



*James Little*

# Background Information

# James Little



- Virginia Museum of Fine Art, Richmond, VA
- Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY
- DeMenil Collection in Houston, TX
- The Library of Congress, Washington, DC
- Maatschappij Arti Et Amicitiae, Amsterdam, Holland
- Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis, MO
- Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY
- New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, NJ
- Tennessee State Museum, Nashville, TN
- Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, AR
- Newark Museum, Newark, NJ
- Art Students League of New York, NY
- National Academy of Design, New York, NY
- Center for the Arts at Yerba Buena Gardens, San Francisco, CA
- Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC
- Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston MA

## ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

James Little (b. 1952, USA) is an American abstract artist whose distinctive aesthetic language is rooted in geometric shapes and patterns, flat surfaces, and emotive color relationships. Little utilizes a method similar to the encaustic painting technique used by ancient Egyptian and Greek artists, blending handmade pigments with hot beeswax.

While developing his unique position within contemporary abstraction, Little has devoted decades to rigorous academic study of color theory, pictorial design, and painting techniques. His practice embodies the complementary forces of simplicity and complexity.

"I hate this term, purity, but when it comes to painting, that's what I try to do," Little says. "I make paintings unadorned that reflect the relationship I have with the medium and good design." Much has been written about Little's distinctive approach, yet critics consistently struggle to articulate the mysterious impact his paintings have on them as viewers. Seemingly resistant to the simple power of color and good design, they instead pontificate about the apparent political references in the titles of Little's paintings and aspects of his personal biography.

Little brushes off critical attempts to saddle his work with unintended narratives. About social messages in his art, Little says, "I am politically conscious and pissed off about a lot of this stuff that's going on as much as anybody. But I can't allow situations like that to get in the way of my aesthetic intent."

Rather than directly addressing the social and political turmoils of the moment, Little has chosen abstraction because it is a field in which he can express his free will. What drives his continued experiments is a single, burning question that he has never stopped trying to answer for himself: What makes a great painting great? If he can find the answer, he says he might be able to "advance abstract painting in America." The quiet confidence of Little's aspiration is matched by the steady, undeniable life force of his paintings.

Little holds a BFA from the Memphis Academy of Art and an MFA from Syracuse University. His paintings have been exhibited extensively around the world and are represented in the collections of numerous public collections, including the Studio Museum in Harlem, NY; DeMenil Collection in Houston, TX; and Library of Congress, Washington, DC; among others.

# Video Links

# THE DIRTY SOUTH

VMFA

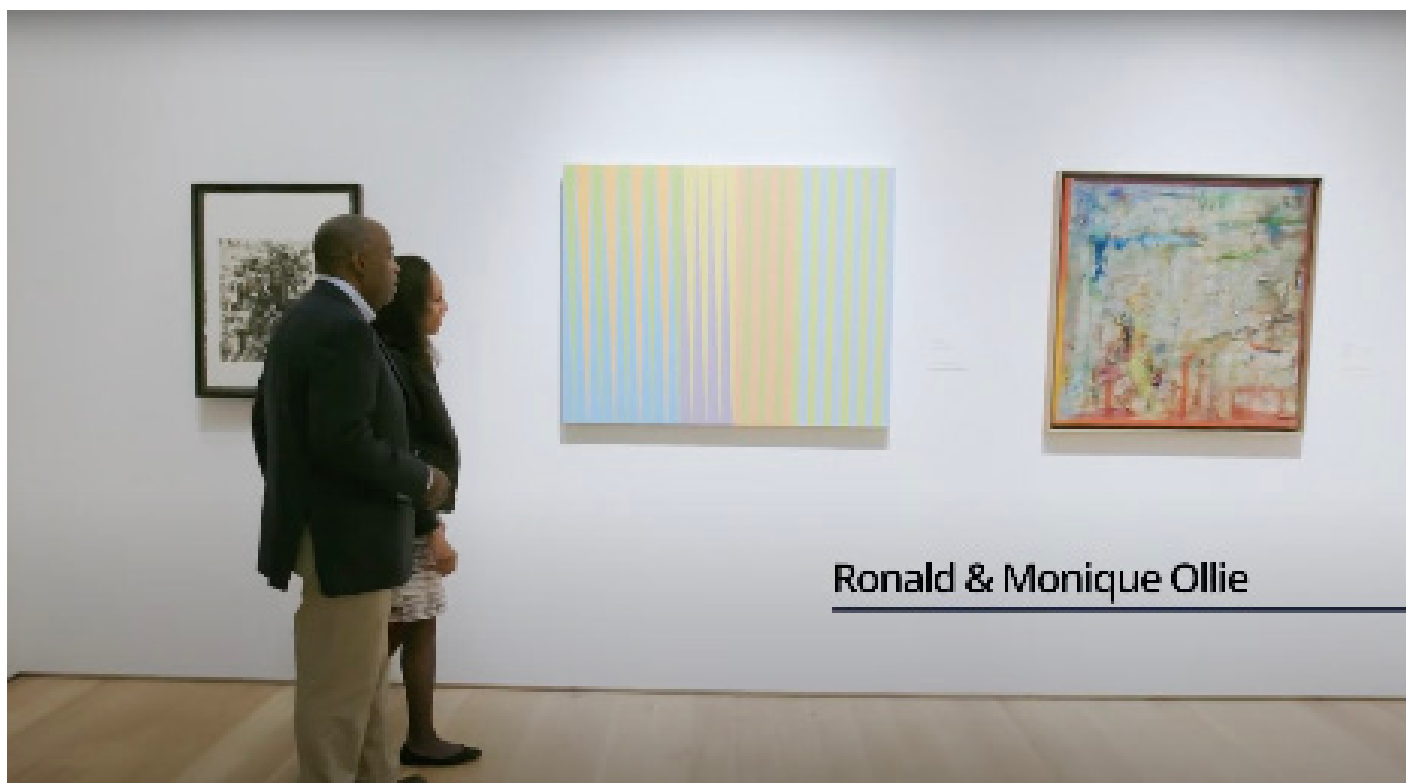
James Little in *The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse*, The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts | <https://kavigupta.com/video/97/>



James Little for The Colorist, by Kitch & New Balance on Vimeo | <https://vimeo.com/387563646>



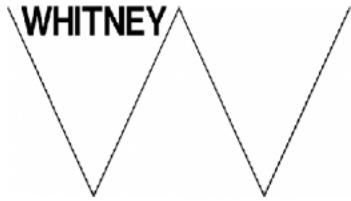
James Little Artist Talk, from Ray Foley on Vimeo | <https://vimeo.com/151087831>



**Ronald & Monique Ollie**

See *The Shape of Abstraction*, Saint Louis Art Museum | <https://kavigupta.com/video/93/>

# Select Exhibitions



# *Whitney Biennial 2022: Quiet as It's Kept*



Quiet as it's Kept, Whitney Museum of American Art, found on Youtube  
| <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwnusf7vXEM>

The Whitney Biennial was introduced in 1932 by the Museum's founder, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. Established to chart developments in art of the United States, it is the longest-running exhibition of its kind. To date, more than 3,600 influential and innovative artists have participated in a Whitney biennial or annual. A constellation of the most relevant art and ideas of our time, our 2022 exhibition will be the Biennial's eightieth edition.

Whitney Biennial 2022: Quiet as It's Kept is co-organized by David Breslin, DeMartini Family Curator and Director of Curatorial Initiatives, and Adrienne Edwards, Engell Speyer Family Curator and Director of Curatorial Affairs, with Gabriel Almeida Baroja, Curatorial Project Assistant, and Margaret Kross, former Senior Curatorial Assistant.



# *Seeds and Roots: Selections from the Permanent Collection*



Installation view of *Seeds and Roots: Selections from the Permanent Collection*, 2004, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY

Unearthing the past, present and future of the Studio Museum's permanent collection, *Seeds and Roots* digs deep into our garden of artful delights. Organized by SMH Chief Curator Thelma Golden and Curatorial Assistant Rashida Bumbray, this exhibition takes its inspiration and title from Chris Ofili's graphite drawing, *Roots* (2001). This work has become a metaphor for the Museum's rich collection as it has germinated, taken root, sprouted and grown in many directions through generous gifts, acquisitions and loans over the past 30 years.

From the collection's oldest work, *Portrait of Sarah Maria Coward* (c.1804), by Joshua Johnson – the first known African-American artist in America to earn his living as a professional portrait painter—to recent acquisitions by artists such as Samuel Fosso, Mickalene Thomas and Eric Wesley Seeds and Roots is a testament to the Museum's longstanding commitment to the presentation of diverse works by Black artists at

different points in their careers.

The roots of the collection stem from the classic, iconic works by African- American artists, including Benny Andrews, Romare Bearden, Betye Saar and Hale Woodruff, while works by artists in the Residency program continue as germinating seeds for the collection.

The theme of nature is explored throughout *Seeds and Roots*. From Benny Andrews' colorful *Trees of Life* (1966), to Tracey Rose's *Venus Baartman* (2001), a depiction of the Garden of Eden, to David Hammons' sculpture, *Untitled* (2000), an installation of cardboard boxes printed with "Made in the People's Republic of Harlem," the organic nature of the collection takes on many different aesthetic permutations in this exhibition.

*Seeds & Roots* is presented during a critical moment at the Studio Museum as we expand below this gallery to construct new permanent collection galleries (opening

in spring 2005), to enhance the presentation of our ever-growing collection. This new space will allow our audiences intimate access to the collection, its treasures and its evolution.

From the Artist-in-Residence 3rd floor studios, to the mezzanine gallery where their annual exhibition is installed, to the diversity found in Seeds and Roots, to the expansion into our new space, The Studio Museum in Harlem continues to be a nurturing home of artistic cultivation and growth for Black visual producers.



James Little, *Portrait of a Star*, 2001, Oil and wax on canvas, 74 x 96 inches.



# *The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse*



James Little's work (left) on view in *The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse*, at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA

*The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse*, organized by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, investigates the aesthetic impulses of early 20th-century Black culture that have proved ubiquitous to the southern region of the United States.

The exhibition chronicles the pervasive sonic and visual parallels that have served to shape the contemporary landscape, and looks deeply into the frameworks of landscape, religion, and the Black body—deep meditative repositories of thought and expression. Within the visual expression, assemblage, collage, appropriation, and sonic transference are explored as deeply

connected to music tradition. The visual expression of the African American South along with the Black sonic culture are overlooked tributaries to the development of art in the United States and serve as interlocutors of American modernism. This exhibition looks to the contributions of artists, academically trained as well as those who were relegated to the margins as “outsiders,” to uncover the foundational aesthetics that gave rise to the shaping of our contemporary expression.

Curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver, VMFA's Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, the groundbreaking exhibition explores the legacies of traditional southern aesthetics in

contemporary culture and features multiple generations of artists working in a variety of genres. Among those featured in the exhibition are Thornton Dial, Allison Janae Hamilton, Arthur Jafa, James Little, Michi Meko, Jason Moran, Sister Gertrude Morgan, Kara Walker, William Edmondson, and many others.

Inherent to this discourse is the rise of southern hip-hop. The exhibition's presentation of visual and sonic culture looks to contemporary southern hip-hop as a portal into the roots and aesthetic legacies that have long been acknowledged as "Southern" in culture, philosophical thought, and expression.

