
James Little

Background Information

James Little

- Whitney Biennial 2022, New York, NY
- 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 is a master in the field of contemporary American abstract painting. In an age that frequently trades durability and patience for ephemerality and instant gratification, Little might be seen as an outlier. A careful, precise, disciplined perfectionist who emphasizes personal improvement over outside recognition, Little offers an alternative definition of influencer to a culture obsessed with quick returns and fame for fame's sake.

Little's distinctive visual position is based on a rigorous, life long academic study of color theory, pictorial design, and painting techniques. Rooted in simplicity, his work centers geometric shapes, patterns and emotive color relationships.

"I make paintings unadorned, that reflect the relationship I have with the medium and good design," 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. I'm just trying to stand up next to the great paintings of the past."

The restraint of his pictures belies the startling complexity of their making—Little makes his own binders and grinds his own pigments, and paints a majority of his works using what is the most complex and difficult-to-master method ever devised: blending handmade pigments with hot beeswax, similar to the encaustic painting technique developed by ancient Egyptian and Greek artists. Properly cared for, his wax paintings will look as vibrant and luminous a thousand years from now as they do today.

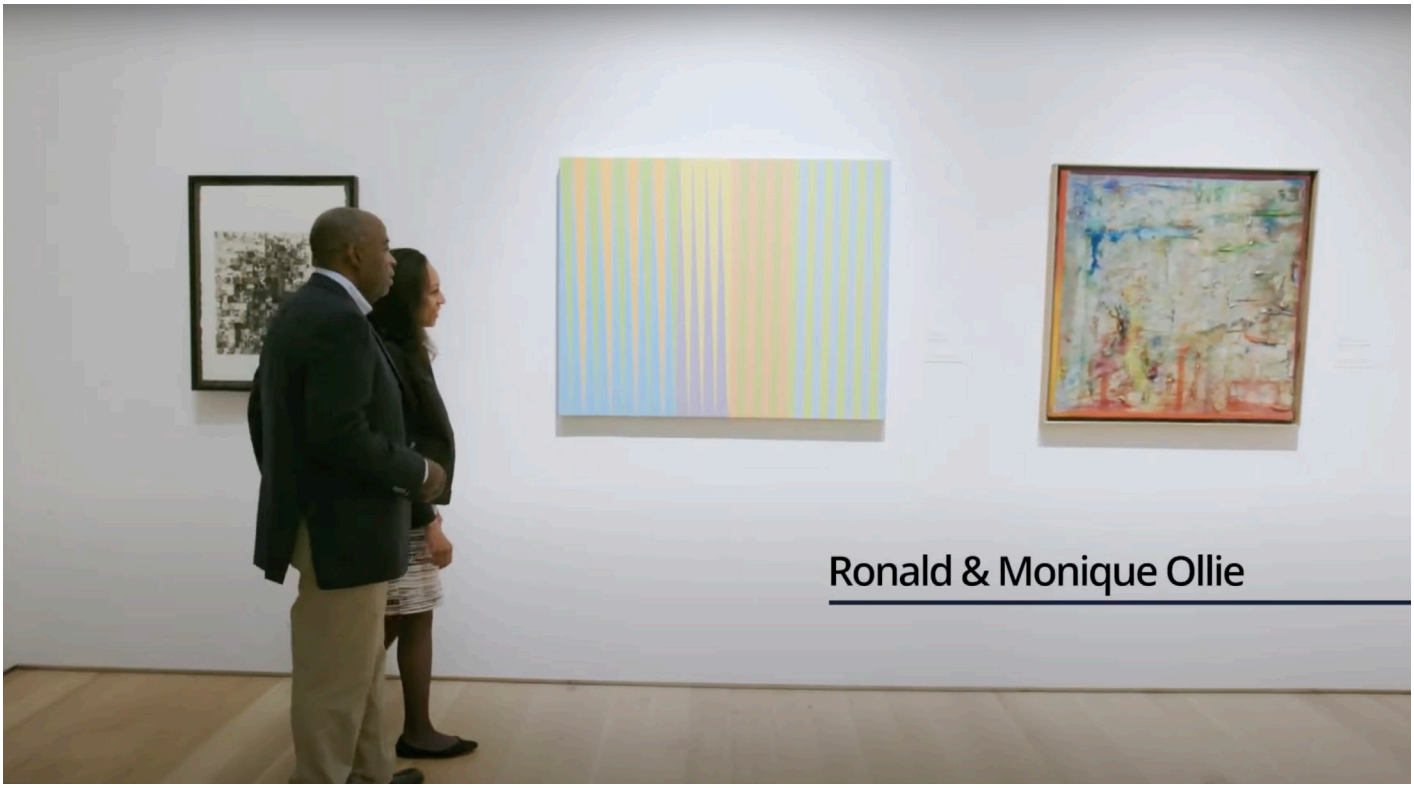
Little holds a BFA from the Memphis Academy of Art and an MFA from Syracuse University. He is a 2009 recipient of the Joan Mitchell Foundation Award for Painting. In addition to being featured prominently in the 2022 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, NY, his work has been exhibited extensively in solo and group exhibitions around the world, including at MoMA P.S.1, New York, NY; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR; Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY; St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO; and the Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC. His paintings are represented in the collections of numerous public and private collections, including the Virginia Museum of Fine Art, Richmond; Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; DeMenil Collection in Houston; Library of Congress, Washington, DC; and Maatschappij Arti Et Amicitiae, Amsterdam, Holland.

Video Links

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



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

Select Exhibitions

DIXON
GALLERY & GARDENS

James Little: *Homecoming*

Installation view, *James Little: Homecoming* at Dixon Gallery, Memphis, TN, 2022. Courtesy of Dixon Gallery and Gardens.

APRIL 17–JULY 10, 2022

Dixon Gallery and Gardens present sixteen gallery spaces with independent, Dixon-organized exhibitions, featuring the exhibition *James Little: Homecoming*.

For more than four decades, James Litle has grappled with the history of abstract painting through his bold, geometric compositions. His canvases display controlled brushwork interest in the physical properties of paint and the influence of color field painting and gestural abstraction while conveying a strong feeling for color, surface, and texture. Born and raised in Memphis, Littles's interest in art was evident from a young age when he copied comic strips and reproductions of the paintings he saw in books his mother brought home from the library. Later, as a student at Memphis Academy of Arts (later Memphis College of Arts), he first began to explore the abstract style that would come to define his career. While completing an MEA at Syracuse University, seminars with Clement Greenberg and Harold Kramer, among the most prominent critics of the era, allowed him to explore the theoretical underpinnings of abstraction and situate his own work within the longer trajectory of modern art.

