

Andrew Kuo  
"Andrew Kuo"  
*frieze*  
by Graham T. Beck, July - August, 2011

# frieze

## Andrew Kuo

TAXTER AND SPENGMANN, NEW YORK, USA



I wish Andrew Kuo would make a Venn diagram of his art practice. Even though it wouldn't simplify what he's up to -- at least not in the traditional way -- it would almost certainly look good, spark a smile, and suggest a novel approach to a body of work so varied it can come off as disjointed. 'My List of Demands', the New York-based artist's second solo show at Taxter &

Spengemann, consisted of five very distinct styles: the colourful, comedic info-graphics for which Kuo is best known; angsty, brushy portraits in acrylic on linen; iPhone photos of convenience store flowers pimped with pie charts; a palette-knifed self-portrait with comic-strip sensibilities; and Sunday-painter meditations on a down-scale florist's unsold stock. Taken one at a time, each sphere's success varied widely, but where they managed to overlap there was potent ground.

The majority of the gallery's wall space was given over to Kuo's charts, and with good reason. Since they started appearing on his blog ([earlboykins.blogspot.com](http://earlboykins.blogspot.com)) in 2006, they've gained a cult following among New York's tastemakers, eventually finding an irregularly recurring place in The New York Times arts section. More abstract than referential, each conveys an idiosyncratic data set along axes of emotion and affect. Studiously matched colours and precisely rendered shapes press precision onto wispy clouds of subjectivity with surprisingly approachable results. There are also laugh-out-loud jokes. The information key that accompanies *My List of Demands* (all works 2011) includes 'Blinking twice could make Jim Henson be here now, hard at work making "The Muppets Take the L.E.S."' and texting me for help finishing a pitcher,' as well as more serious fare: 'We could all erase the moments when we disclosed our appreciation for racist jokes or leaned in for that kiss (and caught air).' Though Kuo's content, confessional style and cultural touchstones are of a very specific moment – namely the artist in New York today – his info-graphics have a surprisingly broad appeal. They're honest and elegant, funny and sincere, and were the exhibition's high point.

His flower paintings follow a different path to a nearby place. With tender brushstrokes and the same striking attention to colour, Kuo teases a sense of mortality out of mundanity. In *Purple, Plastic*, strong white lines encircle doleful bouquets, outlining the edges of clear plastic wrapping that becomes a sculptural element, a transparent barrier, and a source of whimsy. Similarly, a self-portrait titled *Book* uses the thick smears of a palette knife to puzzle together a visage that's both a technicolour monster and a bookish bespectacled clown. The 'Flower Face' series, in which Kuo paints unlabelled pie charts (arranged so as to almost suggest a face) over iPhone photos that could serve as source material for his flower paintings, is the most obvious space of stylistic overlap, but the works don't find that special stance with feet squarely planted in different worlds. I think they will with time, but right now the joke is too dumb and the emotion too overly obtuse. The same imbalance exists in his portraits, where the telling extremes of colours and shapes struggle to find equilibrium in huge fields of darkness.

Where Kuo succeeds, he finds an accord between excesses. Whether it's a happy marriage between too much information and austere abstraction or the balance of brushy petals and pointed geometry, his sense of counterpoint is compelling. Though it's most consistent in his charts, it's heartening to see it spread to flowers and figurative painting too, even if at times the cover is uneven. It would be easy for a young artist who has experienced such success with a very specific style to keep on graphing with a blind eye to everything else, but that's far from Kuo's path - another reason it'd be great to see a Venn diagram of his practice.

**Graham T. Beck**