In addition to the music, the exhibition features the contemporary material culture that emerges in its wake, such as "grillz" worn as body adornment and bodily extensions such as SLAB(s) (an acronym for slow, low and banging). In highlighting the significance of car culture, the museum has commissioned a SLAB by Richard "Fiend" Jones. At its essence, southern car culture, showcases the trajectory of contemporary assemblage often highlighted in southern musical expression. Other such aspects are explored across genres over the course of a century. Beginning in the 1920s with jazz and blues, the exhibition interweaves parallels of visual and sonic culture and highlights each movement with the work of contemporary artists, creating a bridge between what has long been divided between "high" and "low" cultures. The exhibition features commercial videos and personal effects of some of the music industry's most iconic artists—from Bo Diddley to Cee Lo Green.

Ultimately, *The Dirty South* creates a meta-understanding of southern expression—as personified in the visual arts, material culture, and music—as an extension of America's first conceptual artists, those of African descent. The exhibition traces across time and history, the indelible imprint of this legacy as seen through the visual and sonic culture of today.

Cassel Oliver is also the editor of the companion publication, which will function as an essential reader on Black material and sonic culture and demonstrate its impact on contemporary art from the 1950s to the present. Featuring an anthology of critical essays by scholars such as Fred Moten, Anthony Pinn, Regina Bradley, Rhea Combs, and Guthrie Ramsey, the illustrated catalogue will document works in the exhibition as well as artists' biographies and a chronology of iconic moments that have shaped the Black presence in the South.

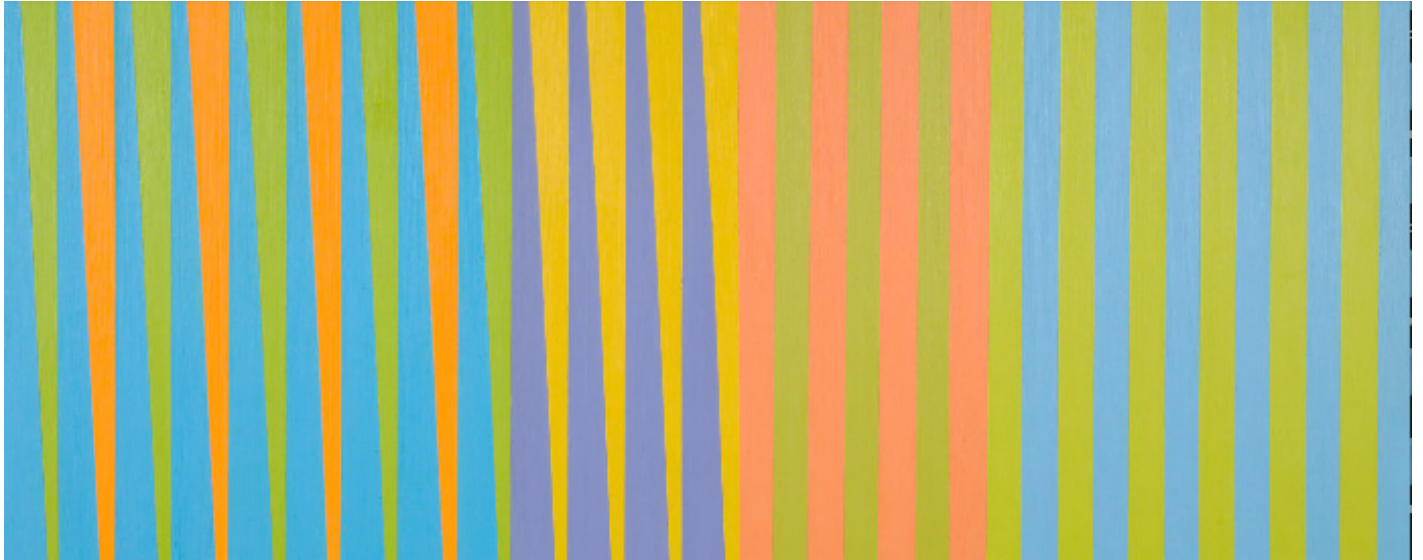
VMFA has also commissioned an LP by Paul D. Miller aka DJ Spooky aka That Subliminal Kid for the exhibition.



*Dirty South* exhibition catalogue, published by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2021.

SAINT LOUIS  
ART MUSEUM

# *The Shape of Abstraction: Selections from the Ollie Collection*



James Little, *Double Exposure*, 2008 (detail), oil and wax on canvas, 39 x 50 inches. The Thelma and Bert Ollie Memorial Collection, Gift of Ronald and Monique Ollie, 2017. © June Kelly Gallery / James Little

*The Shape of Abstraction: Selections from the Ollie Collection* presents paintings, drawings, and prints by five generations of black artists who have revolutionized abstract art since the 1940s. The exhibition includes Norman Lewis's gestural drawings, Sam Gilliam's radically shaped paintings, James Little's experiments with color, and Chakaia Booker's explorations in print-making, among many others. Despite their significant contributions, many of these accomplished artists have remained largely under recognized and omitted from the existing narrative of art history. However, the reexamination and celebration of this history is underway.

In 2017, St. Louis native Ronald Ollie and his wife, Monique, gave the Saint Louis Art Museum a transformative collection of 81 works by black abstractionists. Ollie, who passed away in June 2020, spent decades collecting, often befriending the artists and forming long, collaborative relationships. He grew up visiting the Museum with his parents, who nurtured his deep appreciation for art. This exhibition draws from and celebrates the Thelma and Bert Ollie Memorial Collection, which was named in honor of his parents.

*The Shape of Abstraction: Selections from the Ollie Collection* was curated by Gretchen L. Wagner, Andrew W. Mellon Fellow for Prints, Drawings, and Photographs; and Alexis Assam, 2018–2019 Romare Bearden Graduate Museum Fellow.

## *Introduction to the Exhibition*

The five generations of artists represented in this exhibition revolutionized abstract art from the 1940s to the present. Their innovations with form, color, process, and materials are paramount to the development of Abstract Expressionism and art movements that followed. Despite their significant contributions, many of these accomplished figures, all of whom are black artists working in the United States and abroad, have remained largely under recognized and omitted from the existing narrative of art history.

As artists of African descent negotiating racial inequality, they were often denied entry to the exhibition opportunities and professional circles enjoyed by their famed American and European peers. Moreover, dedicated to abstraction, they encountered additional divisions with other black artists who insisted on addressing issues of



identity and struggle through representational art. Facing such headwinds, these abstractionists forged their own networks, fostering connections with each other, as well as curators, scholars, dealers, and collectors, to support creative production and critical discourse. The exhibition—its title based on the Quincy Troupe poem—features a selection of works from the Ollie gift.

#### *Attention to Materials*

Many of the artists represented in the Ollie Collection emphasized experimentation with materials and processes in the studio. Rather than following prescribed modes of abstraction, they created works that combined techniques borrowed from painting, drawing, printmaking, collage, and sculpture.

The invention of acrylic paint, introduced to the commercial market in the 1960s, was an influential development. Numerous artists, including Frank Bowling, Bill Hutson, and Frank Wimberley, made this quick-drying medium a central part of their creative practices. Alternatively, others were inspired by ancient techniques, such as James Little's adaption of encaustic painting.

These artists employed new methods of art making using nontraditional materials such as sticks or brooms to apply color and exploring unconventional processes such as dripping, staining, pouring, and weaving. Collage also allowed for a hybrid format, combining formal theories with the influence of quilting. Some artists developed systems to streamline their processes. For example, Frank Bowling created a floor platform and specialized stretcher to guide the flow of paint. This constant experimentation remains a critical concern driving these artist's creative approaches.

#### *Representation's Role*

Although depicting the human form may seem contradictory to modern abstraction, figural representation has a long, intertwined history with the development of abstraction during the 20th century. Indeed, many artists enjoyed exploring the tension between the naturalistic portrayal of the figure or landscape and a purely abstract vocabulary.

Abstract art was a contentious topic in the black art community during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Black Arts movement—the aesthetic counterpart to the Black Power movement—advocated that these artists create empowering images of subjects that directly communicated the shared experiences and heritage of their people. According to the Black Arts movement, abstract art largely failed to meet this charge, and, as a result, the movement criticized many who focused on

harnessing the potential of color, line, and shape alone.

For committed abstractionists, Norman Lewis, who articulated his own activism through a combination of abstraction and figuration, often stood as a beacon. From an older generation, Lewis and Herbert Gentry retained the figure to create a dialogue with the automatic, gestural approaches of Abstract Expressionism. The younger Benny Andrews and William T. Williams tapped Surrealist, or dreamlike, imagery and geometric tendencies, respectively.

#### *Taking Shape*

Many artists defining abstraction during the late 20th century made shape the subject of their art. These explorations, combined with concerns for color and materials, manifested myriad visual outcomes, from amorphous, fluid fields to crisply defined geometric designs. Moreover, artists' considerations of shape played a vital role in the reassessment of painting during the 1950s and 1960s, when the medium's definition fell under intense scrutiny.

Figures such as Ed Clark, Al Loving, and Sam Gilliam saw the medium as something more than a picture window into an illusionistic space. Thus, they refuted the rectangular canvas and instead configured their supports into rounds, hexagons, notched polygons, and even draped masses.

Ed Clark, who is credited with one of the earliest shaped-canvas paintings, observed: "I began to feel something was wrong. Our eyes don't see in rectangles. I was interested in expanding image, and the best way to expand an image is in the oval or ellipse." Recalibrating categories, these artists emphasized the sculptural qualities of painting, as well as drawing and prints, inspiring multimedia and installation artists who followed them.



# *Three One-Man Exhibition: Aimé Mpane, James Little, & George Smith*



James Little's works on view in *Three One-Man Exhibition: Aimé Mpane, James Little, & George Smith*, at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art, TX

Great artistic skill, truthfulness, idealism, vision and passion are fundamental to the creation of a profoundly spiritual art. In this ravaged time of endless war, a fresh approach to the spiritual needs of the American people is critical to their mental health. Who can we turn to but artists and musicians who are free of the consumer orientation of contemporary culture and who are free of the nationalism that distorts the teachings of established religions. Exceptional artists who struggle to express their inner life and who endure the intense solitude of a spiritual quest are few in number, hard to find, and rarely celebrated. Nevertheless, they exist. James Little is one of them.