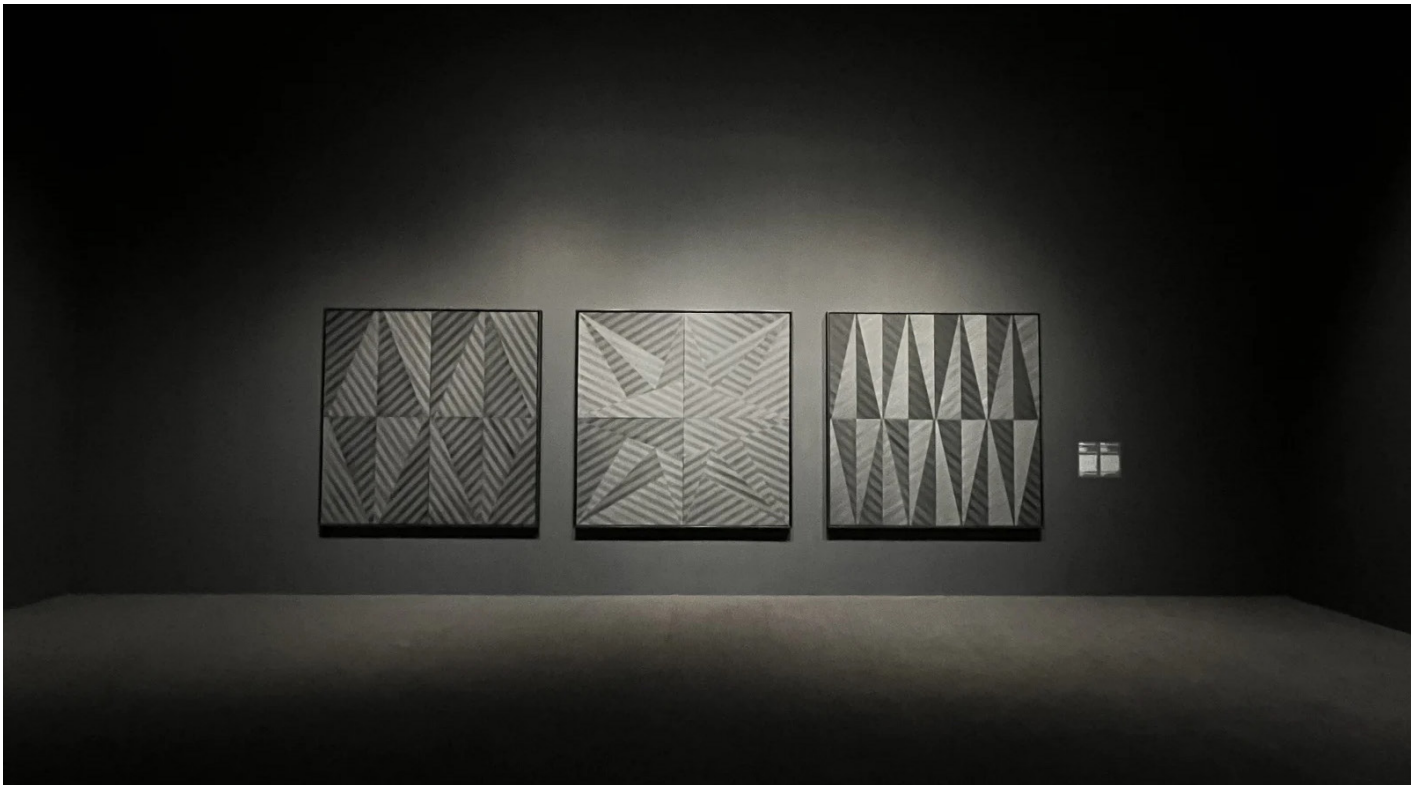
Although he has lived and worked in New York City since the mid-1970, Little's hometown roots still figure in his art. *Homecoming* is his first solo show in Memphis.

He has described how deeply affected he was by the assassination of Dr. Marin Luther King, Jr. in 1968 and the subsequent protests that occurred while he was a student at Hamilton High School, declaring that the "scars of racism and discrimination" last forever. Though persistent in his pursuit of abstraction, Little alludes to a diverse range of current events and social issues in the tiles of his work, calling attention to concerns such as mass incarceration and settler colonialism as well as popular music and art historical references. The works on view in Homecoming, produced between 2008 and 2020, realize a synthesis of multiple influences that has only been possible through a long maturation process. Little has consistently worked with a non-objective tradition that emphasizes the integrity of materials, monumentality. color, and form. Constantly exploring the medium of paint, the artist's diverse, analytical paintings continue to present multifaceted ways of seeing the world.

Installation view, *James Little: Homecoming* at Dixon Gallery, Memphis, TN, 2022. Courtesy of Dixon Gallery and Gardens.

Installation view, *James Little: Homecoming* at Dixon Gallery, Memphis, TN, 2022. Courtesy of Dixon Gallery and Gardens.

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



Installation view, James Little in *Quiet as It's Kept*, 2022 at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

APRIL 1–SEPTEMBER 5, 2022

2022 Whitney Biennial artist James Little (b. 1952) 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.

Little has been an enduring and influential force in the field of abstraction for decades. Included in such pivotal early exhibitions as *Another Generation: Contemporary Abstractionists* at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1979, and *Afro-American Abstraction* at MoMA PS1 in 1980, Little has consistently re-defined the meaning and importance of abstract painting in the Postmodern age. His distinctive aesthetic language is rooted in geometric shapes and patterns, flat surfaces, and emotive color relationships. 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.

In November of 2022, he will open an ambitious solo exhibition of new large-scale paintings at Kavi Gupta in Chicago.

The Whitney Biennial has surveyed the landscape of American art, reflecting and shaping the cultural conversation, since 1932. The eightieth edition of the landmark exhibition is co-curated by David Breslin, DeMartini Family Curator and Director of Curatorial Initiatives, and Adrienne Edwards, Engell Speyer Family Curator and Director of Curatorial Affairs. Titled Quiet as It's Kept, the 2022 Biennial features an intergenerational and interdisciplinary group of sixty-three artists and collectives whose dynamic works reflect the challenges, complexities, and possibilities of the American experience today.

Installation view, James Little in *Quiet as It's Kept*, 2022 at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Courtesy of Ben Davis.

Kavi Gupta | Washington Blvd. Fl. 1

Abstraction and Social Critique

Installation view, James Little in *Abstraction & Social Critique*, 2021/22, Kavi Gupta | Washington Blvd Fl.1

OCTOBER 23, 2021–JANUARY 1, 2022

Kavi Gupta proudly presents *Abstraction and Social Critique*, an intergenerational group show of artists whose aesthetic positions declare the continued relevance and influence of abstraction.

The artist James Little, whose masterful geometric paintings are included in the exhibition, offers this personal elucidation of why he chose to pursue abstraction in his work: "Abstraction frees me to do whatever I want."

Artist Clare Rojas echoes that sentiment when asked what she is talking about when she talks about abstract art. "My main concern is creating my own sacred construct, one I have freedom to alter," she says. "It's about feeling that freedom and empowerment."

Mimesis oppresses the artist by relegating where to begin or where to end, while abstraction serves the changing and unpredictable needs of the individual creative being.

It could be argued that abstract art is thus inherently political, because it is an expression of personal freedom. It could also be said that abstraction is inherently anarchic, because it invites every point of view. Yet, every point of view has not always been welcomed into the conversation about what abstraction is, and what it means to contemporary culture.

Voices of BIPOC artists and artists identifying as women or LGBTQ+ have been systematically quieted through their exclusion from nearly every level of the contemporary art field, particularly in the United States. Many academies and institutions have long served and upheld cultural canons that lean heavily cisgendered, straight, and white, marginalizing all other artists. Relegated to the sidelines, showing their work in galleries that are mostly ignored by the art press, these artists have largely been left out of mainstream critical conversations, rendering their efforts and achievements all but invisible to those who write, edit, and study the art

historical record.

Kavi Gupta's mission is to amplify the voices of diverse and underrepresented artists to expand the canon of art history. Though their approaches are varied and idiosyncratic, the artists spotlighted in *Abstraction and Social Critique* are connected in the sense that their practices allow for a fully actualized conception of abstraction.

