re presently taking in. The work is big and 빨간 (the adjective form of red there, ppalgan, which I’m only able to make out as “py-gahn” like before but with no “g” at the end). Now it’s a lot of 빨강 and it’s really, really 빨간, much more 빨간 than less 빨간 could ever be. This is an idea—that quality increases with quantity, that a color strengthens when an area of it heightens and lengthens, that more 빨간 is more 빨간—which (1) to me doesn’t sound completely obvious, (2) has been mentioned by artists before, though I didn’t understand it enough to believe in it, (3) strictly speaking probably isn’t true if you pull out your lux
yet (4) sure does seem to be at play here, I must admit. What’s more, after only thirty seconds retinal fatigue kicks in. With all the unflaggingly 빨간 input, your cones stop registering it so keenly and the spectrum of eye/brain sensitivity gets color-shifted such that the once-white walls nearby become a fiery apple-green. As for the painting itself, this green underlies (or overlays? I can’t tell…) its front surface and seeps out from each edge. And, at odds with the results predicted by any color wheel and theory I’ve run across, the green and the 빨강 combine and give rise to a lurid, lipsticky orange-fuchsia. On this point, you know already or you’ll now note how the writers never fail to mention Kim’s layering of paint: You’re looking here at thirty layers, forty. You can work out from the sides of the stretchers and from the rich little cracks and pockmarks everywhere that at the very least Kim has gone about layering 빨강 onto black, onto white, onto canvas (pg. 45). On top of that, I think you need green in this tally, and maybe other colors too. Because what you see is the usual so-called subtractive mixing of colored pigment, plus the so-called additive mixing of colored light (the painting actually turns the white ceiling a touch pink, and this thrown pink light is going to blend with the yellowy light from the overhead lamps), plus our green right there in the thick of it, even though in the end it’s an optical illusion. All of which makes for a pretty meaty 빨강. I’ll say, and that’s if the surface were straightforwardly flat, which it isn’t. Kim’s crumbling grid and double-mounded sunny-side-up ovals jut out ever so slightly (fig. 2). This enriches the color still more. The grid and ovals are the same as the rest of the work when it comes to the three properties of hue, value, and saturation, yet the simple fact of additional paint means they wind up more opaque (a fourth quality of color). And the double bulge of the ovals catches and reflects the room lighting more than a sheer flat section does, which makes them seem glossier (a fifth): You see either a whiter/lighter tint of 빨강 or an altogether pure white/light, and in both cases it’s different from the areas that aren’t bulging and reflective. Of course the other thing about three-dimensional things, no matter how small, is they block light. The color below either the inner or the outer lip of a given oval sits in a tiny shadow and strays from how it appears elsewhere. You can think of it as a darkening of value, like how brushing in a dab of black would get you a shade of 빨강, but, as with the gloss, it feels somewhat distinct from the register of value/tint/shade and could amount to

yet another property (a sixth)—illuminated-ness or enshadowed-ness, maybe. Everything here deals only with seeing the work under the gallery lamps; during daytime there’s also the sunlight to wonder about. No doubt this brings out more kinds of 빨강, all built-in, all a part of really looking at this painting. It’s one of thirteen in the show. Others are what you’d call green or yellow or black or white. Another is red and green and black. Some are five colors, even six.
meter or some such instrument and start measuring light levels, yet (4) sure does seem to be at play here, I must admit. What’s more, after only thirty seconds retinal fatigue kicks in. With all the unflaggingly 빨간 input, your cones stop registering it so keenly and the spectrum of eye/brain sensitivity gets color-shifted such that the once-white walls nearby become a fiery apple-green. As for the painting itself, this green underlies (or overlays? I can’t tell…) its front surface and seeps out from each edge. And, at odds with the results predicted by any color wheel and theory I’ve run across, the green and the 빨강 combine and give rise to a lurid, lipsticky orange-fuchsia. On this point, you know already or you’ll now note how the writers never fail to mention Kim’s layering of paint: You’re looking here at thirty layers, forty. You can work out from the sides of the stretchers and from the rich little cracks and pockmarks everywhere that at the very least Kim has gone about layering 빨강 onto black, onto white, onto canvas (pg. 45). On top of that, I think you need green in this tally, and maybe other colors too. Because what you see is the usual so-called subtractive mixing of colored pigment, plus the so-called additive mixing of colored light (the painting actually turns the white ceiling a touch pink, and this thrown pink light is going to blend with the yellowy light from the overhead lamps), plus our green right there in the thick of it, even though in the end it’s an optical illusion. All of which makes for a pretty meaty 빨강, I’ll say, and that’s if the surface were straightforwardly flat, which it isn’t. Kim’s crumbling grid and double-mounded sunny-side-up ovals jut out ever so slightly (fig. 2). This enriches the color still more. The grid and ovals are the same as the rest of the work when it comes to the three properties of hue, value, and saturation, yet the simple fact of additional paint means they wind up more opaque (a fourth quality of color). And the double bulge of the ovals catches and reflects the room lighting more than a sheer flat section does, which makes them seem glossier (a fifth): You see either a whiter/lighter tint of 빨강 or an altogether pure white/light, and in both cases it’s different from the areas that aren’t bulging and reflective. Of course the other thing about three-dimensional things, no matter how small, is they block light. The color below either the inner or the outer lip of a given oval sits in a tiny shadow and strays from how it appears elsewhere. You can think of it as a darkening of value, like how brushing in a dab of black would get you a shade of 빨강, but, as with the gloss, it feels somewhat distinct from the register of value/tint/shade and could amount to yet another property (a sixth)—illuminated-ness or enshadowed-ness, maybe. Everything here deals only with seeing the work under the gallery lamps; during daytime there’s also the sunlight to wonder about. No doubt this brings out more kinds of 빨강, all built-in, all a part of really looking at this painting. It’s one of thirteen in the show. Others are what you’d call green or yellow or black or white. Another is red and green and black. Some are five colors, even six.

[그립이라는 것은 …] 순수한 지각현상에 의해서 사람의 눈에서 읽히는 것이지, 자기 회화를, 자기가 하는 작업을 설명한다는 것은 제 자신으로서는 굉장히 부족하다고 생각합니다. 그러니까 회화는 어느 환경에서 시각적인 지각현상에서 의미가 더 크다고 저는 생각합니다.

"Personally, I think an explanation of one's own art will be greatly lacking, because a painting is to be read by our eyes as a purely perceptual phenomenon. And so I think that a painting is more meaningful as a visual and perceptual phenomenon in a certain environment."

Kim Guilin, 2014
Kim Guiline (b. 1936, Goywon, Korea; lives and works in Paris) graduated from Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, South Korea in 1960; Dijon University, France in 1965; École et Nationale des Beaux-Arts, Paris in 1968; and received his BFA from École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs, Paris in 1971. His work has been featured in numerous international exhibitions and biennials including Color Pool, Gyeonggi Museum of Modern Art, Ansan, South Korea (2015); Inhabiting the World, Busan Biennale, Busan, South Korea (2014); Scenes vs Scenes, Buk Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul, South Korea (2013); Dansaekhwa: Korean Monochrome Painting, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Gwacheon, South Korea (2012); Qui is Full, Daegu Art Museum, Daegu, South Korea (2011); Korean Abstract Art 1958–2008, Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul, South Korea (2008); and The Opening Exhibition, Seoul National University Museum MoA, Seoul, South Korea (2006). His work is held in numerous public and private collections including Busan Museum of Art, Busan, South Korea; Daegu Art Museum, Daegu, South Korea; National Museum of Contemporary Art, Gwacheon, South Korea; Leeum Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul, Korea; and the Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul, South Korea.