

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Kim, Byron, "Artists on Ad," *The Brooklyn Rail*, December 2013 – January 2014.

BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

BYRON KIM

I can't remember exactly when I became interested in Ad Reinhardt, but it had something to do with either the New Museum library, or the Archives of American Art, and it would have been in the early 90s, probably '91 or '92. I spent a lot of time in both those places, reading a lot of material that I couldn't find elsewhere. I'm not sure what brought me to that mode of research but I think it was probably an impulse to read writing by artists themselves. I discovered Smithson's and Reinhardt's writings at the same time—and they were really transformative. That's when my whole thinking began, in a way.

I started my monochromes in response to Reinhardt. I was interested in Reinhardt's art as much as I was interested in a lot of other severely abstract painters' work, such as Ryman and Marden and Martin, and so forth. But it was the moment I discovered his cartoons that he became head and shoulders more interesting than everyone else.

I took him at his word that his work was contentless. But seeing those cartoons made me skeptical as to whether that work had content or not. That's partly what is wonderful about that work, and the aura that he created around it. It was my interest in synthesizing the two things that allowed me to be able to think about my own work in a different way. So I started making really reductive paintings, and then, almost like a teenager's reaction against Reinhardt, I started to put content in work that looked like it had no content—that had only art content. It came straight from Reinhardt in a way. It occurred to me to look at Reinhardt's black paintings as the most deadly serious paintings ever made, and an elaborate joke at the same time. I've mentioned that to some people in the past and got some heavy pushback.

I love this moment in the lecture that he gave at Skowhegan in '67 where the lecture's over, and it's time for questions, and he says something like, "I'm curious

what you might ask me, because anything you say, or ask me I can refute." Which is just an amazing position to take. But that's also the position that his paintings took.

The moment he said that, I got this sense of it all being part of an elaborate joke and I could imagine Andy Kaufman playing that role. He's the greatest comedian of the endless joke. Goes on and on. There are these different roles, and taken deadly seriously, to the point where you can't tell whether it's serious or not. ■

Adapted from a conversation with Alex Bacon, November 13, 2013

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