

ANDREW KUO *You Say Tomato*

By **Ryan Lee Wong**



Andrew Kuo, "Every Problem Solved (on March 6, 2013)," 2013.
Acrylic and carbon transfer on panel and laminated paper, 58 x 114". Andrew Kuo, courtesy Marlborough Chelsea.

Andrew Kuo paints hard-edged color fields that turn out on closer inspection to double as charts. A legend below the painting assigns a miniature story or confession to each color in the work, superimposing the artist's thoughts and life onto abstract fields. At Marlborough Gallery, six of these paintings are shown with a handful of his more painterly, cartoonish acrylics, including a few still lifes, a portrait of Jeremy Lin, and a self-portrait. Along with those annotated color fields, they show Kuo playfully riffing on the history of painting.

On one level, the chart paintings are a gimmick: a joke at modernism's expense. Yes, hard-edged abstraction can point to the beauty of colors in themselves, and to paint precisely is a skill belied by the ease of its appearance. But don't Kuo's parallelograms and angles look an awful lot like nice Excel charts?

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Tanya Leighton

If there's something more to these works, it lies in their self-criticality. At a distance, the bright, basic colors and weightlessness of the geometric forms are appealing, drawing you close. The words printed at the bottom are in small type; they demand that the viewer lean forward to read them and lose sight of the work as a whole. Those texts are both self-indulgent and self-deprecating. In one piece, Kuo admits he is someone who “forgets every part of every day except exactly how the nap was”; in another, that he is “too lazy to listen to a book on tape.” The content of the words mirror the effect of the work as a whole: both legible in their quippy, relatable voice, and puzzling—why is he bothering to tell us this?

In another work, “Watching TV on 3/23/13,” steep diagonal lines, about an inch thick, zig-zag vertically from left to right, representing an eight-hour viewing binge. A key at the bottom talks about the banal categories of shows watched. Kuo's lines are jarring, intersecting and overlapping each other, defying your eye to follow any one of them. They recall radio waves, but also suggest the disorienting effects of consuming eight hours of mindless televisual information.

Like “Watching TV,” most of these works are dated: “Now and Later (2/20/13),” or “If I Wasn't Sick on 1/11/13.” Similar to On Kawara's *Today* series, they attempt to inscribe the passage of time into the substance of a painting. But in contrast to the solemnity and discipline of Kawara's paintings, Kuo's revel in time wasted, a frank record of a slacker lifestyle. It is a funny and frustrating paradox: Kuo fossilizes the very hours he frittered away.

The chart paintings overlap with Kuo's other outlets: his posts for the *New York Times* Arts Beat blog and his tweets. The blurbs at the bottom of his chart paintings could be taken from his twitter account, and vice versa. In a tweet from March 26 he writes: “Was just contemplating hitting up everyone on my iChat w/a “yooooooooooooo” but no.” Like many popular tweeters, Kuo is irreverent, sheepish but not self-pitying, and able to fit small narratives into the space of 140 characters.

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In a recent “charticle” for ArtsBeat, Kuo maps out all of the characters in part three of R. Kelly’s sprawling hip-hopera “Trapped in the Closet.” He shows us in a bright, colorful graphic the characters’ relationships to one another and where they fall on a gradient of their importance. Kuo is a talented graphic designer, able to sort complex information into an appealing visual format. The chart paintings may be precariously simple, little more than a jokey graphic design exercise. But painterly care, coupled with the pathos and reflection in their narratives, imbues the chart paintings with a difficulty and personal nuance that Kuo’s blog posts do not have.

In the self-portrait on view, as with his other recent self-portraits, Kuo is identifiable only by his trademark thick-rimmed glasses. The rest of his head is a cluster of colorful splotches. It’s a little surprising, considering that Kuo parses his days with such precision. Then again, maybe it’s not: his mind a mess of “soft” information and experience, Kuo finds expression in the hard-lined rigor of his charts.