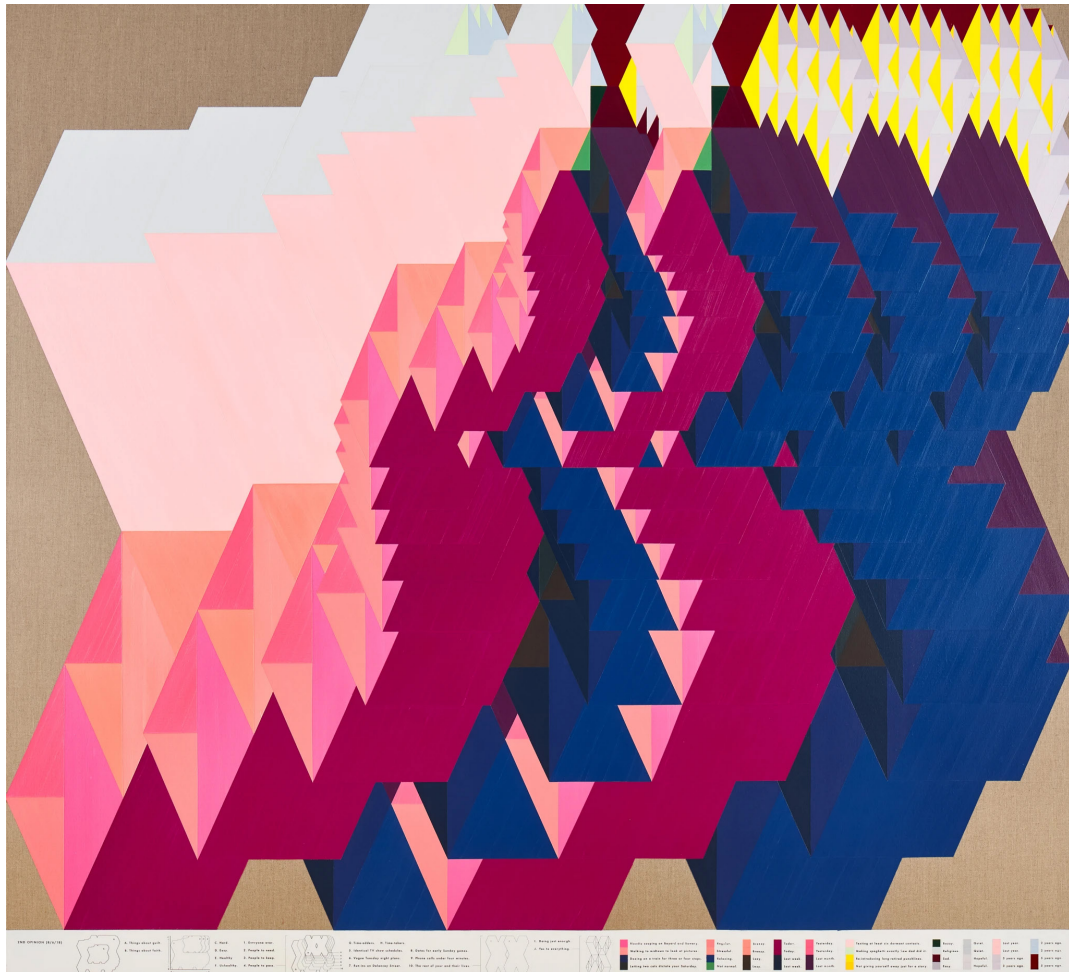


Tanya Leighton

SSENSE

Off the Charts with Andrew Kuo!

THE FUNNY COLORS AND HEARTBREAKING LOGIC OF
AN EXTREMELY SPECIFIC NEW YORK ARTIST



Has there ever been a time in the entire history of America where more people looked at charts on a single day? We watch COVID-19 case numbers go up, then we watch unemployment numbers soar. We watch the president's approval rating go down, then we try to quantify exactly how many Black Lives Matter marches have happened in a given week. We're constantly viewing social unrest, health, and personal change in bar graphs and pie charts and histograms and

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cartesian graphs, all mixed together in a mess of complex information writ large. Who knew a basic chart could hold so much anxiety and pressure?

Andrew Kuo—New York-based artist who has shown his art in major cities all over the globe, and whose work has regularly appeared in *The New York Times*—has been working across mediums, but is most known for his complicated yet gorgeous charts. He is no stranger to anxiety and uncertainty rendered in chart form, and has been using the language of graphs to track his own emotional ups-and-downs for over a decade now. His charts grapple with death, with insecurity, with basketball and late night snacking, and what's the best pizza slice, actually? His work is a visually pleasing reflection of an analytical and neurotic mind sorting itself out. "When I sit down to make the painting, I want the information to have so much frequency that it becomes a wave, or a mountain, or a body of water," he says one afternoon over the phone. "It always has to work. I always say that these are figurative works because if something glitches and it doesn't work, the whole painting falls apart. It has to stick together like glue. Like a misplaced word in a crossword puzzle, you have to reconfigure the things around it."