Some works, like those of Angel Otero, Abigail DeVille, and Richard Hunt, convey social critique through their methods and materials. Others, like those of Raymond Saunders, Cameron Welch, Miya Ando, Modou Dieng, Jamaal Peterman, and Rewind Collective, introduce personal and social narratives, though in abstracted terms. Paintings by Jack Whitten, James Little, Al Loving, Brooklin Soumahoro, and Clare Rojas can be read in purely formal terms—the combination of the artist's lived experience and their intentions infuses the works with political relevance.

Within the exhibition, we see artists engaged in an effort to subvert systems of aesthetic oppression and control that attempt to define and thus limit what abstract art is and can be. Their presence here testifies to the changing needs of the contemporary art field, and broadens participation in the ongoing debate about the scope and influence of abstract art.

Installation view, James Little in *Abstraction & Social Critique*, 2021/22, Kavi Gupta | Washington Blvd Fl.1

VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

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

Installation view, James Little (left)in *The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse*, 2021 at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

MAY 22–SEPTEMBER 6, 2021

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.

The Dirty South has since traveled to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and The Contemporary Arts Museum Houston.

The Dirty South, Published by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2021.

ROSENBAUM | contemporary

Louise Nevelson + James Little

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

Louise Nevelson + James Little, an exhibition pairing Nevelson's monochromatic black sculptures with Little's new series of large-scale, black-toned paintings. While at first glance the pairing of Nevelson's works with Little's may seem to be driven solely by their use of black pigment, the two artists and their works actually have much more in common. Both artists perceived black as a color versus the absence of color, both artists were deliberate in their use of black tones, and the work of both artists, despite using only black as a color, is surprisingly complex. In creating her sculptures, Nevelson assembled everyday objects and elevated them in the resulting compositions by painting them entirely in black, which, to her was "the most aristocratic color." In creating her assemblages, she was very meticulous and methodical, deliberately choosing objects and positioning them so as to cast shadows within the overall blackness. In creating his new Black Paintings series, Little was equally methodical, layering oil pigments with beeswax to create varying tones and depths of black. As with Nevelson's sculptures, every element in Little's paintings is deliberately placed. "Everything has to have a job, a role to play," Little said. While he uses repeating patterns in his work, his paintings are not based on repetition alone. The tones, angles and lines compete with one another as part of an underlying structure, creating a conversation that gives each painting its spirit or voice, resulting in an aesthetic experience for the viewer. "A painting will tell you what it needs," Little said. "It's up to you whether you want to listen." This aspect of his process is similar to how the results can be experienced. Viewers who take the time to really look at Nevelson's and Little's work will absorb their underlying spirit.

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

SAINT LOUIS
ART MUSEUM

The Shape of Abstraction: Selections from the Ollie Collection

James Little in *The Shape of Abstraction: Selections from the Ollie Collection,* 2019/20 at the Saint Louis Art Museum.

SEPTEMBER 17, 2019–OCTOBER 11, 2020

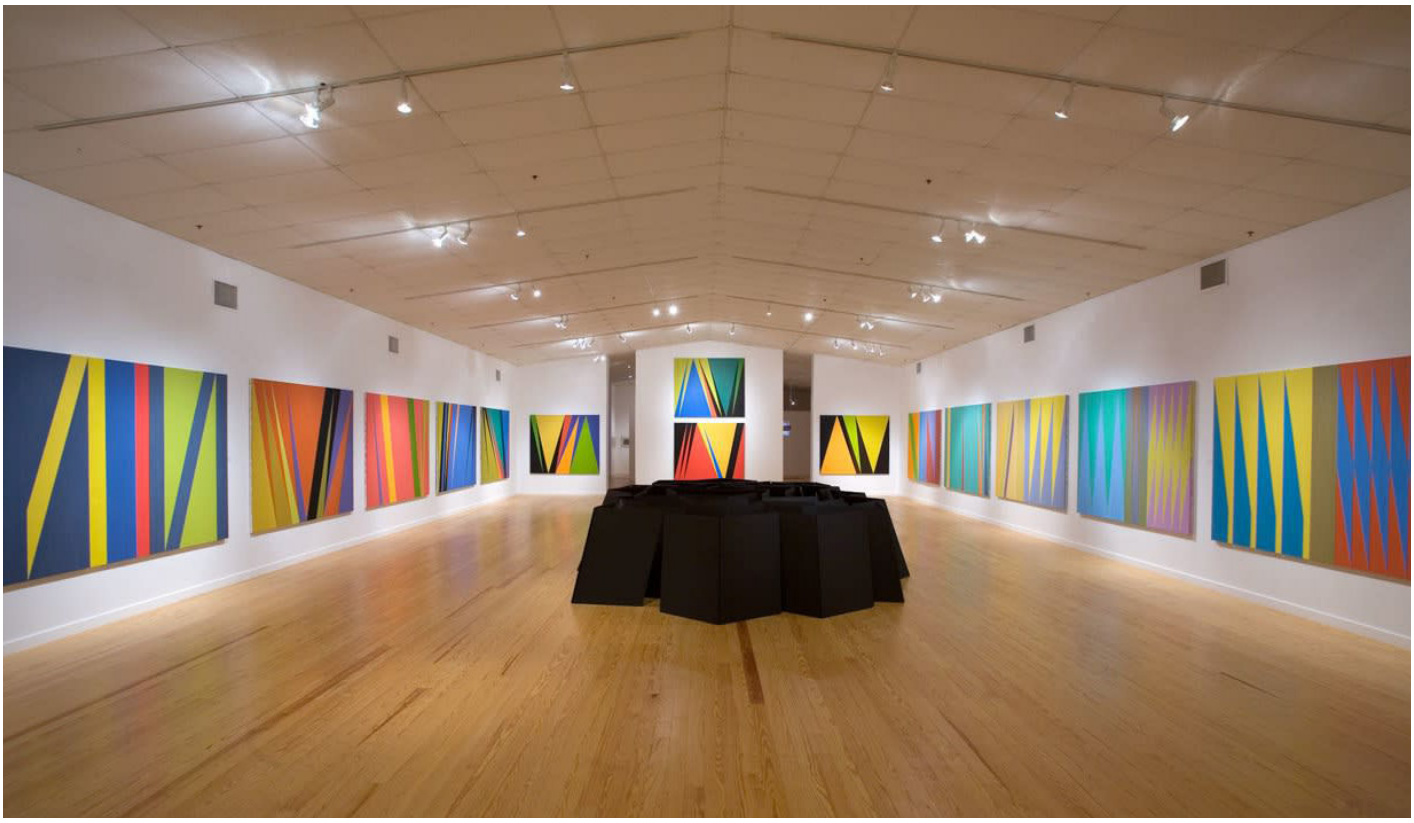
The Shape of Abstraction: Selections from the Ollie Collection presents paintings, drawings, and prints by five generations of black artists who have revolutionized abstract art since the 1940s. The exhibition includes Norman Lewis's gestural drawings, Sam Gilliam's radically shaped paintings, James Little's experiments with color, and Chakaia Booker's explorations in printmaking, 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 re-examination 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 is curated by Gretchen L. Wagner, Andrew W. Mellon Fellow for Prints, Drawings, and Photographs; and Alexis Assam, 2018–2019 Romare Bearden Graduate Museum Fellow.

STATION

Three One-Man Exhibitions: Aimé Mpane, James Little, & George Smith



Installation view, James Little in *Three One-Man Exhibition: Aimé Mpane, James Little, & George Smith*, 2007/8 at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art.

SEPTEMBER 16, 2007–MARCH 1, 2008

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

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.