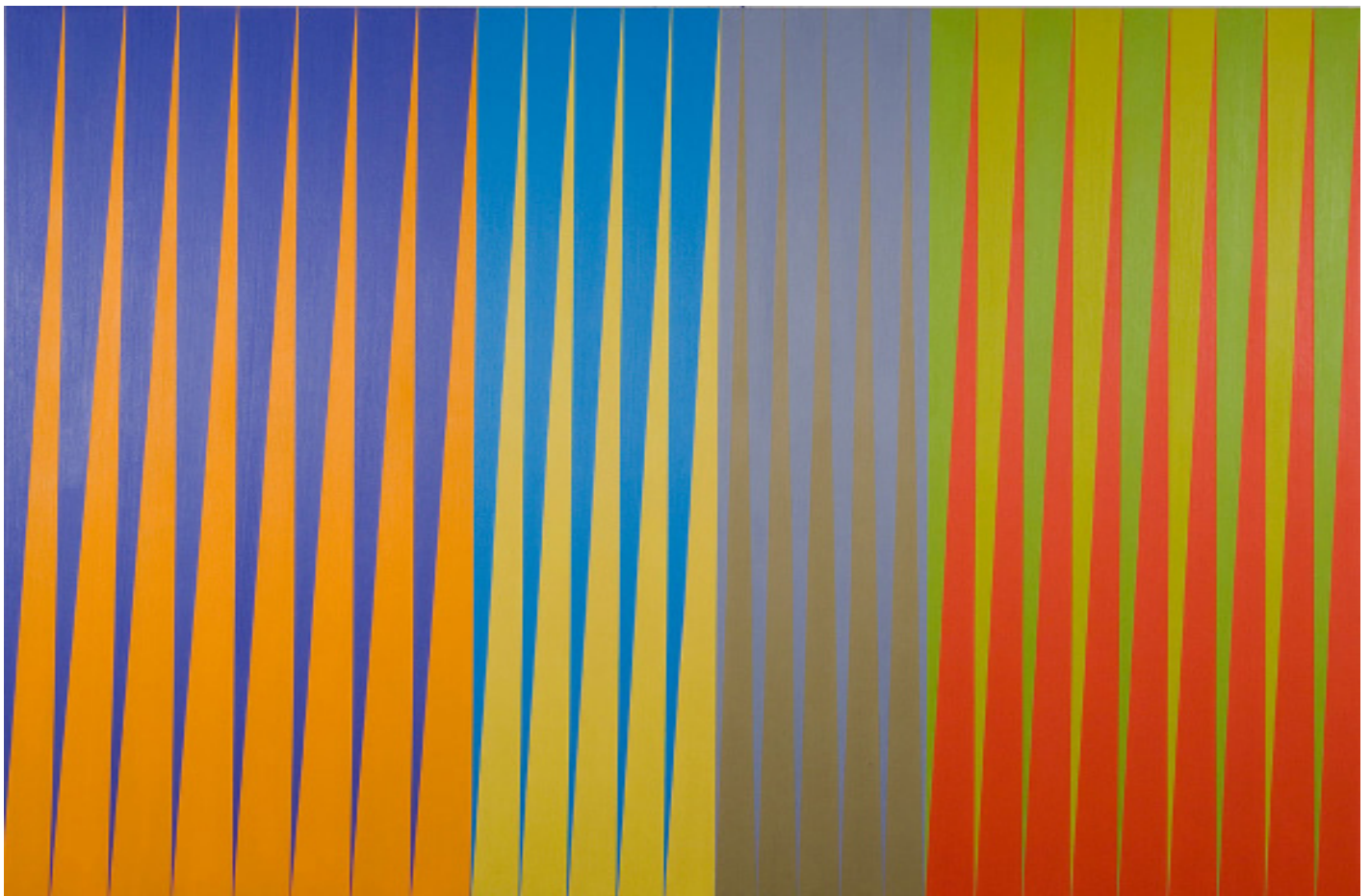
James Little's paintings are original, sophisticated, and profound. They are expressionist and ceremonial in essence. They are quite distinct from earlier approaches to non-objective and hard edge painting. Little's paintings use geometry and color in a way that reaches beyond their historical sources in Modern Art and go on to express a social and spiritual dynamic that is new to American art.

Earlier modern artists focused on the fundamentals of structure, color, and on the relationship between the pared-down, constituent elements of painting. However, the great artists of this persuasion were not purists, formalists, or devotees of art for art sake. They faced the critical issue of the spiritual versus the social content of their art. Mondrian's neo-platonic paintings are the expression of his fervent idealism and mysticism. Malevich's paintings are icons of revolutionary rebirth. Albers' Aristotelian paintings reveal his color discoveries in the context of the unchanging, universal form of the square. Newman's non-Euclidean paintings evoke the profoundly human drama of Jewish mysticism at the same time that they successfully challenge and go on to expand the Western tradition of painting.

Little has immersed himself in the same tradition of painting and enriched it and expanded it with a personal vision rooted in his African American and American Indian heritage. His paintings have soul – the power to ignite the spirit. Like the best Jazz, they express powerfully distilled emotions and take the art of painting to a



level of intensity and conviction that is rare in contemporary American art. Little's compositions are bold and supremely intelligent. With great simplicity, the artist creates a complex dynamic, using unique combinations of resonant colors and fundamental geometry. Triangular vectors move his color decisively up, down and across the canvas. There is an underlying rhythm and a reference to African design and to American Indian symbols as well as an abiding beauty, and the powerful impression or feeling that "something or someone" is fully on the move. Little's paintings communicate the enduring spiritual power of his African American and American Indian heritage and occupy an important place in the history of modern American art.

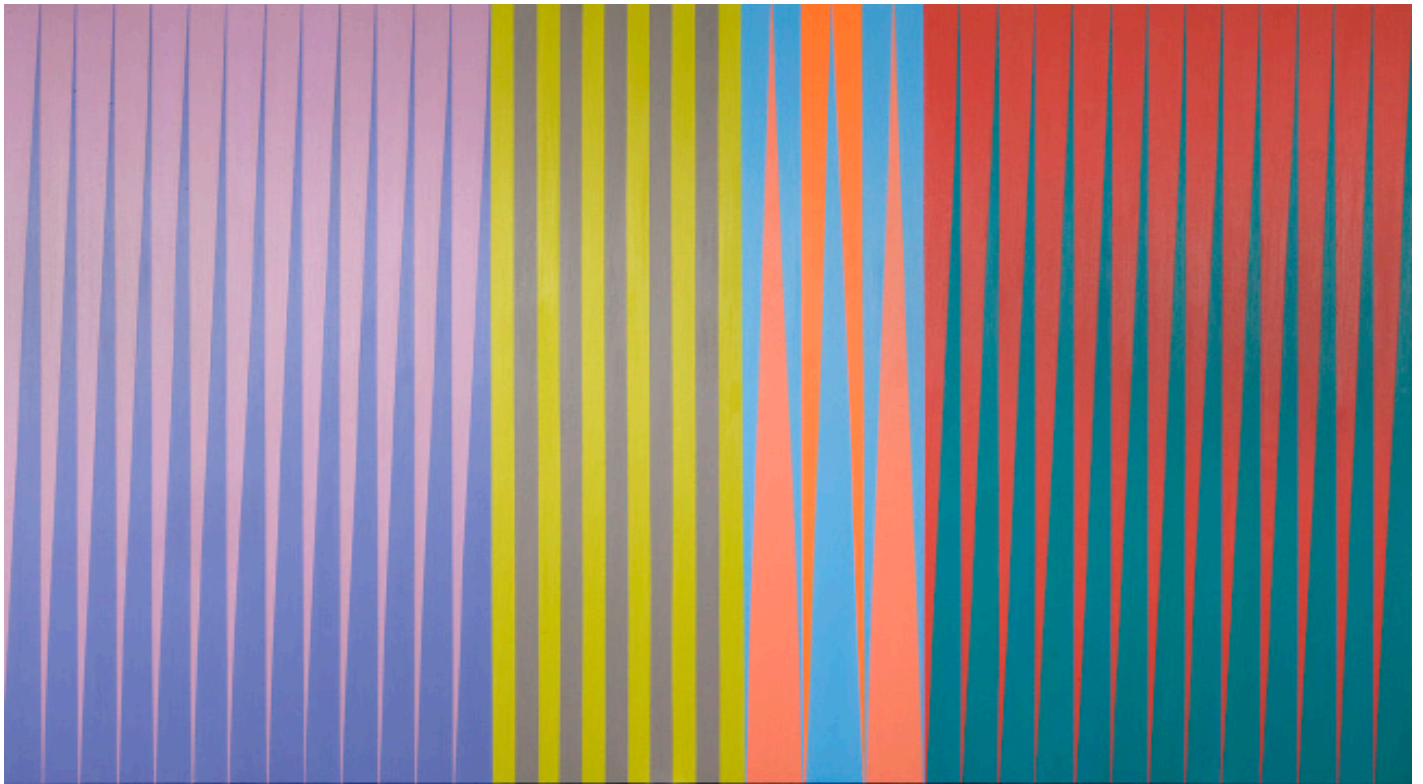


James Little, *The Marriage of Western Civilization and Law of the Jungle*, 2008, Oil and wax on canvas, 76 x 98 inches.



# Select Press

## Taking the Title ‘Quiet as It’s Kept,’ 2022 Whitney Biennial Names 63 Participating Artists



By Maximiliano Duró, January 25, 2022

James Little, *Near Miss*, 2008, Pigment on paper, 72 1/2 x 94 in

After being delayed a year because of the pandemic, the Whitney Biennial, the most closely watched contemporary art exhibition in the United States, has named the 63 artists and collectives that will participate in the 2022 edition of the exhibition, which will open on April 6 and run until September 5 at the Whitney Museum in New York.

The exhibition is curated by two Whitney curators, David Breslin and Adrienne Edwards, who have titled it “Whitney Biennial 2022: Quiet as It’s Kept,” a colloquialism that has been invoked by the likes of novelist Toni Morrison, jazz drummer Max Roach, and artist David Hammons. The exhibition was originally supposed to open in spring 2021, and the curators said in a statement they

had begun its planning a year before the 2020 election, the pandemic, and the racial justice protests that spent the country in summer 2020 after the murder of George Floyd.

“The Whitney Biennial is an ongoing experiment, the result of a shared commitment to artists and the work they do,” Breslin and Edwards said in their statement. “While many of these underlying conditions are not new, their overlapping, intensity, and sheer ubiquity created a context in which past, present, and future folded into one another. We’ve organized the exhibition to reflect these precarious and improvised times. The Biennial primarily serves as a forum for artists, and the works that will be presented reflect their enigmas, the things that

perplex them, the important questions they are asking.”

Since its first edition in 1932, the Whitney Biennial has been a polarizing exhibition, with fans and detractors on both sides. The most notorious iteration of the exhibition was the 1993 edition, which many critics at the time derided for its focus on so-called identity politics; that show has in recent years been re-evaluated for the groundbreaking ways in which it dealt with the realities that people of color face in the United States and that artists of color face within the art world.

The most memorable piece from that exhibition was the admission tags, officially titled *Museum Tags: Second Movement (Overture)*; or, *Overture con Claque*

(*Overture with Hired Audience Members*), a commissioned piece by L.A.-based artist Daniel Joseph Martinez. Martinez will again be included in the 2022 Whitney Biennial, as will Coco Fusco, Renée Green, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Charles Ray, who were also included in the 1993 edition.

The forthcoming biennial will also include a grouping of some of the most closely watched artists working today, including Rebecca Belmore, Nayland Blake, Raven Chacon, Tony Cokes, Alex Da Corte, Ellen Gallagher, EJ Hill, Alfredo Jaar, Julie Tolentino, Rick Lowe, Rodney McMillian, Adam Pendleton, Lucy Raven, Guadalupe Rosales, and Kandis Williams.

The youngest artist included in the biennial is Andrew Roberts, who was born in Tijuana, Mexico, in 1995, and the oldest living artist is Awilda Sterling-Duprey, who was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in 1947. The exhibition will also include the work of several deceased artists, including Steve Cannon, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, N. H. Pritchard, Jason Rhoades, and Denyse Thomasos. Additionally, the curators said they have included artists who work outside of the United States, including artists based in two cities on the U.S.-Mexico border (Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez) and First Nation artists in Canada as a way to explore the “dynamics of borders and what constitutes ‘American.’”

This iteration will also prove to be unique in that Breslin and Edwards have done away with creating separate programming for performance and video and film, which have previously been organized by additional curators and presented in separate areas of the museum which many visitors tended not to see. Instead, they said that the show will feature “dynamic contributions that take different forms over the course of the presentation: artworks—even walls—change, and performance animates the galleries and objects” and that performance and film/video will be “integrated into the exhibition with an

equal and consistent presence in the galleries.”