Although his charts are beautiful—a vibrant matrix of colors butting up against each other and bleeding and cascading—the logic, or at least the *possibility* of logic, is their most compelling aspect. Looking at one of his charts in tandem with the personal, funny, and heartbreaking text that sits below acts as a sort of emotional guidepost. One of Kuo's charts might actually help you work through some of your own shit. "I don't want to be a bummer," he says. "I want to be able to communicate in image and words. Within a painting, there has to be a truce between what I want to do and what I think will entice someone to read the words or spend some time with the painting."

It can be easy to overlook small details in Kuo's work. On a base level, it's all aesthetically pleasing. A complicated chart about his best

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friend moving from New York to LA and the sense of loss and uncertainty he felt about that can, from a distance, be smoothed out into an Instagram-friendly series of overlapping blocks of color. The emotional resonance is the reward for spending time on any given image. “A conversation I’m always going to have is jokes with color combinations,” Kuo says. “It’s like there’s a sense of humor there that you can convey with somebody who’s watching. I’m very interested in funny. Like I think blue and red together is hilarious, I don’t know if that makes sense. Brown and pink together is super funny. Green and blue together is very funny, but the cool combinations, I’m not interested in.”

“I think of Mark Rothko quite a bit because he made paintings for the Four Seasons that, famously, they didn’t want because he was so anti the corporate clientele there that he made these washes of black, and dark red, and brown. They were like, ‘This is deeply not what we want,’” Kuo says. “He took those paintings, and I think they’re hanging in London now. I’ve seen them twice. They’re beautiful, but they didn’t make it to the wall. I always wonder, if you can keep that same energy and make it to that wall, you’ve created something different. Success is a slippery slope but in his mind, he did, I think, exactly what he wanted to do.”

When people look at Kuo’s work, they tend to crouch down or hunch over like they’re studying a weird beetle. Then they move even closer, staring at the grain of the paint, attempting to follow clean lines and shapes as they tangle and weave and overlap so that they can understand how a cutting phrase like *YOU WANT TO OFFER ADVICE (BUT ONLY IN TERMS OF HOW IT STILL “REMINDS YOU OF YOU”)* fits into the trajectory of the thing. Watching people stare at his art is part of the appeal of the art itself. This moment of shared realization, of honing in on a specific detail and connecting to it tends to happen in complete silence, but it’s pretty clear what’s happening: the miracle of internal connection in a public space, of recognizing that problems we thought were specific are maybe more

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universal than we'd ever thought before. That this marriage of personal realization borne from artistic struggle, as filtered through what is basically a psychedelic logic puzzle, is no accident. Kuo's work encourages us to see ourselves reflected in his confessions. It's this clarity of emotion coupled with the potential for conversation that Kuo has been working toward since he first became an artist.



Andrew Kuo, FIRST WILL (6-25-18), 2018, acrylic and carbon transfer on linen, 65 × 80 in. / 165.1 × 203.2 cm. Top Image: Andrew Kuo, 2ND OPINION (8-6-18), 2018, acrylic and carbon transfer on linen, 71 × 78 in. / 180.3 × 198.1 cm.

Kuo grew up in Edgemont, New York, in Westchester County. His mother taught Asian Studies at NYU, his father worked at the United Nations as a translator for China. His parents never put him in daycare, so he'd accompany them into Manhattan, spending time with their friends in the city, roaming around Chinatown, accompanying his mom to museums when she wasn't at work. "At an early age, I was surrounded by, like, Marc Chagall," Kuo says. "Chagall was her favorite painter. She pushed me to draw a lot. It's funny. I just found a

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bag of old paint tubes that I've had since I was five that I remember her buying for me at Utrecht downtown."

