

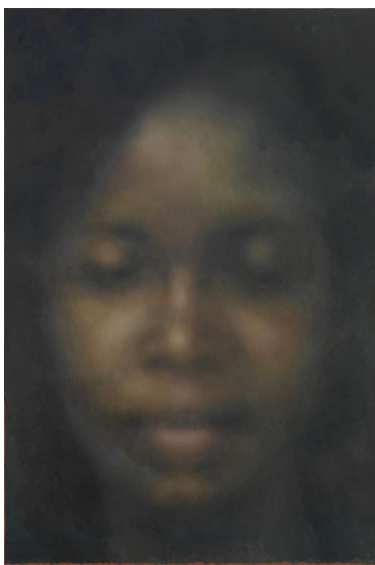
GAGOSIAN GALLERY

the *arts* desk

YZ Kami, Gagosian Gallery

Hypnotically arresting portrait and abstract paintings that play with variation and repetition

Marina Vaizey



'Ava': 'exudes a sense of comfort, even security'

All images: © YZ Kami; courtesy Gagosian Gallery; photography by Robert McKeever

The Iranian-born New York resident painter YZ Kami, now in his mid-fifties, continually plays with our hunger to look at “reality” while being seduced by abstraction and repetition. In 17 canvases, painted over the past two years, Kami explores two distinct and recognisable styles or idioms that however much in common they have with contemporary concerns he has made his own. The results are both powerful and pleasurable.

He uses oil on linen when painting blurred portraits based on photographs or, presumably when the subject is named, based on a person known to the artist; acrylic on canvas when dealing with swirling abstract patterns. In ways both subtle and obvious, each subject, representational or abstract, deals with themes and variations, as well as suggesting ways of looking beyond what we actually see, to ponder on issues beyond the visible.

The nine portraits, of subjects young and older, the heads perhaps five or six times or more life size, at times have their eyes downcast, at times, as with *The Man with Violet Eyes*, look straight out. The work is nine feet tall and six wide, and yet, curiously, not overwhelming so much as approachable, as though the young man looking out, just his face and the top of his bright, almost luminous, T-shirt visible, is about to speak. He is serious but not solemn. We are disarmed because the subject is so ordinary, someone to whom we might not give a second glance. But

here, the scale, the skilled blurring of the image, and the range of blended colour, is inescapably arresting without being in any way melodramatic.

The artist's mother is another subject; she is quietly beautiful, even more so because it is not blatant good looks but rather a fascinating calm. The image is obviously from memory or a photograph taken when younger. Again the pose is modest. The size of the portraits makes them imposing, but the subject possesses a quiet reticence, a curious self-effacement but with no false humility. These images are dignified, but not irritatingly so: there is no apparent smugness, just a sense of containment.

Occasionally, there's no neckline, no visible clothing underlining the flesh tones; one such is *Ava*, a bronze-black face, strongly delineated, against an even darker background. The face is almost mask-like, but also serene: inexplicably *Ava* exudes a sense of comfort, even security. The women in Kami's portrayals are impassive, but not passive; they look as though they know a thing or two, but without being knowing. Watchful. In fact, like all fine portraits, we can project a range of emotions, but mostly we understand they are looking inward. The young men – *Daya in Profile*, for example – seem fresh-faced and a little uncertain.

One painting is of just two hands clasped together in the conventional pose of prayer, a subject so resonant, so frequent, that it is almost impossible to shed a conventional reaction that is partly almost resentfully agnostic. These, the title tells us, are *Daya's Hands*, 2014. Are they clasped and pointing upwards in supplication? Is this an act of respect or an act of worship? Somehow the more you look the more any interpretation shivers into ambiguity.

One gallery contains a sequence of abstractions in which circles of uneven white geometric shapes – like rectangular bricks, or squares, seemingly painted free-hand – surround a central circular void. The generic title is *White Dome* and in their revolving rhythms they oddly echo that master of the overall white painting, Robert Ryman, as though on speed. They somehow seem to be absolutely still, making a fascinating pattern, and also in movement, directing the eye to the central white space. One variation is in black. The effect is that of a kind of mandala; the large size – approximately eight by nine feet – means they can easily take over our field of vision. It is also almost a game to see the infinite variations possible, with each visual unit offering almost miniscule variations in size and texture. These series of tiny inflections are the opposite of mechanical.

The artist's last and only exhibition in London, at Parasol Unit in 2008, was shown under the general title of *Endless Prayers*. Kami's intent is, it seems, both in the portraits of people and in the sequence of inventive abstract patterns, to make us attentive, to make us look beyond. People and pattern become familiar, and we are lulled and soothed. But each person is markedly different, and each pattern also, and each distinctly recognisable. The procession of his paintings becomes almost hypnotically fascinating.

YZ Kami at Gagosian Gallery, Britannia Street, until 30 May