Breslin and Edwards added, “Rather than proposing a unified theme, we pursue a series of hunches throughout the exhibition: that abstraction demonstrates a tremendous capacity to create, share, and, sometimes withhold, meaning; that research-driven conceptual art can combine the lushness of ideas and materiality; that personal narratives sifted through political, literary, and pop cultures can address larger social frameworks; that artworks can complicate what ‘American’ means by addressing the country’s physical and psychological boundaries; and that our

‘now’ can be reimagined by engaging with under-recognized artistic models and artists we’ve lost.”

# The New York Times

## Color and Design Matter. So Does Optimism.



Fatima Shaik and James Little in their Garment District apartment.  
Andrea Mohin/*The New York Times*.

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS, MARCH 19, 2020

“Coming from my background, which was a very segregated upbringing in Tennessee, I felt that abstraction reflected the best expression of self-determination and free will,” said the artist James Little, 67. “I have this affinity for color, design, structure and optimism.”

Those qualities apply to both the paintings he collects

and his own works, which are characterized by hard-edged geometry and shifting colors, with compositions strongly informed by jazz.

The Garment District apartment where Mr. Little lives with his wife, Fatima Shaik, a writer, is hung with dynamic abstractions by artists including Toshio Iwasa,



# The New York Times

Stanley Whitney, Thornton Willis and Stewart Hitch.

A woven handmade paper piece by Al Loving was a trade between friends who met when Mr. Little arrived in the city in 1976 with a new M.F.A. from Syracuse University. “Al knew everybody in the art world,” he said. Their work was exhibited in a 1977 group show at Just Above Midtown alongside that of other African-American abstract artists.

Through gifts and trades with Harold Hart, a mentor who was once director of the Martha Jackson Gallery, Mr. Little also acquired several vivid abstract paintings by Alma Thomas. Mr. Little said he regrets that Ms. Thomas, who died in 1978, fell ill before his planned trip to Washington to meet her.

Mr. Little recently completed his largest work to date, a commission for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. Commuters at Jamaica Station will pass through his 85-foot-long environment made of multicolored glass panels in a prismatic design. And in November, his two-toned black paintings will be paired with sculptures by Louise Nevelson at Rosenbaum Contemporary in Boca Raton, Fla.

“I don’t really follow trends,” said Mr. Little, as can be seen in the couple’s collection of more than 100 works — ranging from a Salvador Dalí print to “Money Lures,” an object made of shredded money by Richard Mock — displayed in the city and at their homes upstate and in New Orleans.

“I’m a painting fanatic,” he added.

*These are edited excerpts from the conversation.*

*How have you typically acquired things?*

The majority are through trades, gifts. I buy things, too, but I haven’t bought anything from a gallery. I got the Jake Berthot at an auction. I’ve got works by self-taught artists, like this guy Emitte Hych, that I bought at the Outsider Art Fair. I have three Stewart Hitches that I bought from him. He was really a renegade. He came to New York from Nebraska. He was fearless. He loved the Abstract Expressionists. He loved James Dean. He had gotten sick and was kind of down on his luck. I had a couple bucks.

*Who did this piece over the couch?*

This is a Toshio Iwasa. We were close friends. He didn’t have much family and had all this art. When he was about to go into assisted living, he called everybody up. It was a room full of Japanese and me. The lawyer asked him, “Who would you like to take care of your art?” Everybody was on pins and needles. And Toshio said,

“James Little.” Some of it I gave to museums, some of it went to the State University of New York. I have all his drawings in my studio.

*Have any of the works here inspired your own painting?*

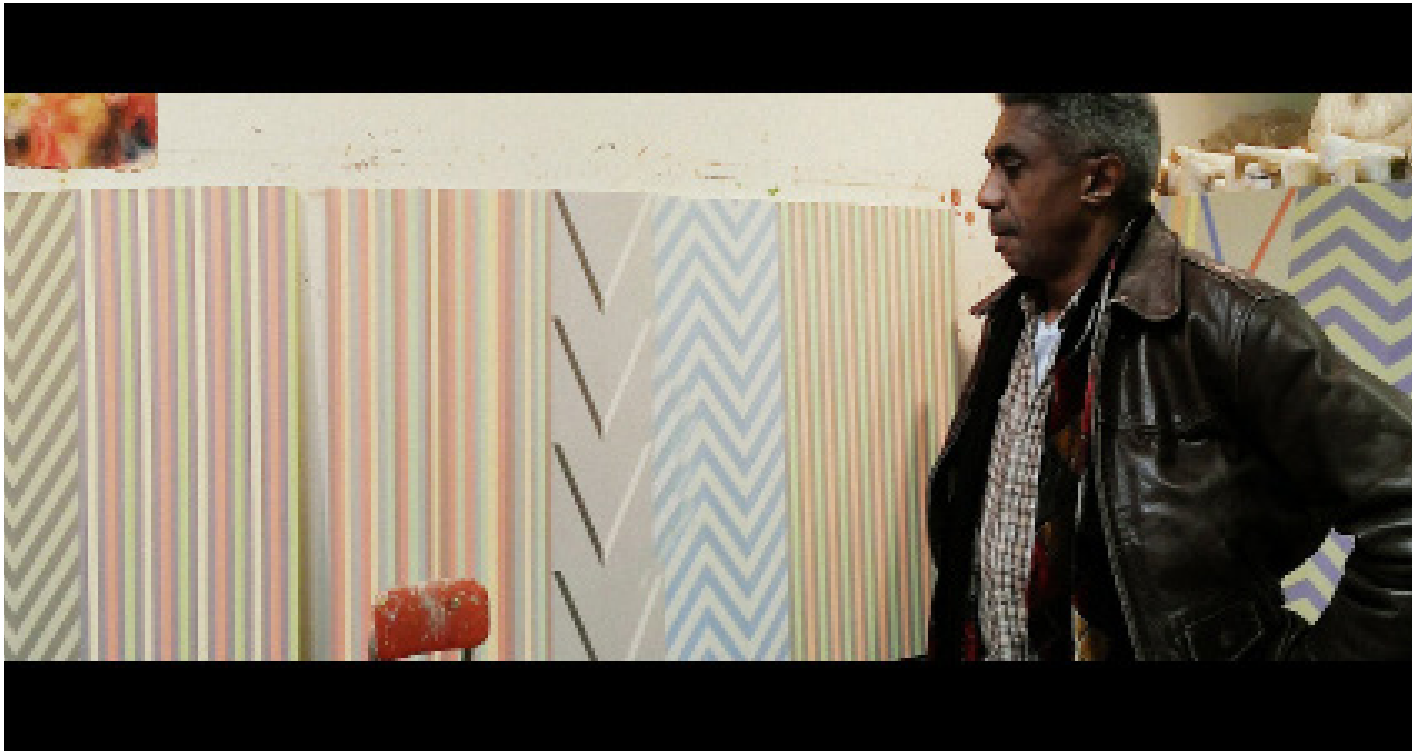
Oh yes. Artists are thieves, really. We steal from each other all the time. I think the Stewart Hitch, the Al Loving, the Alma Thomas and the Thornton Willis are the ones that I’ve engaged with the most. Like I told Thornton once, “I always struggle with the edge, how to bring things together and give it equilibrium. You’re one of the people that does it well.”

That one from 1957 by Alma Thomas. I know she struggled to make that painting work. She started out doing civil rights paintings. That’s a common thread I found in a lot of artists of my generation and before me. We all started out doing some sort of social commentary.

My mantra is that you have to develop a relationship with the medium. She does that with that painting. You can feel it in the brush and the hand. It’s not aggressive. She was working from nature, from her kitchen window and her flower garden. That’s where this stuff comes from. It hits the mark for me.

**James  
Panero**

# Studio Visit: James Little



James Little in his studio in Brooklyn, photo courtesy of James Panero.

BY JAMES PANERO, MAY 3, 2013

James Little paints like no other artist. His unique wax medium and labor-intensive process have developed over decades in the studio. Recently, I visited him in his walk-up space in East Williamsburg to see his latest work before it heads out to June Kelly Gallery, where his next solo show will open on May 16. (All photographs by James Panero)

In her catalogue essay for the upcoming exhibition, Karen Wilkin writes of the “ravishing physicality of Little’s paintings... orchestrations of geometry and chroma to delight our eyes and stir our emotions and intellect.”

Reading the paintings from left to right, Little employs a rhythmic sense of composition. Shapes, colors, and values all work together to energize the paintings.



Drawings line the upper walls of the studio.

**James  
Panero**



The silky finish of the encaustic, combined with the precision of the lines, adds to the work's unique attraction.



Postcards of exhibitions line the studio door. The 2005 exhibition "Thorton Willis/James Little: Raising the Bar" at Sideshow Gallery, Brooklyn, introduced me to Little's "sensuous surfaces of silk and quicksand, and colors as sharp as needles."

The latest work will be on view at June Kelly Gallery from May 16 through June 21, 2013.

**Kavi Gupta** | 835 W. Washington Blvd., Chicago, IL | +1 312 432 0708 | [info@kavigupta.com](mailto:info@kavigupta.com)



# James Little with Benjamin La Rocco

BY BENJAMIN LA ROCCO, MAY, 2009

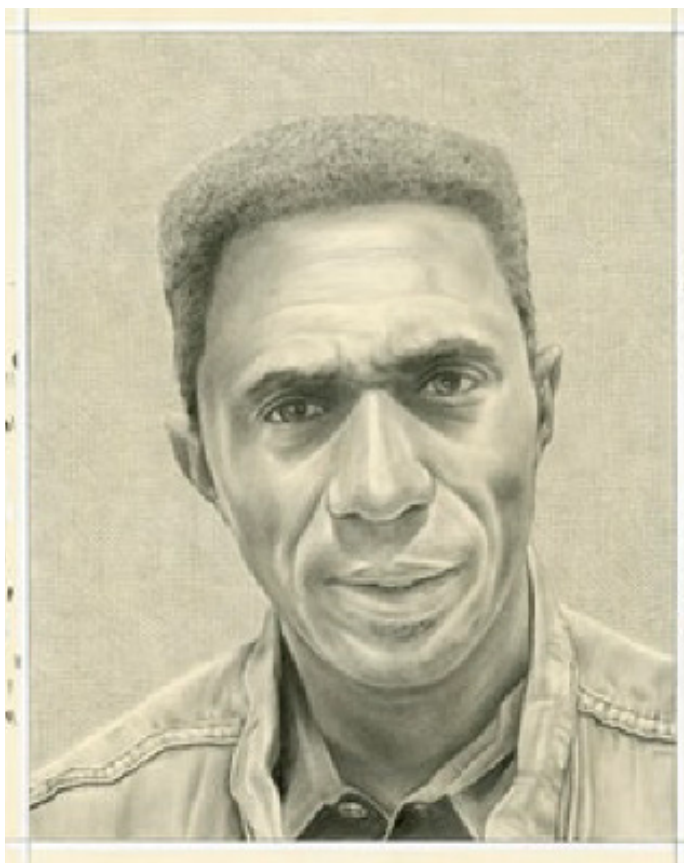
In the midst of his preparation of the new one-person exhibit *De-Classified: New Paintings* at June Kelly Gallery, which will be on view from May 7 til June 9, 2009, the painter James Little took time to visit *Rail* Headquarters to talk to Managing Art Editor Benjamin La Rocco about his life and work.