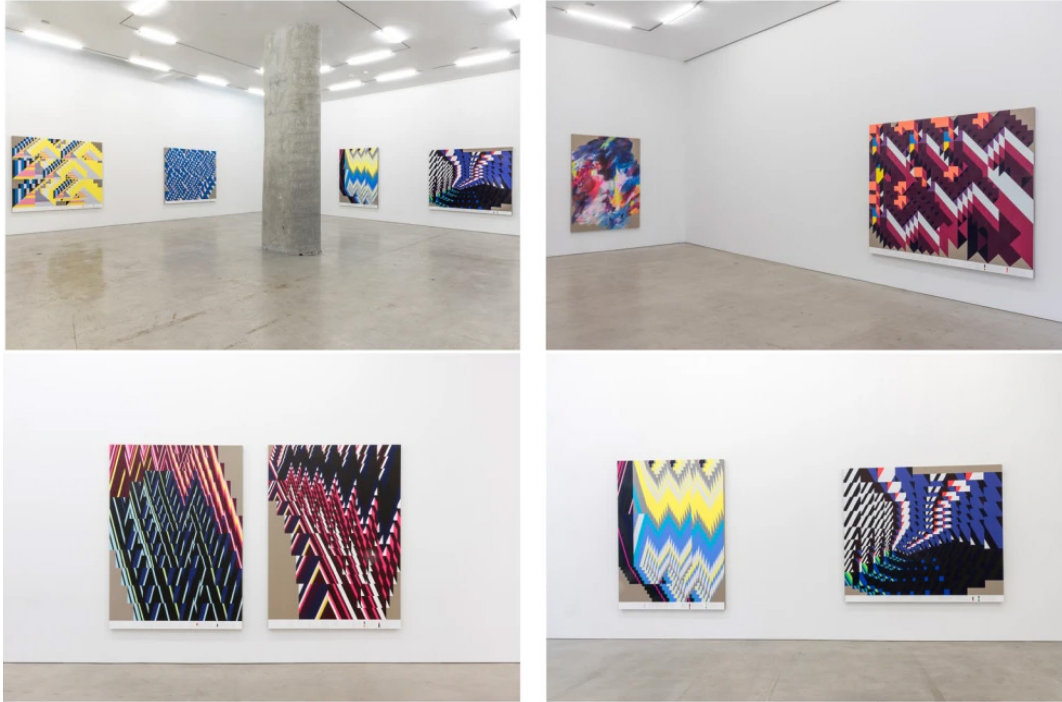
Though he's not overtly influenced by Chagall's work, you can see some of Chagall in Kuo's approach to color. In the way that his colors smash up against each other, or how both artists often use such vibrant, rich tones that even staring at a piece through a screen conjures up a kind of visceral texture. From a young age, though, Kuo had other plans. He wanted to be an abstract expressionist painter. "For some reason I thought representation and illustration was an inferior form of art," he says. "Obviously, I switched away from that."

Kuo entered RISD in 1995, obsessed with hardcore punk, making zines, and abstract painting. "I tricked my parents into sending me to RISD," he says. "I promised them I would be a graphic designer. Then my plan was to get my footing in [New York] and be a messy, gritty painter." While at RISD, Kuo found the art collective Fort Thunder, a crew of fellow student artists who were making hyper-detailed comic books and zines that took childhood nostalgia for dungeon crawling video games, wizards, slime, goo, old comic books, and the deceptively primitive world of outsider art. "I was moving into my dorm room, freshman year, and [Fort Thunder artists and members of the band Lightning Bolt] Brian Chippendale and Hisham [Bharoocha] were just cruising the dorms looking for people listening to music," he says. "I was listening to some generic punk thing but they stopped in my room and chatted with me and set my course for my entire life. A week later I was in Fort Thunder jamming with them."

Kuo ended up finding his artistic lane by hanging out with a bunch of guys who made work that looked completely unlike his own. "I also knew I couldn't do what they did, so they were doing these amazing comic books and screen prints, and there were noise bands, and shows. I thought if I was going to participate in the next four years, fine, I needed to figure out my own way, and that was more writing. I was fighting it for so long, and then I realized the thing that I was about, who I was, was someone who likes words, and who knew

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how to typeset, or create a type-space, or operate within a grid. Then within that grid I was like, ‘This is actually about math, and what is math but reason?’”



Andrew Kuo: NO TO SELF 12/08/2016 - 01/14/2017

The first time Andrew Kuo made a chart, it wasn't really meant for many people to see. He'd attended a concert (the lineup was, insanely, Kanye West, The Strokes, and M.I.A.) with a magazine editor. Afterwards, to thank her for the ticket, he quickly sketched a pyramid with his favorite artists—at the time The Strokes and Kanye—at the top. “She was like, ‘what is this?’ I was like, ‘I don't know. I draw these charts for fun. I don't show anybody.’”

What followed was one of those semi-mythical New York City moments that people will tell you don't really happen anymore, but actually happen constantly within small creative worlds. Kuo started making *a lot* of charts. He made big charts on canvases. He made charts that were concert reviews. Charts about procrastinating. Charts about his summer. Charts about the entire Dinosaur Jr. discography. Kuo's charts straddled the line between two forms of internet-based communication. Each chart was like a blog post, but where blogs were

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treasured for the way that they could instantly exist and be read globally, Kuo's charts were meticulously and slowly crafted, often zooming in on a few minutes of a day, or turning over a painfully awkward social interaction that could've come straight out of the brain of Larry David.