Installation view, James Little in *Three One-Man Exhibition: Aimé Mpane, James Little, & George Smith*, 2007/8 at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art.

Seeds and Roots: Selections from the Permanent Collection

Installation view, *Seeds and Roots: Selections from the Permanent Collection*, 2004, The Studio Museum in Harlem.

JULY 15–SEPTEMBER 25, 2004

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

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

Select Press

The New York Times

James Little, Unapologetic Abstractionist Painter, Catches the Limelight

Mr. Little waited more than 40 years to show his work in the Whitney Biennial. This year, he prepares for two gallery shows and a collaboration with Duke Ellington's music.

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS, OCTOBER 20, 2022

James Little was just 28 back in 1980 when he sent reproductions of his abstract paintings to the Whitney curator Barbara Haskell in hopes of being selected for the biennial she was organizing.

Having moved to New York four years earlier after completing his M.F.A. at Syracuse University, the Memphis-born artist had just been included in *Afro-American Abstraction* at PS1 in Queens alongside Ed Clark, Sam Gilliam, Al Loving and Jack Whitten, among others.

The well-reviewed exhibition gave Mr. Little reason to believe that the art world might finally pay attention to him and his peers who were rejecting the expectation of Black artists to make figurative and identity-based work.

Ms. Haskell praised Mr. Little's paintings in a gracious letter that he said he has valued all these years for the encouragement and acknowledgment it offered. But she didn't put him in the biennial. He would have to wait more than four decades.

Today, at 70, Mr. Little is widely heralded as one of the breakout stars of this year's Whitney Biennial. The museum has just acquired his large-scale oil-and-wax canvas *Stars and Stripes* (2021) — which Holland Cotter called "magisterial" in his review in The New York Times. Painted with colliding diagonal bands in two shades of black that optically shift between lighter and darker with the viewer's movement, the dynamic canvas was one of three such geometrically patterned all-black works by Mr. Little in the show that held court with a mysterious luminosity and presence.

At his longtime studio on Hope Street in Williamsburg, the artist said that working outside the limelight allowed him to find his voice and personalize his art. "I knew the recognition was going to happen sooner or later," said Mr. Little, who has stayed true to his labor-intensive approach to abstraction emphasizing color, design and structure. "I've always been in the mix."

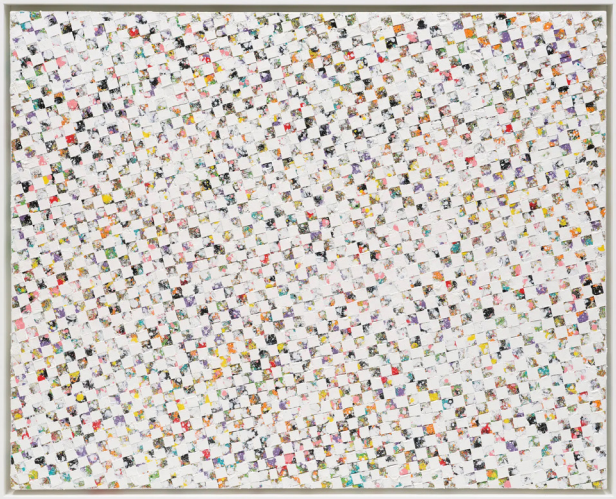
Mr. Little was preparing for his first show with the Kavi Gupta Gallery in Chicago, opening Nov. 12, called *Black Stars & White Paintings*. It will include more of his two-tone black paintings, a theme he has explored in variation over the last decade. He spends three months on each piece, painstakingly building their intersecting vectors in up to 20 layers of hand-blended pigments that he mixes with hot beeswax to seal the color and give it a kind of sheen.

James Little at his studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. At 70, he is widely heralded as one of the breakout stars of this year's Whitney Biennial. Elias Williams for The New York Times

"I come from a family of construction workers who

used to mix mortar and lay bricks," he said. "That had an effect on me." So did his mother's cooking from scratch and structuring of meals for seven children. Indeed, his studio tabletops looked like a kitchen explosion or a mad scientist's lab with a jumble of buckets, jars, bottles and blenders filled with his concoctions. On the canvases, though, all is distilled and clean-edged, bridging vernacular craftsmanship with modernist ideas mined from Paul Cézanne, Piet Mondrian and Willem de Kooning, among others. "I come from a family of construction workers who used to mix mortar and lay bricks," he said. "That had an effect on me." So did his mother's cooking from scratch and structuring of meals for seven children. Indeed, his studio tabletops looked like a kitchen explosion or a mad scientist's lab with a jumble of buckets, jars, bottles and blenders filled with his concoctions. On the canvases, though, all is distilled and clean-edged, bridging vernacular craftsmanship with modernist ideas mined from Paul Cézanne, Piet Mondrian and Willem de Kooning, among others.

The Gupta exhibition will also show Mr. Little's more recent series of white canvases, some included at the Whitney, that are studded with grids of little circles or rectangles, each containing a multitude of swirling colors like mini Jackson Pollocks. These grids are inspired by commonplace industrial design that the artist notices on architecture, sidewalks and textiles.



Mr. Little's piece *Thespian Stories* (2022) was created on linen. Each colorful square contains a multitude of swirling pigments, applied with eye droppers. After more than four decades, he has stayed true to his labor-intensive approach to abstraction.

"The whole society's full of patterns," said Mr. Little. He uses up to 100 different shades of color applied with eye droppers to the surface of these canvases. Then he masks off a grid of repeating shapes and pours white pigment over the entire piece, lifting the shapes when the upper layer dries. He never knows exactly what will be revealed in the resulting apertures.

His longtime studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where Mr. Little said that working outside the limelight all this time allowed him to find his voice and personalize his art. Elias Williams for The New York Times

"Each one of these is like a universe in its own," said Mr. Little, who's always interested in imbuing his work with a certain optimism. "How can I make it musical? How can I make it playful and joyful? It harks back to Christmas toys and celebrations." He's experimenting with smaller versions of these white grids on oval canvases, set in diamond-shaped frames, for his first show next spring with Petzel Gallery in New York that is now representing him as well.

With a deep affinity for music, particularly the improvisation of jazz, Mr. Little is collaborating with the New York Choral Society on the presentation of Duke Ellington's Sacred Concerts on Nov. 18 and 19 at The New School.

"James's compositions have this rhythm and precision that reminds me of a musical score," said Patrick Owens, the choral society's executive director who knew Mr. Little's work from his years showing at the June Kelly Gallery.

Mr. Owens invited the artist to use a huge projection screen behind some 120 vocalists and a 60-person orchestra that will perform movements of jazz, choral, gospel and symphonic music taken from Ellington's three Sacred Concerts, ecumenical reflections on personal faith that were originally performed between 1965 and 1973. Mr. Little is sitting in on rehearsals, selecting more than two dozen paintings from across his career

to project on the screen in conversation with the music.

“Painting is a solo act — I try to put the orchestra together pictorially,” said Mr. Little, who is embracing this first opportunity for artistic collaboration.

Mr. Little at the Whitney Biennial preview on March 29, 2022. “I knew the recognition was going to happen sooner or later,” he said. Krista Schlueter for The New York Times

During the civil rights movement, many African Americans wanted Ellington to be more forthcoming, said Mr. Owens, but “he was very dedicated to his music as a force as opposed to actual protest.” Similarly, Mr. Little, who grew up in the very segregated environment of Memphis and was 16 when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated there, has committed to abstraction as “the best expression of my free will,” he said, despite pushback over the years from some for not engaging in social issues.