Ben La Rocco (Rail): Let's start with your background. You were born in Memphis.

James Little: Yes, I was born in Memphis, in 1952. I grew up in a working class family. Mother was a cook, father did construction and various other jobs. I wasn't aware of it, of course, but it was segregated. Most of my people had migrated from Mississippi. My mother's family was from that part of the country, and a lot of them were sharecroppers and she just got married and got out of there. My father's side of the family was Native American, Irish, Black. So, that's pretty much my ethnic makeup.

Rail: Were there any particular influences that you remember back then that you think might have contributed to your early interest in the arts?

Little: Well, I have an older brother who was the first person I ever saw draw, or make a picture, because he started school before I did and he was introduced to art before I was. He inspired me. But the thing that made a lasting impression on me was my father and my grand-father taking me to a construction site that they were working on. They were pouring cement—it should be done manually. You've got a guy to mix it, and you put it in a wheelbarrow, and you walk it down and pour it. And there were some other guys, masons, that would spread it out. So that had a strange influence on my sensibility toward surface, even to this day. I just like the idea of taking this medium, this material and transforming it—making it do something other than what it appeared to want to do. And that sort of stayed with me. They asked me to take the wheelbarrow. They loaded it up and said “take this, and roll it down, and dump it like your father did.” I picked it up on the wheel, and tried to do it, and it



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

flipped over. So then I learned if you lift it up, you have to move. You can't just lift it.

Rail: [Laughs.] You have to stay on the move.

Rail: [Laughs.] You have to stay on the move.

Little: No, you can't stay put, you have to lift it up, and you have to move it.

Rail: So, in 74, you went and got your BFA at the Memphis Academy of Art, right?

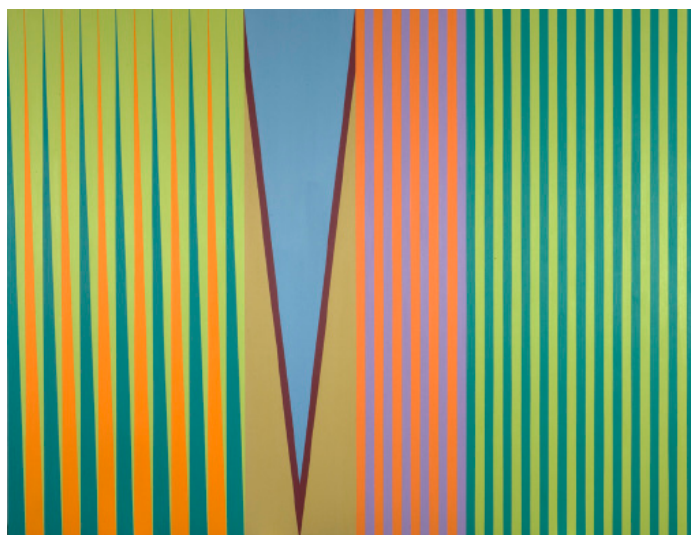
Little: Yeah

Rail: And in 76, you went on to Syracuse University.



Little: Yeah, I went to Syracuse University on a fellowship, and earned an MFA there. While I was there I met Clement Greenberg and a number of other people, Hilton Kramer, Sol Lewitt, you name it. It was a pretty-high-powered place. There were some serious things going on there, especially in the visual arts, and in painting in particular. It was like a beacon for abstract painting. The visiting artist program was fascinating. I didn't know what I was getting into when I got up there.

Rail: Yeah, we talked a little bit about the presence of Greenberg there earlier. I want to come back to that, later. But first I'd like to talk about your paintings a little bit.



James Little, *Little Legacy of Thieves and Pundits*, 2009, oil and wax on canvas, 50 x 95 inches.

One of the things that's always struck me about them is the type of surface you achieve. It's always seemed both meticulous and free to me. I know that you're using encaustic. So I was just wondering if you could talk a little bit about the process that gets you that surface.

Little: First of all, I've always had this interest in the properties of materials—how they work, and how things become what they are, like the cement. But my surface sensibility is something that evolved over a long time, and I made some sort of conscious, rational decisions about surface. People tend to think that surface always has to deal with texture. And it doesn't. Surface can be smooth, it can be tactile, it can be rugged, it can be any number of things. I would mix oil and water. I would take paint and put it in a blender. I used knives, I've used spritzers, you name it. A lot of it came through experimentation. But I've always tried to grasp the essence

of the material as it manifests itself. I've always tried to respect the integrity of the material. I go in 50-50. I see myself as an instrument. I'm here, the medium's there, and the success of the painting is based on the marriage between the two of us. I'm never at a point where I'm in charge of anything. I'm always out there seeking something. It's a delicate material, encaustic. It has its own properties, and all those different colors have their own properties, you've got cobalt, you've got cadmium, you've got umbers, each its own thing. Some of it is heavy, some of it is light. You've got titanium. When you mix that up it breaks down in certain ways. Its alchemy. And also you have to be careful with toxicity. I use coffee cans, and heat up the coffee cans. Stand oil and varnish and stir. I don't take my eyes off it. I take chopsticks to stir it.

Rail: How many layers of paint on a canvas? Forty?

Little: Aw man, I use a bunch of layers. Not forty, but it's a bunch of them.

Rail: Why chopsticks?

Little: I get them for free. When it's melting, I stir it. I go to Planet Thailand and you get to keep them. It's very convenient. I can see the color, I can match color with those sticks. So from start to finish, it must be about fifteen to twenty layers. So it's like that for three months, three and a half months I'm working like that on just one big painting. Can't work on two. It's too much. It's labor. Real labor. When it comes to painting, it's as difficult, as taxing as anything. It's like unbelievable. So when people say there's something very unique about my surfaces and that kind of thing, yes there is. [Laughs.]

Rail: So it's not systematic.

Little: No, it's not systematic. It's not formulaic. It really isn't. A lot of what I do to make these paintings work is hard to quantify. You just know it. I can tell if the mixture is too thick or too thin as soon as I put the stick into it. Now that's taken years, to learn that. Because before I was putting the paint on no matter what. If it's too thin it causes cracking. If it's too thick the paint curls. So to get the surface I'm after, it has to be just right, the right thickness and the right temperature. When it's heated that paint is anywhere between 155 and 165 degrees, that's pretty hot.

Rail: You must have lost a lot of painting while you were figuring this out.

Little: I once spilled a can of paint on my feet. I had on these comfortable shoes. Got wax underneath. Had my gloves on and my respirator on. Put the wax down, unplugged the hotplate, took the gloves off, and tried to get the shoe off while the encaustic is drying. By

the time I got it off I had this huge blister on my instep. [Laughter.] So now what I do, I don't concentrate on anything else. I've got four fire extinguishers in the studio because it's very flammable stuff. It can take the skin right off you, but when you apply it, it sticks. Dry to the touch. You know, wax, *wham*—its there.

Rail: That's cool.

Little: I like the painting to have a presence.

Rail: We've talked about the category of "hard edge" painting, and I know you shy away from using that in reference to your paintings. You do use tape and you work with diagonals sometimes, verticals, and no horizontals. Could you talk a little bit about the edges of forms in your paintings and how you think of achieving those edges and why you don't like hard edge specifically as a term.

Little: Well, because when you say hard edge, there's an objective there. I don't say hard edge because I'm interested in geometry. And actually the edges aren't hard, they're just clean and they're inviting. Hard edge was a style, a genre at one point, back in the 60s and 70s, when artists sought these hard, acrylic, pristine edges. The emphasis was placed there. In my work, that's not the emphasis.

Rail: Well, they're oil paintings for one thing, right? The medium is different.

Little: That's right, so it probably has something to do with the type of continuity, or rhythm that I'm trying to grasp in my paintings. And that's just one of the ways I get there, if I could get there with a loose brush or a ballpoint pen I would do it that way, but hard edges—that just really doesn't mean much to me.

Rail: I want to get back to this formative quality that Greenberg had on students at Syracuse, and also what his formalist doctrine might've meant to you. At certain times, you have associated yourself with formalism in painting.

Little: Yes.

Rail: But you seem to use the word with qualifications. Formalism is often considered to strictly stress the compositional and tactile elements of a paintings above any other type of content and, as Greenberg put it, formalism tends to privilege contemporary forms of abstraction over representation in painting. So I was just curious about how formalism contributed to your thinking as you developed your mature style, and secondly how your thinking about formalism has changed over time.

Little: Well, I'm gonna quote something that

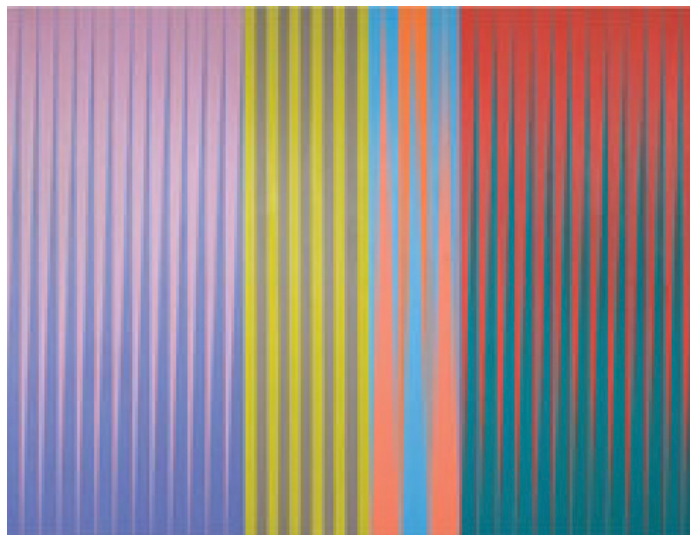
Greenberg said and that I totally agree with. He said, "major art is impossible, or almost so, without a thorough assimilation of the major art of the preceding period or periods." So, formalism, to me, is associated with structure and a type of discipline, and an understanding of the art of previous periods, the success of that art being based on some sort of order, tried and true. I've always looked at it that way.

Rail: Would you talk about it as a sort of historical awareness?

Little: It's almost like a grid. The old masters used to teach it this way. Things had to correspond to one another within this gridded structure. That's strict formalism, to me. I think that the formalism that I'm talking about has more to do with the rehabilitation of the medium, and identifying what makes great painting great.

Rail: The issue then becomes distinguishing greatness. And of course, Greenberg did have his notions about what constituted great art and what did not. What do you make of his influence on your peers in that regard?

Little: Well, he had a lot of influence on them, but he also had a lot of influence on me. I think that the failure of it and the reason he raises so much interest and discord was his personality. The thing about Greenberg that I liked was his writing. As a painter, it just made all the sense in the world. And I don't think it's something



James Little, *Satchmo's Answer to Truman*, 2008, oil, wax, canvas, 76 × 98 inches. Photo: Bill Orcutt

that you arrive at quickly. Everybody seems to be on the same train today, so its almost the most refreshing thing to me, to see a good painting or a good painting exhibition because I know the kind of time and energy that's been invested in that. Sometimes it reaches back beyond the artist, in years. But there's an understanding that makes this attainable. And you can get that from Greenberg, or you can get it from somebody else. He just happened to be the guy who struck a chord with me.

Rail: Greenberg made a sort of equation between his Marxist and socialist beliefs about the ultimate social objectives, and his formalist doctrine and aesthetics, so that what resulted from that is the belief that in art, as in life, you might progress toward some greater good. That's always seemed to be problematic in that it could tempt a critic to prescribe what's good. Who's to judge, ultimately?