The accompanying text, meanwhile, echoed the then-nascent communication platform Twitter. Complicated stories and emotions were distilled into bite-sized, almost anti-intellectual chunks. Basically, Kuo was talking about big ideas in extremely accessible ways. His work took off. Soon he was producing charts regularly and exclusively for *The New York Times*, which is a thought worth sitting with. Kuo did not invent beautiful charts—he is part of a long lineage of artists and thinkers like W. E. B. Du Bois who have used them to convey information in visually appealing ways—but the paper of record hired him to make some *only for them* for over a decade.

“I remember looking at what I could do with this kind of artwork and having to make that call,” he says. “Being like, ‘Where does this live? What is this thing about? I remember talking with a well-respected museum curator, and he was like, ‘I want you to do something.’ I told him I could make him a chart, and he was like, ‘But that’s just your schtick.’ Don’t we all have a schtick? I took it to heart though. I really did. I was like, ‘These charts aren't going to take me to the place I want to go. There's somewhere I want to go in my brain that these charts cannot complete.’ Because of that, in the years after creating these charts, I've started thinking, I want to talk about even more than can happen in a painting. I want to have discussions outside that.”

Those discussions have taken multiple forms: Kuo continues to paint pieces that are not charts. He co-hosts a basketball podcast called Cookies Hoops, with an accompanying merch line that plays his love of basketball off of other iconic “old” New York signifiers like the *Playbill* logo or the *New Yorker* dandy spinning a basketball on his finger. He makes bootleg Simpsons T-shirts, and hats that feature,

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with no explanation, the painter Alice Neel's signature alongside some embroidered flowers. He runs an extremely popular (and often cat-content heavy) meme account online that offers absolutely no connection whatsoever to his artwork. The main thread through all of this stuff is a love of ephemera and nostalgia that feels unburdened by context or the weight of expectation. In his work and merchandise, he's generating multiple iterations of his own extremely specific world view. Kuo's New York is no one else's New York, but chances are you'll find something you connect to somewhere amidst the basketball jokes and extremely specific art references.



Andrew Kuo, Other (7/17/17), 2017, acrylic and carbon transfer on linen, 45 x 33 in. / 114.3 x 83.82 cm.

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But the charts. He always comes back to the charts. “[They] end up being more liberating,” he says. “Messy abstractions or paintings of flowers always end up more controlled than I think. I’ve been doing this exercise where I freestyle. I’ll put out 20 pieces of paper and start painting flowers all at the same time. Invariably, even if I try my hardest to make each seem different, they kind of end up looking the same, and I’ve been really trying to figure that out. Like, am I just programmed to do the same mark making—is there someone out there that can predict the kind of painting I make, and can I figure that out myself?”

In 2007, Kuo released what is currently the only book length retrospective of his work. It’s called *What Me Worry* and before you get to the charts, there are a few essays about Kuo and art from *New Yorker* writer Kelefa Sanneh, as well as some reprints of an email newsletter that Kuo used to send out that happens to feature a lot of recipes for everything from “Sizzling Steamed Fish on Chinese Greens” to multiple variations of puttanesca. There are some pictures of sculptures and paintings in there, too. But there’s something else. A brief moment at the end of one of Sanneh’s essays that stops me in my tracks every time I see it:

*IN MEMORY OF THE ARTIST’S
FATHER, WHO ALSO KNEW
EXACTLY HOW IT FEELS,
RIGHT?*

“Yes. But he didn’t look short, like I do. I think so—I don’t know.” Then, underneath that line is a small dark blue rectangle. Maybe it’s navy, or some sort of rich ocean blue. It seems important to say that the blue has this bottomless depth to it. Like you could stare at it for so long that the rectangle takes over your whole vision until it’s all that you see, and a simple color inside a basic shape starts to alter you.

The meaning of this small dark blue rectangle is no longer subjective. Did Kuo just do the definitive version of a rectangle with color in it? There's a caption next to that rectangle. It says:

THE ARTIST AND HIS FATHER, 1999

It's a small moment birthed from a collective work—an essay about one guy, written by another guy, putting the first guy's work in context. You can read that whole essay, or you can just look at that fucking haunting rectangle and think about how the quote before it and the caption next to it says everything it needs to say, because it's saying a lot about life and death and genetics and the unbearable weight of family, and what else is there, really? There's nothing in that rectangle except everything.

Text: Sam Hockley-Smith