Adrienne Edwards, co-curator of the Whitney Biennial this year who was pointed toward Mr. Little by the artist David Hammons, called Mr. Little’s work “unapologetically minimalist,” adding: “It’s artists like him who are often overlooked because people tend toward sound bites or things that affirm their own beliefs.”

She was drawn to the soulfulness of Mr. Little’s work and his relationship to labor — “how ordinary things like bricklaying could be a space of imagination for him,” she said. Installed amid a cacophony of politically charged works in the biennial, Mr. Little’s black monochromes with two contrasting tones anchored a dark room with “ice-cold lighting that really allowed the blacks to dance on those black walls,” Ms. Edwards said. “They did a lot of work for us in that installation. There was a solemnness and space of reflection even in the chaos.”

Valerie Cassel Oliver, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, was struck by the ambience of Mr. Little’s black stars in that dark space. “One thinks of black paint as the absorption of light, but it’s just very much alive in his hands,” said Ms. Oliver, who has included a large painting by Mr. Little with polychrome stripes and zigzags in her traveling exhibition *The Dirty South*, on view now at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver.

Mr. Little’s black paintings “take Frank Stella to a whole different level,” she continued, referring to the older artist’s minimalist black monochromes from the late 1950s that were seen as groundbreaking. “James is carving a little niche for himself within that very long trajectory in the history of art. It’s familiar and yet it’s new territory. It extends what we understand as American modernism.”

Featured in the Whitney Biennial, these pieces were painted with colliding diagonal bands in two shades of black that optically shift between lighter and darker with the viewer’s movement. Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

THE ART NEWSPAPER

With a Whitney Biennial feature and newfound commercial representation, James Little's commitment to abstraction is finally paying off

Works by James Little in *Quiet as It's Kept*. Photo by Benjamin Sutton

BY ISIS DAVIS-MARKS, JUNE 21, 2022

Over the past four decades, the abstract artist James Little has made everything from monochromatic black paintings rendered with straight lines to colourful canvases replete with repeating rectangles and white surfaces adorned with multicoloured circles. Though Little's paintings can't be defined by a particular genre, they are all enthralling abstract works that transport the viewer into a field of colour.

"If I put together a painting, I have geometry," Little says. "I may have a luminosity. I have all those things that are formal, but not representative. It's not me painting a tree, a bowl, a human figure or anything like that. [My practice] relies a whole lot on imagination and feeling, vision and skill." Now, Little's virtuosity is finally gaining more widespread recognition. The Memphis-born painter's canvases figure prominently in the 2022 Whitney Biennial, *Quiet as It's Kept* (until 5 September). One work in the exhibition, *Stars and Stripes* (2019), shows a pattern of intersecting black lines when seen from up close and, from a distance, reveals a complicated arrangement of rhombuses and triangles. These shapes seem sacred, meditative somehow, and looking at this canvas makes the viewer feel like they are stepping into the inky black pool of someone's subconscious.

"There are a lot of different meanings behind these paintings," Little says. "The Black Star [works] reflect

the way we look upon ourselves, and [have] astrological connotations. I'm sure that there will be people who walk in and tie some sort of sociological meaning to it, which is OK, but I also have other objectives. I like to just raise the questions and allow the paintings to have some sort of contemplation." Another piece on view, *Big Shot* (2021), similarly employs black brushstrokes to create a shape that resembles a six-pointed star. This painting is punctuated by lines that converge on a singular point and encrusted textures that speak to the subtleties of Little's sacred geometries. He achieves these granular surfaces by using encaustic paint, which requires the artist to carefully apply layers of wax and pigment to a flat surface, a meticulous process that can take months to complete.

"I was drawn to the paintings," says Chicago-based dealer Kavi Gupta. "I was drawn to their physicality. He's mixing varnishes, encaustics and pigments, which almost no one does." Gupta adds, "He must be so consistent. It's hard to get the level of pigment that he has achieved because he needs to get these huge swathes of colour." Little recently joined the roster at Gupta's gallery, where he will have a solo exhibition in November. It will feature new works building on the artist's interests in surface, texture and colour. The relationship between surfaces and materials in Little's work is informed by his humble beginnings. Born in 1952 in Memphis, Tennessee, the artist came of age at a time when the American South was still deeply segregated. Most of his mother's family had migrated from Mississippi, whereas his father's family had Native American, Irish and Black ancestry.

"My work comes from necessity," Little says. "My mother was a cook. My father was a construction worker. My grandmother was a seamstress, and she made quilts out of her kids' clothes. They were from Mississippi, and they were dirt poor and figured out a way to advance and fly, and that's the story of a lot of Black folks in this country, especially from the South. "Many of these early experiences and family stories had a profound impact on the painter and one vivid memory still inspires him to this day, as he recounted in a 2009 interview with Benjamin La Rocco for the Brooklyn Rail. When Little was a child, his father and grandfather took him to a construction site where they were working. When Little arrived, he saw workers mixing and pouring cement, a process that mesmerised him.

"That had a strange influence on my sensibility towards surface, even to this day," Little told La Rocco. "I just like the idea of taking this medium, this material, and transforming it—making it do something other than what it wanted to do." As he entered adolescence, Little remained fascinated by materials and continued to hone his practice, making work with readily available supplies and copying Old Master paintings by Thomas Eakins from Encyclopedia Britannica, according to a 2011 ARTnews article by Celia McGee. Once he graduated high school, Little decided to study these interests formally, enrolling at the Memphis Academy of Art, where he earned his BFA in 1974. He received his MFA from Syracuse University in 1976.