Little: Well, I'm not too bound up with this idea of progress. I think that there's too much out there to narrow it down, to some sort of a generalization. Although I do understand that, if you look back at his background, coming from the Lower East Side, being of Jewish origin, working class, intellectual, feeding his intellect, you can understand him. And he grew up in the McCarthy era when the political landscape was completely different. The things that he said, that have helped shape me were in regard to abstract painting and he takes shots at practically every school of thought since Abstract Expressionism—he didn't even like all the Abstract Expressionists, for that matter. [Laughter.] Didn't care very much for minimalism.

Rail: There's something there, though. You can't deny that minimalism influenced you.

Little: I'm not a minimalist. But if what I like happens to be minimalist I'll use it.

Rail: It's hard to be a painter-minimalist anyway.

Little: It's too much labor. But I understand what you're saying. It's a good point. There's a fork in the road, you gotta go left or you gotta go right. Or you figure out a way to go under or something. I've never given up on the history of painting, never. And I know if anything is going to come out of what I do, it has to be connected to the past. You can call it avant-garde, you can call it new art, postmodernism, you can call it whatever you want to. It still has to be connected to the past. And that's just the way that I see it.

Moving away from Greenberg, Einstein said that "Imagination is more important than knowledge." That makes an enormous amount of sense to me.

Rail: Which kind of runs contrary to some of what Greenberg is saying.

Little: Absolutely, but I totally agree with that, you know?

Rail: It's a paradoxical state, painting, sometimes.

Little: That's the kind of work that we do, you know? That's the problem with the whole thing: how do you navigate this?

Rail: It exists sometimes between this idea of what the thing is and the actual thing.

Little: But the thought process keeps going.

Rail: Yeah, doesn't it. [Laughs.]

Little: And it doesn't get easier, it becomes more complex. So in order to put something together, to get a true synthesis, is really what is important here: It's not about one thing and its not about another, its about a multiplicity of things.

Rail: A multiplicity. You've said that you borrow from all over to arrive at your forms and color—certain Native American art, West African art, Mexican art, and you've even talked about commercial color relationships as influences. So I'm interested in how you think about taking in all these influences and synthesizing them in your paintings.

Little: Well, we're in the business of visual phenomena and when I see it and I record it, I know I've had a response. There's not what I would call an aesthetic experience, but it's something close to that. There's an enlightenment. When there's something that is striking, if I can, I'll make some sort of move on it.

Rail: As an African American growing up in the segregated south, it must have been difficult to avoid issues of race in your painting. Some of your titles are very suggestive in that regard.

Little: Yeah, well, I lived it. It's a juicy subject. Always has been. But now there's this small type culture, people are being featured as major artists because they're making statements about their social conditions or political conditions or gender and that kind of thing. I think they are separate entities. Gender is not art. Race is not art. Politics are politics. To take those things and put them under the caption of art, or to try to displace art with politics, is a mistake. And the fact that some of my paintings have titles that refer to different racial issues or ethnic issues—I have a painting called "The First Black." There's not a speck of black in the painting, but the reason I called it "The First Black" was because it seemed endless that anytime there was a black person to





James Little, *The Marriage of Western Civilization and the Jungle*, acrylic on canvas, 78 x 96 inches. Photo: Bill Orcutt.

accomplish something, in any area of our society—school teacher, track star, baseball player, computer analyst, scuba diver, first black person to ever be a scuba diver, the first black person to ever work at Macy’s—you would hear about it. There’s all these “The First Blacks.” But that title, that was my way of getting beyond it. Not that we all got beyond it, but it was my way of getting beyond it. Painters have always made some sort of social comment. There’s a whole history of black artists’ social awareness. When it comes to their work, sometimes to their detriment. I am who I am. I’m black now. I’m gonna be black tomorrow. I mean it’s not something that’s unique to me. This is my genetic makeup. It’s not something that I’m going to spend the rest of my life sitting here and dealing with. It’s somebody else’s problem. The most that I can do in terms of race, gender, and politics, is to be the most successful painter I can be, break new ground, and that’s a political milestone in and of itself. That’s the way I’ve always looked at it. Take painting and try to do something heroic and successful and ambitious.

Rail: You mentioned a painter earlier, Al Loving?

Little: Al Loving is a good friend of mine. One of my best friends.

Rail: I wonder if there’s any distinction to be made in artists like Al Loving or Stanley Whitney or yourself, if there’s anything in your work that you think is distinctly African American, or if you associate your work with any other abstract painters’ work in particular.

Little: I can say of Al Loving that there are African

American or African-esque qualities in his work. To me, they’re manifested in his Stained Canvas pieces. He has mentioned that quilt making influenced the work. His grandmother’s quilts, that kind of thing. But that can affect you, or me, or anybody else the same way. So you can’t really say that that’s any more African. We are who we are. We are different because of who we are. And those subtle differences are really what make us unique. And the product that I produce is always going to be different than the product that you produce. Sociology has a role in it, and the social condition has a role in it, but to get beyond that issue is the thing. If I had wanted to deal with race from the time I was a kid, and I stayed there, I wouldn’t have been able to achieve any of the things I’ve achieved.

Rail: When you were at Syracuse in 76 there was a big show of Al Held at the Whitney Museum.

Little: The black and white?

Rail: Yeah! What did you think of that? Little: Well, when I first saw his work, I was impressed with that, more so than I am with what he did later in life. I liked them because they were to a large extent reductive, simple shapes, geometric shapes, primary shapes, along with black and white. I liked the surfaces in the paintings and I thought there was something intellectually stimulating about the paintings. I was impressed when I saw them. I was impressed when I first saw John Seery’s work back then. John Seery was pouring and dripping paint, huge paintings. He sort of fell off the radar. Jack Bush—these kinda painters were on the scene then.

Rail: John Hoyland is another painter who belongs to that generation. How about people like David Novros? Were you aware of his work?

Little: Novros was pretty good early on. I actually liked Novros more than I did Marden back in the day. He was more interesting to me. He was studying frescoed walls in Italy. Pretty good color. Good sense for design. He was pretty smart. I don’t know why he just stopped. I don’t know him well. I know his wife, Joanna’s work, but don’t know her that well. I like his work. I saw some of Novros’s paintings at the the Menil in Houston. They hold up. That’s what I mean by quality.

Rail: Well that’s a good lead into your recent work. I feel that there is a compression of space in your most recent work, compared to work from say four or five years ago. You’ve worked with the vertical for a long time, the diagonal, could we say since the millennium? You use these axes as divisions, setting color off against itself.

Little: Well, the horizontal suggests landscape, horizon

line. I'm not interested in that. The vertical is there because I'm very interested in the up and down, and the flatness of the plane. I really am trying to keep the plane as flat as I can, and the emphasis has shifted more toward color and design than in the previous paintings. Only God knows where I'm gonna go with it. I think that the paintings are more ceremonial in certain ways. You can almost call them compartmentalized.

Rail: Could you elaborate on their ceremonial aspect?

Little: I think the kind of ambience, the energy, the aggression, and the feeling, the optimism in the paintings brings on an air of ceremony.

Rail: These are all sensations, feelings that you associate with the act of painting, generally.

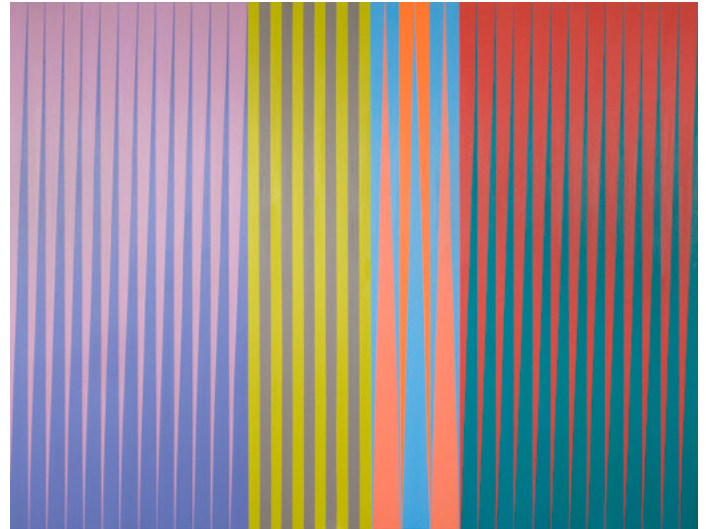
Little: Exactly.

Rail: You do grind your own paint.

Little: I buy the paint in powder form. I also buy some tube paint. But I prime with an oil ground, which I make with copal varnish crystals. It's a hard varnish and I melt the crystals to make the varnish. I use this varnish along with oil and turpentine, in a blender. So it's oil based. The varnish, the copal, gives the primer a hard finish, and it dries fast. I use a roller, I roll it on. On cotton duck. When it dries, I just lay out my composition, and I use a thin tinted varnish glaze to highlight my edges. So when I paint the painting there is no negative space between the colors.

Rail: All this generates this really intense optical quality in your work. What are your thoughts about that specifically? There's a whole tradition of optical art which you don't seem to associate yourself with, and I don't think your paintings are really in that category. But nonetheless, they have this optical quality. Is it just something that comes up naturally?

Little: I struggle to keep it at bay. As a matter of fact I don't really like op art. Because I can't look at it. I don't like having something control me that way. But I use colors as imagery, the way figurative artists use imagery, that's the way I use color. My whole thing is about synthesis. If I put something in a painting it has to have a role, it has to work, its got to do something, otherwise it's going to come out, or I'm gonna highlight it or I'm gonna tone it down. So the painting, if it jars a little bit or it moves a little bit, sometimes I want that. Most of the stuff that I do when it comes to materials and methods and techniques is 3,000 years old, but the way that I've transformed some of those procedures over the years, I've learned a lot. Wax is a very fragile substance. I figured out ways of using it to make it stronger.



James Little, *4 Gypsy*, 2008, oil and wax on canvas, 74 x 96 inches. Collection of Ricardo Braglia.

Rail: It must be really hard keeping those paintings protected.

Little: It is. If you just protect these paintings, they'll look like they do now, forever. The color is frozen in the wax.

Rail: You seem quite positive about the future of art here and I just wonder what you see coming out of this financial mess we're in now as potentially positive.

Little: I think in a way there's a silver lining to it because I think the art world needs a correction, and its just been like a runaway freight train lately. Anything goes. It's like publishing a book that didn't get edited. It doesn't happen that way. It never did. It takes time to get there. It really does. The best art is still in the shadows.

Rail: Do you see yourself in a painting underground?

Little: I do think there's an underground. I think there's a handful of painters that are busting through this thing. I think that there are some good things being done. I think its more important to make painting by consensus among artists rather than by committee. It's more important to me that a person like you, or a painter like Thornton Willis, or my friend Al—people who are knowledgeable about art, who do this stuff day to day—it's more important to me that they understand what I'm doing and have an appreciation for what I'm doing than say, a room full of four or five people trading names with each other.



# James Little's Black Paintings are a 'Volley of Minimalist Ideals' Exposing the Drama, Richness, and Contrasting Values of Black



Installation view of *Louise Nevelson + James Little*, Rosenbaum Contemporary, Boca Raton, FL, 2020. Courtesy Rosenbaum Contemporary.

BY VICTORIA L. VALENTINE, OCTOBER 22, 2020

WORKS BY TWO SINGULAR ARTISTS have been brought together for a tightly curated gallery exhibition titled "Louise Nevelson + James Little." It's an all black show.

The practice of James Little is devoted to painting. He is known for his abstract works, geometric explorations driven by form and exuberant color. In his latest series, *The Black Paintings*, he maintains his focus on structure and design and shifts his palette, demonstrating the possibilities of black paint—its depth, various tones and complexity.

Five monumental paintings by Little are on view with

three sculptural works by Louise Nevelson (1899-1988), who is closely identified with her monochromatic, painted-wood wall reliefs. Her most iconic one-color works are black. Two wall works by Nevelson are installed in the gallery and a standing sculpture is displayed at the center of the space. Produced between 2015 and 2020, Little's large-scale paintings are composed of four panels—36-inch square quadrants that form the 72 x 72-inch paintings. In the exhibition catalog published to accompany the show, Gabriel Diego Delgado wrote about the work of both artists.





Installation view of *Louise Nevelson + James Little*, Rosenbaum Contemporary, Boca Raton, FL, 2020. Courtesy Rosenbaum Contemporary. The title “Cubist Rendezvous” (left) is a nod to the contribution of the Cubists. “I like the way they went about doing what they did. I’m always trying to flatten the plane. Twentieth century Cubism laid down the roadmap. You have to figure out a way to flatten the picture plane and keep the art relevant,” Little said.

“Nevelson described black as the ‘total color’ that ‘means totality’—it contained all color,” he said. “It wasn’t a negation of color. It was an acceptance, submitting to the notion that black encompasses all colors. For her, black was the most aristocratic color of all.”

About Little, Delgado wrote that “he chose to move away from his more recognizable color palettes and dive into the divine notions of absolutes.” He called Little’s black paintings “a volley of minimalist ideals” and “a catalyst for a quasi-religious experience put forth through non-color mannerisms.”

The artist’s paintings are composed of flat planes of herringbone-style patterns. He mixes his own paints. Working with pure pigments and heated beeswax and a rigorous process of application and removal, he exposed the drama, richness, and contrasting values of black.

Little has said, “What’s important when you use color is what you put next to it. It has to have a purpose and it has to be integrated.” The principle holds with his black paintings.

Throughout his career, Little has said his work is absent of narrative. The Black Paintings, for example, are not about race. His work is designed to provide an aesthetic experience. At the same time, the paintings are not devoid of content and history—art history, American history, his own personal history.

In 1985, Little made a series of “X” paintings titled “El-Shabazz.” In an oral history interview published in BOMB magazine in 2017, the artist mentioned the paintings. He said, “I’ve always dealt with politics and sociology in that kind of way. But it’s never been something that was the subject matter of my work.”

More recent works have carried titles such as “Refugee” (2016), “Immigrant” (2016), “Now Is The Right Time To Do the Right Thing” (2013), and “Democratic Experiment” (2017).

BORN IN THE SEGREGATED SOUTH, in Memphis, Tenn., Little earned an MFA from Syracuse University (1976). He lives and works in New York City. The titles he gives his paintings reveal what he brings to the studio, his



background and perspective. The gallery asked Little about the titles he gave his black paintings.

“Raw Power” was inspired by a quote referencing “power that you haven’t used that you don’t even know that you have.” Little explained: “Even in the worst situations you still have some power, whether it’s prayer, hope, or resistance.”

Immortalizing legendary creatives he admires, including Miles Davis, Louis Armstrong and Eartha Kitt, the title “Black Star” acknowledges what it takes to become a Black star—whether musician, singer, actor, or painter.

In the BOMB interview, which was conducted by LeRonn P. Brooks, Little also discussed the relationship between his experiences and political outlook and his mastery of painting and what he puts on the canvas.

“[T]he only thing I really know how to do is make paintings. I want to give you a show, an experience you’ve never had. To show you ways of painting that you hadn’t thought about before,” he said.

“[B]elieve me, I am politically conscious and pissed off about a lot of this stuff that’s going on as much as anybody. If I wasn’t painting I don’t know what the hell I’d do, because I act out my violence in my art. And a lot of other sensibilities. But I can’t allow situations like that to get in the way of my aesthetic intent.”

Little continued: “If the situation changed overnight, and we had a utopia, where there was no more racism, there were no more police killings, and everybody got along, I’d be preoccupied with that kind of subject matter in my work. What would I do then, paint a perfect world? I mean that’s not what drives me.” CT

“Louis Nevelson + James Little” is on view at Rosenbaum Contemporary, from Sept. 8 to Oct. 31, 2020.

James Little’s work is also featured in “On the Same Wavelength” at Louis Stern Fine Arts in West Hollywood, Calif. The group show follows his solo exhibition at the gallery earlier this year: “James Little: Dots and Slants”



James Little, “Black Star,” 2015 (oil and wax on linen, 72 x 72 inches / 182.9 x 182.9 cm). | © James Little, Courtesy the artist and Rosenbaum Contemporary



James Little, “Decoy,” 2019 (oil and wax on linen, 72 x 72 inches / 182.9 x 182.9 cm). | © James Little, Courtesy the artist and Rosenbaum Contemporary



## Driven to Abstraction

BY CELIA MCGEE, JANUARY 1, 2011

James Little, still a gentleman of the Old South after four decades in New York, offers to “rest” a visitor’s coat. In his skylit studio, on the top floor of an old brick industrial building in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, it’s not immediately apparent where he will find a place for it amid the paint cans and tubes, bottles of varnish, jars of brushes, stacks of plastic utility buckets, and rows of storage racks.

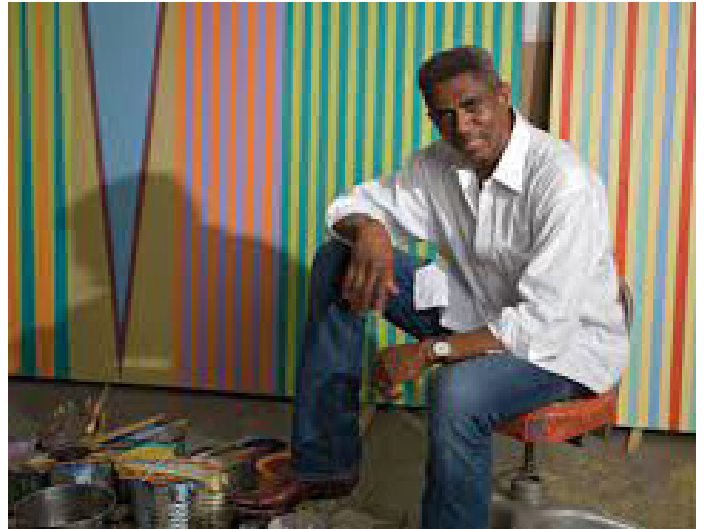
This is the workspace of a maker of labor-intensive geometric compositions executed in silky pearlescent colors. Most measuring at least 6 by 8 feet in size, they glow against the walls of his studio.

Little, 57, was already well known among a small circle of abstract artists when the adulatory reviews of his 2009 show at the June Kelly Gallery in New York brought his work to the attention of a wider audience. That same year he won the Joan Mitchell Foundation Award (<https://www.artnews.com/t/joan-mitchell-foundation-award/>) in Painting.

It “meant a lot to me,” he says of the Mitchell prize. He counts Mitchell among the artists he most admires, along with Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Franz Kline, Alma Thomas, and George L. K. Morris. “To me,” he says, “the most heroic art produced is abstract art, because... it made us see in a different way. It’s been difficult at the present time, because painting has been ostracized or not looked at in favor of Postmodernism.”

Yet his own work is faring quite well these days. His large paintings sell at June Kelly for \$40,000 to \$50,000, and his smaller works on paper go for \$6,500 to \$7,500.

A defiant abstractionist, he intently avoids any sense of horizon or other landscape impressions in his paintings. Through years of experimenting and refining, he has developed his own mixtures of oil paint and beeswax and has mastered the difficult medium of encaustic to achieve restrained but lush pictorial effects. It is a slow process. “A painting takes me three months to make,” he says. He starts by applying five or six coats of stand oil to a canvas so it won’t burn from the hot wax and then uses palette knives to manipulate upward of 20 layers of paint. He produces his varnishes himself. “If I hadn’t been a painter, I would have been a scientist,” he says.



James Little (<https://www.artnews.com/t/james-little/>) in his Brooklyn studio. Behind him, *Legacy of Thieves and Pundits*, 2009.

“There’s alchemy in it too.”

“I’m a strong believer in modernism in painting—something physical and perceptually tangible,” Little says. “I’m not interested in illusionism, the way a lot of abstract artists are. I’m interested in flatness, the flat plane, and materials that keep illusions at bay.”

Little earned an M.F.A. in 1976 from Syracuse University, where he was strongly influenced by the ideas of Sol LeWitt, Hilton Kramer, and Clement Greenberg. “I was more a Greenbergian than anyone,” he says. “I had my style by the time I got there, but Greenberg gave me my theory. He teaches you to take a stand against decadence in art. You have to set high standards, and reach them.”

Little was held to high standards earlier in life, as a child in Memphis, Tennessee. His mother was a cook and his father a construction worker. They always encouraged James and his siblings to do better than they had—and tried to shield their children from segregation. At a young age, Little desperately wanted to paint. His mother gave him a paint-by-numbers kit, and one day, when he had paint left over, Little recalls, “I started copying Eakins. We had the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* up on the bookshelf, and I took down ‘A’ and found ‘Art.’ There was a reproduction of an Eakins.” He doesn’t remember which picture it was.

# ARTnews

The tragedy of his young life was losing his father to alcoholism. “He was frustrated and depressed and had nowhere to vent it,” Little says. “He drank himself to death.” If Little’s career has been an extended effort to uphold the tenets and viewpoints of earlier abstract artists, it has also been an embrace of their fatherly leadership.

From high school, Little graduated to the Memphis Academy of Art (now the Memphis College of Art). He studied fine art, but he says he absorbed as much from those around him who were being trained in advertising design, architectural drafting, and textile design.

Little rejects the idea that he was influenced by the hard-edge abstractionists. “What I picked up on were the stripes in shirts or plaids, advertising signs, construction,” he says. He likes to walk around the city, soaking up the architecture and signage. A few years ago, he saw the word “Gypsy” on the side of a livery cab, inspiring a painting of the same name; its yellow contrasted with lavender, scarlet with cerulean, purple with green, and green and turquoise with an earth tone traveling across the canvas.

Color, Little says, is his imagery, just as a cup or bowl would be for a still-life painter or trees and mountains for a landscape artist. “It’s subject matter for me—the statement is in the interactions of certain colors, their placement, the temperature of color.”

When he landed in New York, in 1976, Little was taken under the wing of the older artist Al Loving, who drew him into the circle of such black abstract artists as William T. Williams, Jack Whitten, Mel Edwards, Fred Eversley, and Bill Hutson. Little also fell in with a group of SoHo artists, white for the most part and also a generation ahead of him, including Thornton Willis, Peter Pinchbeck, Stewart Hitch, Richard Mock, and Tom Evans.

Ethnicity and its attendant social issues have never been central to his art, nor is it important to him to conform to political and esthetic expectations of black artists. “I just don’t think that art has to do with that,” he says. “I’m more interested in the deft touch of Vermeer.”