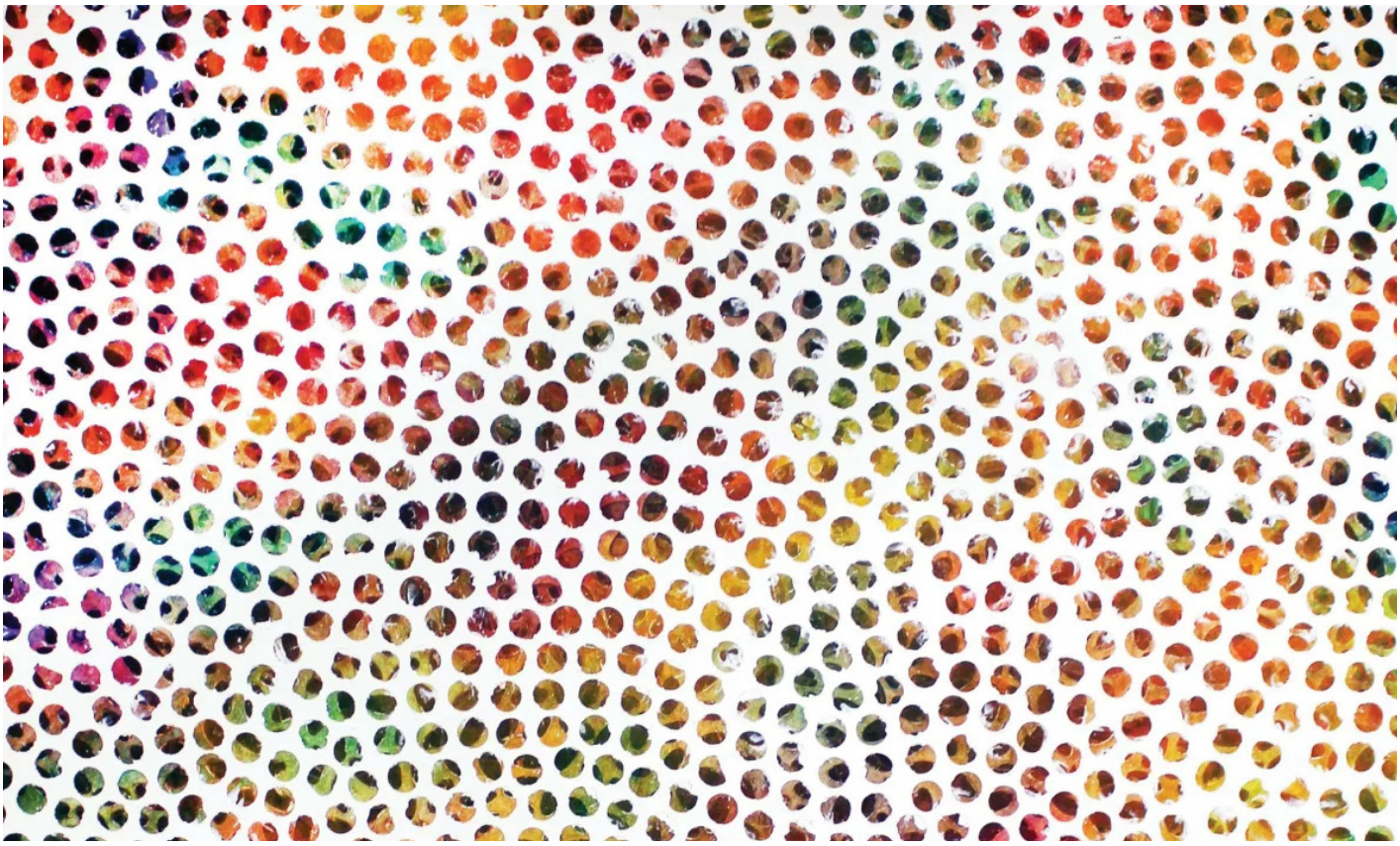
When Little started his career, racial tensions were always present in the background. The artist's teenage years coincided with the height of the Civil Rights movement and there weren't many other Black artists exhibiting in mainstream museums and galleries at the time. "I was 21 years old before I paid any attention to any Black artists because it wasn't available," Little says. "It wasn't taught in the schools. We didn't see it. It wasn't in the museum, there was no representation. In a way, this allowed me to develop my own ideas about art. But at the same time, I felt cheated because I was just immersed in Western painting." This lack of representation didn't deter Little from honing his practice, and over the years he became a true painter's painter, committed to abstraction even as external events and prevailing trends sought to impose figurative readings on his work.

Some of Little's earlier works speak to the artist's interest in colour and craft. El-Shabazz (C) (1985), for instance, depicts four pastel-coloured triangles that intersect at a single point. The lines in this painting are crisp and clean; they demonstrate a diligence that undergirds his entire oeuvre. Eventually, others took note of Little's attention to detail and commitment to his singular brand of abstraction. He started showing with New York's June Kelly Gallery in 1988 and has works in the permanent collections of the Saint Louis Art Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Menil Collection in Houston. Little's meticulous approach remains a cornerstone of his practice, and he continues to use his workmanship to evoke emotions with his materials.

"I like rhythm in my work," Little said in a 2017 BOMB magazine interview. "Music and dance. Speed and colour. And those are the things that I see that are just as important as what we say or how we act."

Memphis
THE CITY MAGAZINE

James Little: Homecoming



Courtesy of the artist

BY ABIGAIL MORICI, JUNE 20, 2022

As part of the *Sweet Sixteen* exhibit on displayat the Dixon, this artist's canvases seem almost to vibrate.

Human nature dictates that we look for patterns in the world around us, like seeing a face in the grain of wood or a piece of toast. It's a need to find order and meaning among random phenomena, to have a sense of control, especially when your reality offers little room for self-determination. For James Little, who grew up in a segregated Memphis, this desire to create meaning, rather than have meaning imposed upon him, drove him to the abstract paintings he's created for most of his career.

Little, born in 1952, began drawing at a young age — "at 3, 4 years old," he says. He would copy comic strips and reproductions of paintings from library books. When he was 8, his mother bought him his first paint set. "I was like any other kid. I did all the other stuff," he recalls. "I played basketball, climbed trees, played in the streets. I always had a curiosity about art and collectibles and archaeology. I always had an imagination. I wanted to try and figure out what was going on. I was inquisitive, nosey. ... So that all contributed to me pursuing a career in the arts. It's something that I have a lot of passion for."

Little attributes this passion-driven work ethic and dedication to his parents. His father worked in construction, and his mother was a cook. "I would go with my father to construction sites. We used to mix mortar and cement. So I kind of got a feel for making stuff and mixing stuff and hard work, rigorous kind of work," he says. "[My mother] used to come up with these different recipes and these different ways of making cakes and pies and cooking stuff and making it better and better and that kind of thing — and having fun doing it."

In the 1970s, Little enrolled in the Memphis Academy of Art (later named Memphis College of Art, and now sadly defunct). "I have to say that [my parents] encouraged me, which was a rare kind of thing," he says. "Even

when I went to the art academy, [the teachers] tried to push us toward more practical professions because the whole thing was, 'You're not going to make a living with this painting thing. We teach this, but you've got to have something where you can make some money.' They tried to push us toward advertising and a lot of Black kids at the school, and white kids, too, were pushed to advertising.

"I took a year in that, or a semester — I don't know — but I couldn't take it. It just wasn't for me. Painting was it. It kept tugging at me and that was it. It's a risky, courageous thing to do, to go after this thing."

A formal education in the arts, he says, passes on ideas and skills that have been developed for millennia, skills that an artist might not learn outside of an institutionalized climate. Such an education elevates the artist and their art, providing them with the knowledge of how to balance form, color, line, shape, and texture — skills Little has mastered and reinterpreted into his work.

That's when he turned to the abstract, an art form that demands risk. "I guess it came from seeing other kinds of art and then you just try to figure out where your heart is and where your imagination is and where your skill set is," he says. "I was a person that said there's no reason for me to paint a figure, to keep doing a figure. Why should I keep doing that? It's not that I have anything against the figure, but I don't have anything for it. So I wanted to experiment, and in modern art and abstraction, experimentation was allowed. It was liberating."

While in Memphis, though, Little says his exposure to the arts remained limited. The collection at Brooks Museum of Art, a minute's walk from the academy, was not as extensive and diverse as it is today. "To put it lightly, it was a segregated place," he says. So instead, he often turned to those reproductions he saw in library books to study the evolution of art and the diversity within it. "We used to take a trip to the Art Institute of Chicago. Going to stuff like that opened my eyes."

The academy also invited visiting artists and offered a rigorous curriculum, of which Little speaks highly, noting his disappointment about the school's closure in 2020. A formal education in the arts, he says, passes on ideas and skills that have been developed for millennia, skills that an artist might not learn outside of an institutionalized climate. Such an education elevates the artist and their art, providing them with the knowledge of how to balance form, color, line, shape, and texture — skills Little has mastered and reinterpreted into his work. "You can't do that stuff independently," he says. "I think [the school's closure] is a terrible thing to happen to a city, and they should reopen it. They need to reopen that school."

After all, while at the Memphis Academy of Art, Little began showing his work around Memphis and Arkansas. "We were trying to make something happen," he says. "I had begun to get a lot of buzz in Memphis and Arkansas." He was eventually scouted by Syracuse University, which awarded him a fellowship so he could earn his MFA.

When it comes to laying down the patterns of dots or lines that make up his work, Little says, "There's no narrative. It's based on imagination. … I'm not a linear thinker. The orbit that I'm in is more of an intuitive decision-making space."

While his schooling in New York was paid for, Little had to pay for his travels. "My mother and the church raised money," he says. "Jameson Jones [the academy's director at the time] loaned me some money to get there. Everybody was behind me, and when you do this kind of thing, if you fail, you let all these people down, the city, the church, the school."

This wasn't the only pressure resting on Little's shoulders. He adds, "I have to say that a lot of the stuff that happened — us getting into these schools — a lot of it happened right after the assassination of Martin Luther King. It has to be recognized that these schools were not these little old bastions with open arms. Because Memphis was a segregated place. So after Dr. King was killed, everybody was trying to pack us into these schools everywhere — in Memphis, Syracuse, New Haven, all of them. A lot of people got into these places based on the blood of Dr. King and the blood of a lot of other people."

This awareness of those who created a more hopeful world for Little — one in which he could succeed as an artist — has woven its way through his works, within which Little hopes to convey a sense of optimism. "What I mean by optimism," he says, "I mean [observers] being able to engage with [the work], to have pleasure" — to appreciate the labor put forth by the artist and, perhaps, the labors put forth by others for the artist's sake.

As such, Little approaches each piece with patience, beginning with making his own paints by mixing pigment with wax — a process dating back to ancient Egypt. "The stuff that I do, it's really hard to develop some kind of recipe for," he says. "I know what the core materials are, but if I want to change the effect or the look or the design, sometimes I can change the medium for that particular thing. If I use varnish, sometimes I thin it down for certain works, sometimes I make it thicker. … I pretty much decide on what I want to do and where I want to go based on the material I decide to work with."

When it comes to laying down the patterns of dots or lines that make up his work, Little says, "There's no narrative. It's based on imagination. ... I'm not a linear thinker. The orbit that I'm in is more of an intuitive decision-making space."

For most of his pieces, Little employs a variety of colors, taking note of the interactions between each hue and line. Some pieces follow a strict pattern of alternating colors; others, upon closer look, break their patterns, in color and even in line. Little frequently builds layers upon layers of paint, creating seamless edges between colors placed next to another. When walking past one of his large-scale paintings, the paintings become rhythmic, seeming to vibrate.

Even without narrative, his paintings evoke social commentary as evidenced in his titles like American Dreamers Denied or Remember Amal. "I don't title the paintings until after they're done," he says. "I'm always politically aware. There's always something behind my title. The paintings dictate the titles; the titles don't dictate the painting."

Nor do the titles dictate the paintings' meaning for viewers, Little adds. "Contemplate it. It's not something put there for no reason. But you can put your own interpretation. I raise the questions, but I also give you the free will to make your own self-determination."

By giving himself and the observer such leeway, Little says, "I don't disallow myself to experiment. Experimentation is still a strong part of what I do. ... I think that artists should always experiment to some degree. I try to avoid being repetitive because you have a lot to say, you can't just be a one-dimensional human, and I try to take advantage of that."

Now in his 70s, Little still strives to improve his artistry. "I paint every day," he says. "Or let's put it this way: I do something that relates to art every day." Having stayed in New York since graduating with his MFA, Little says, "I'm now beginning to get a lot of attention." This year, his work is featured in The Dixon Gallery and Gardens' "Sweet Sixteen" here in Memphis, as well as the Whitney Biennial in New York.

Of these two exhibitions, Kevin Sharp, the Linda W. and Herbert S. Rhea director at the Dixon, says, "[The Biennial] is a recognition of a lifetime of brilliant, brilliant work, and it's satisfying for us to reintroduce him to the community he came from."

THE DIXON'S "SWEET SIXTEEN"

This exhibit, which opened in April, features 16 exhibitions in each of the museum's 16 gallery spaces. Ranging from Hattiloo Theatre's collection of commissioned portraits to an interactive quinceañera exhibition, the exhibitions explore different styles, time periods, and subject matters. "Art," Sharp says, "has this tremendous capacity to speak to the plurality of the human condition, to our diversity, to the multiplicity of ideas that drive our existence."

As for Little's exhibition, "James Little: Homecoming" features work produced between 2008 to 2020. "It will be like a mini-survey. You'll be getting to see my evolution," Little says. "It's a nice thing to show in your hometown."

James Little, *Rosa's Mantra*, 2018

James Little, *Grey Noise*, 2019

ARTnews

A Long Overdue Recognition: James Little Finally Gets His Turn in the Spotlight at this Year's Whitney Biennial

James Little.

MAY 2, 2022

Some artists find global acclaim fresh out of art school. Others toil a lifetime in obscurity, only to be discovered—if they're lucky—long after their death. So there's something particularly stirring about artists who finally receive the recognition they deserve after pursuing their work for decades upon decades, to the exclusion of all else. Such is the case with 70-year-old painter James Little, a participant in this year's Whitney Biennial, who will also be honored in a solo exhibition at Chicago's Kavi Gupta gallery this fall.

Though always well regarded within his immediate circle, Little has flown under the art world's radar for more than half a century—until now, thanks to his inclusion in the 2022 Biennial, where more than half a floor is dedicated to his series of "Black" geometric compositions. The seven grisaille canvases that fill the space are a revelation, establishing once and for all Little's importance as an American master of Abstraction. The show is the fulfilment of a long-held dream, he says: "When I got out of graduate school and came to New York, being recognized in the Whitney Biennial was the one thing I wanted more than anything else—anything."

Little's late-career flowering was the result of both choice and circumstance. Instead of attempting to appeal to the fleeting tastes of the art market, he always focused first on the principles of his medium, engaging

in a rigorous study of color theory, pictorial design, and painting technique. At the same time, like most African American artists, he was consistently undervalued by white dealers, collectors, and curators. This was especially true during the 1970s, a period dominated by Minimalism, Conceptualism, and Performance Art. By then, Little's formalist approach—and, indeed, painting itself—was out of fashion; but Little didn't care, describing himself as "a guy who just stuck to his guns... It sounds stubborn as hell, but that's me."

James Little, *Big Shot*, 2021

Little's determination was, to a large degree, shaped by his background. He was raised in Memphis, Tennessee, during the 1960s; and though the Civil Rights movement had begun to dismantle the strictures of the Jim Crow South, the city remained highly segregated, forcing him to stay mindful of where he could and couldn't go, lest he attract the attention of the Ku Klux Klan or other racists bent on violence. His parents both worked, his mother as a cook, his father as a construction worker. And while Little says the family's financial situation wasn't "dire," they did live paycheck to paycheck, an experience that instilled in him frugal habits—such as grinding his own paints and mixing his own additives and binders—that continue to this day. "I had to learn how to invent things and be creative," he says. "I buy raw materials and create my own stuff instead of getting it off the shelf. Rather than pay $50 for a quart of varnish, I can make it for $10. All these things play into the whole idea of not having something."

Yet, despite their difficult circumstances, Little's parents supported his artistic ambitions. He notes how unusual this was at the time: "If you were from Memphis, you became a musician, an athlete, or a minister," he says. "That was it. There was nothing else." As a very young child, he was inspired to draw by watching his older brother work on art assignments he brought home from school. When he was 8, his mother gave him a paint-by-numbers kit for Christmas; after finishing it, he wondered what to do with the leftover paint, and his father offered a solution by giving him pieces of shirt cardboard from the cleaners. Little used them to render copies of a painting by Thomas Eakins he found in an encyclopedia.