Nonetheless, he adds, “your history is your history.” The titles of many of his paintings—Separate but Equal (<https://www.artnews.com/t/separate-but-equal/>), The First Black (<https://www.artnews.com/t/the-first-black/>), The Problem with Assumptions (<https://www.artnews.com/t/the-problem-with-assumptions/>), The Difference Between Then and Now (<https://www.artnews.com/t/the-difference-between-then-and-now/>), Satchmo’s Answer to Truman, When Aaron Tied Ruth (<https://www.artnews.com/t/when-aaron-tied-ruth/>)—while they may

make sly references to the formalism of his paintings, also explicitly or implicitly draw on black history and refer to personal heroes such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., whose likenesses and sayings adorn a section of Little’s studio.

It was the assassinations of Malcolm X and King, Little says, that determined him, anguished though he was, not to separate himself from American society but “to take on American art and show ownership of it, to be among the best artists of a generation.” Married to the writer Fatima Shaik, who comes from of a prominent New Orleans family of mixed East Indian and African American descent, he says he has absorbed much of the history of her ancestry as well.

“I want an American image,” he says. “I am an American, and that hasn’t been easy for me to say. I grew up with a lot of oppression. But I’m an optimist. American art is what the best art should be—monumental, in that it’s larger than life and arising from or exhibiting boldness, spirit, or daring. And pure, which is a paradoxical word coming from me, with my background being black, Irish, and Native American.”

But he is using “pure” at least partially in a spiritual sense. In his philosophy, there are echoes of the black church in which he was raised, but also, he says, of the mystical metaphysics of Kandinsky, his precursor in abstraction.

Little says his own studio is just “an emergency room where all the issues we have so urgently in front of us come to get fixed. Then they can go on their way.”

Celia McGee (<https://www.artnews.com/t/celia-mcgee/>) is an arts reporter in New York.

# GOTHAM

## A Curator Finds Inspiration in Abstract Expressionism At the American Fine Arts Society Gallery



BY GARY DUFF, APRIL 3, 2019

As an artist, James Little found inspiration in creating his own abstract impressionism paintings. Now he seeks to bring light to others in the movement as a curator with an exhibition entitled, “New York - Centric,” now open through May 1.

“I picked these artists because of the way they bridged the second generation of abstract expressionism,” says Little of his contemporaries Ronnie Landeld, Dan Christensen, Margaret Neill and Robert Swain, among others, whose art appears alongside his in the gallery. “Despite other movements, they stuck with 20th-century modernism and painting... and I looked for artists who developed some sort of relationship with those ideas and the medium of paint.”

The pieces span the latter half of the 20th century and

offer a vision of art in the onset of the 21st century, giving the viewer a sense of history as they walk through the multi-room exhibit. The striking thing is the space’s versatility, with each piece complementing another as though brother and sister. The family resemblance is clear.

“With these paintings, you can feel the spirit of each artist and each brushstroke,” adds Little. “They stand out because each artist takes a different advantage of the freedom of expression and the democratic approach to painting. Some of these artists are familiar and others are unsung heroes, but in my opinion, we are definitely working with the very best painters.

The American Fine Arts Society Gallery, 215 W. 57th St., New York, [theartstudentsleague.org](http://theartstudentsleague.org)

# Curriculum Vitae

# James Little

Born 1952, Memphis, TN  
Lives and works in New York, NY

## EDUCATION

- 1976 MFA, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
- 1974 BFA, Memphis Academy of Art, Memphis, TN

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2022 *Forthcoming solo exhibition*, Kavi Gupta, Chicago, IL
- 2020 *James Little: Dots and Slants*, Louis Stern Fine Arts, West Hollywood, CA
- 2018 *Slants and White Paintings*, June Kelly Gallery, New York, NY
- 2016 *Informed by Rhythm: Recent Work by James Little*, Louis Stern Fine Arts, West Hollywood, CA
- 2015 *Color/Barriers: Recent Work*, June Kelly Gallery, New York, NY (essay by James Harithas)
- 2013 *Never Say Never*, June Kelly Gallery, New York, NY (essay by Karen Wilkin)
- 2011 *Ex Pluribus Unum: New Paintings*, June Kelly Gallery, New York, NY (essay by Mario Naves)
- 2009 *De-Classified, Recent Paintings*, June Kelly Gallery, New York, NY (essay by James Harithas)
- 2007 *James Little: Untold Stories*, Station Museum of Contemporary Art, Houston, TX
- 2005 *Reaching for the Sky*, G. R. N'Namdi Gallery, New York (catalogue; essays by Robert Costas, James Harithas, and Al Loving)
- 2003 *Beyond Geometry: New Paintings*, L.I.C.K. Ltd. Fine Art, Long Island City, NY (essay by Robert C. Morgan)
- 1995 *Recent Abstract Paintings*, Kenkeleba Gallery, New York, NY
- 1992 *James Little: Selected Works from the Past Decade*, Lubin House Gallery, Syracuse University, New York, NY  
*James Little: Ovals and Arbitration Paintings*, Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York, NY
- 1990 *Tondos and Ovals*, June Kelly Gallery, New York, NY (essay by April Kingsley)
- 1989 *James Little: Recent Paintings*, Christian Science Church, Boston, MA
- 1988 *James Little & Al Loving: New Work*, June Kelly Gallery, New York, NY  
*New York to Memphis*, Alice Bingham Gallery, Memphis, TN  
*New Paintings*, June Kelly Gallery, New York, NY
- 1987 *New Paintings*, Liz Harris Gallery, Boston, MA
- 1985 *James Little: Format Paintings*, Harris Brown Gallery, Boston, MA
- 1982 *Recent Oil Paintings*, Alternative Museum, New York, NY (essay by April Kingsley)
- 1976 *Paintings by James Little*, curated by Ronald Kuchta, Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY

## GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2022 *Quiet as It's Kept*, Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of Art, New York, NY
- 2021 *Abstraction & Social Critique*, Kavi Gupta, Chicago, IL  
*The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse*, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA; traveling to Crystal Bridges, Bentonville, AR, in March 2022
- 2020 *Louise Nevelson and James Little*, Rosenbaum Contemporary, Boca Raton, FL
- 2018 *Color/Line/Form*, Rosenbaum Contemporary, Boca Raton, FL
- 2017 *Celebrating 30 Years, Gallery Artists: Drawings and Photographs*, June Kelly Gallery, New York, NY
- 2016 *Circa 1970*, curated by Lauren Haynes, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY  
*Beyond Borders: Bill Hutson & Friends*, University Museums, Mechanical Hall Gallery, University of Delaware
- 2015 *Decoding the Abstract Unlimited Potential*, curated by James Austin Murray, Lyons Wier Gallery, New York, NY  
*Outside the Lines: Color Across the Collections*, curated by Tricia Laughlin Bloom, organized by the Newark Museum, NJ  
*Works on Paper: Selections from the Gallery*, Louis Stern Fine Arts, West Hollywood, CA
- 2014 *Black in the Abstract, Part 2: Hard Edges, Soft Curves*, organized by Valerie Cassel Oliver, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, TX (catalogue)
- 2012 *Today's Visual Language: Southern Abstraction, A Fresh Look*, curated by Donan Klooz, Mobile Museum of Art, AL (digital catalogue)



- What Only Paint Can Do*, curated by Karen Wilkin, Triangle Arts Association, Brooklyn, NY
- 2011 *ABSTRACTION (Abstraction to the Power of Infinity)*, curated by Janet Kurnatowski, organized by the American Abstract Artists, The Ice Box, Crane Arts, Philadelphia, PA
- 2010 *Abstract Relations*, collaboration of the University of Maryland David C. Driskell Center and the University of Delaware Museums, curated by Dr. Julie L. McGee and Dr. Adrienne L. Childs, Mechanical Hall Gallery, Mineralogical Museum, University of Delaware, Newark, DE
- It's A Wonderful 10th*, Sideshow Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- 2008 *Shape Shifters: New York Painters*, The A.D. Gallery, University of North Carolina at Pembroke, Pembroke, NC (catalogue)
- 2007 *Three One-Man Exhibitions: James Little, Aimé Mpane, George Smith*, Station Museum of Contemporary Art, Houston, TX (brochure)
- 2006 *The 181st Annual Invitational Exhibition of Contemporary American Art*, National Academy of Design, New York, NY (catalogue)
- Neo-Plastic Redux*, Elizabeth Harris Gallery, New York, NY
- 2005 *Different Ways of Seeing: The Expanding World of Abstraction*, Noyes Museum of Contemporary Art, Oceanville, NJ
- Optical Stimulations: American Abstract Artists*, Yellow Bird Gallery, Newburgh, NY
- 50 Plus*, Netherlands Tunnel Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- Raising the Bar: James Little and Thornton Willis*, Sideshow Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- 2004 *Seeds and Roots: Selections from the Permanent Collection*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY
- A Century of African American Art: The Paul R. Jones Collection*, University of Delaware, Newark, DE
- Abstract Identity*, Pelham Art Center, New York, NY
- 2003 *Theories: Abstract New York*, Roger Ramsay Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 2002 *No Greater Love, Abstraction*, Jack Tilton/Anna Kustera Gallery, New York, NY
- Ajita – Unconquerable*, The Station, Houston, TX (catalogue)
- 500 Works on Paper*, Gary Snyder Fine Art, New York, NY
- Amplified Abstraction*, Chapel, Plantage, Doklaan 8-12, Amsterdam, Netherlands
- 2001 *Painted in New York City: Viewpoints of Recent Developments in Abstract Painting*, Hofstra Museum, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY (catalogue)
- Dialog and Discourse*, Dolan Center Gallery, Friends Academy, Locust Valley, NY
- 2000 *Significant Pursuits: Paint and Geometry*, Smack Mellon Studios, Brooklyn, NY
- Straight Painting*, The Painting Center, New York, NY
- 1999 *Straight No Chaser*, The Puffin Room, The Puffin Foundation, New York, NY
- The Art of Absolute Desire*, 450 Broadway, New York, NY
- The Power of Drawing*, Westbeth Gallery, New York, NY
- 1998 *New Directions '98: 14th Annual National Juried Fine Arts Exhibition*, Dutchess County Art Association, Barrett Art Center, Poughkeepsie, NY
- New York Eight*, Luise Ross Gallery, New York
- Works On, With and Made Out of Paper*, Sideshow 195, Brooklyn, NY
- The African-American Fine Arts Collection of the New Jersey State Museum*, New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, NJ
- Postcards from Black America*, curated by Rob Perrée, De Beyerd Center for Contemporary Art, Breda, Netherlands, and the Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, Netherlands (catalogue)
- de leugenaars/the liars (I) Helder en Verzadigd Clear and Saturated*, Arti et Amicitiae, Amsterdam, Netherlands
- Color, Matter, Energy*, Galerie Maria Chailloux, Hogeschool van Amsterdam, Netherlands

#### COLLECTIONS

Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NJ  
 Newark Museum, Newark, NJ  
 New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, NJ  
 Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO  
 Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY  
 Tennessee State Museum, Nashville, TN  
 Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, AR  
 State University of New York at Albany, Albany, NY  
 Memphis Academy of Art, Memphis, TN

Maatschappij Arti Et Amicitiae, Amsterdam, Netherlands  
Menil Collection, Houston, TX  
Library of Congress, Washington, DC  
AT&T, NY and FL  
Gucci Corporation, Boston, MA  
Mutual of New York Assurance Company, New York, NY  
Occidental Petroleum Company, Aberdeen, Scotland  
Phillips/Schwab Inc., New York, NY  
Sherbourne, Powers and Needham, Inc., Boston, MA  
Stephen Mallory Associates, New York, NY  
Veryss Corporation, Boston, MA  
The Twentieth Century Fund, New York, NY  
U.N.C. Ventures, Boston, MA