Another formative experience in Little's art education occurred at Syracuse University, where he went to graduate school in the mid-1970s. There he attended seminars taught by New York Times art critic Hilton Kramer as well as writer and critic Clement Greenberg, an SU graduate who played an essential role in promoting the ascendency of American art after World War II, when New York displaced Paris as the world's art capital. Greenberg championed Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Hans Hofmann, Barnett Newman, and Clyfford Still, insisting they were the true inheritors of the Modernist avant-garde because they pursued pure abstraction through "medium specificity"—that is, applying paint for its own sake, without reference to subject matter or spatial depth.

his emphasis on "flatness," as it was more generally referred to, dates back to Maurice Denis—a late-19th-century artist associated with the Symbolists and the Nabi group—who postulated that above all else, a painting was "a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order." Greenberg; the Abstract Expressionists; and, later, Color-Field painters such as Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, and Kenneth Noland followed Denis's notion to its logical conclusion. Their example was not lost on Little: "I want to create a flat, frontal, modernist space and eliminate as much illusion as I possibly can," he says of his technique. "But I also want an animated space that's engaging."

While Little has used both raw pigment on paper and conventional oils on canvas, the material he's most frequently associated with is one that dates back millennia: encaustic. Believed to have been invented in Ancient Greece, encaustic—a mixture of varnish, pigment, and wax heated to a liquid state—is difficult to use. As he does with most everything else, Little formulates his own encaustic, then flattens them out in smooth layers arrayed in hard-edged patterns like chevrons, angled striations, and triangles. And though he acknowledges his appreciation for the medium's "robust and central qualities," Little says he also wants to "expand it beyond

the conventional notion of encaustic, so when you look at my paintings, you don't really know what medium they're made with."

James Little, *Exceptional Blacks*, 2021

Regarding art world expectations that his work address issues of race, Little has resisted being pigeonholed, remaining true to his commitment to abstraction. While perfectly content for people to interpret his "Black" paintings through the prism of race—"Because I'm Black, people try to see that in the work, and part of it is true"—he also rejects an outright pursuit of the issue. "I don't buy it," he says. "But if you want to go out there and paint these things about race and that kind of thing, I mean, be my guest."

Still, he adds, dealing with racism in the abstract pales in comparison to what he experienced first-hand, growing up in the tumult of the segregated South. He also cites the transient nature of making work topical, posing a hypothetical: "What if things change tomorrow, and we don't have racism anymore? What do you paint then? That's why I paint pictures for everybody. Race doesn't have a space in my art."

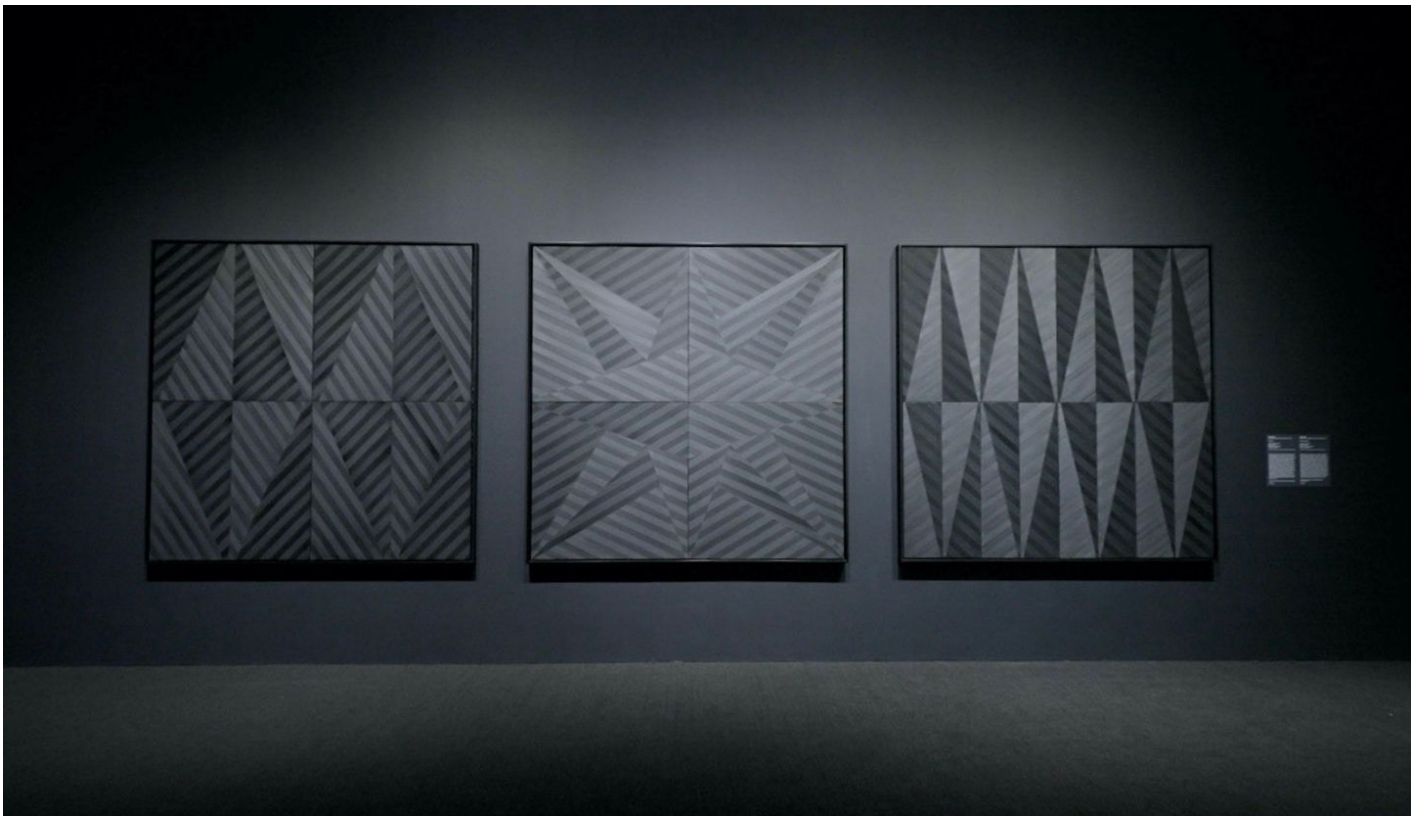
Although the Biennial showcase will certainly expose Little's work to a much wider audience, it hasn't gone completely unnoticed over the years. In 2009, the artist received the Joan Mitchell Foundation Award in painting; and in 1980, he was included in the group show "Afro-American Abstraction" at MoMA P.S.1, along with such luminaries as Mel Edwards, Ed Clark, Sam Gilliam, Richard Hunt, Al Loving, Martin Puryear, Jack Whitten, and William T. Williams.

Yet only now is Little receiving his due. His perseverance over five decades has been remarkable, especially considering the number of artists who, in the course of history, have simply given up in the face of such seeming indifference. But Little's passion for painting and art history, as well as his belief in the universality of art, always kept him going. He didn't—and, perhaps, couldn't—quit.

"Art is like religion to me," he says. "It has to have feeling and emotive content, and it has to be transcendent. If it lacks that, then it's just clinical. It's a clinical exercise."

The New York Sun

The Single Best Work in the Whitney Biennial



James Little, *Big Shot*, *Stars and Stripes*, and *Exceptional Blacks*, 2021. The New York Sun/Dana Gordon

BY DANA GORDON, APRIL 18, 2022

In the show of 63 artists, about 10 are working in this old-fashioned sense of painting. The one who addresses the art of painting in the purest and most complete way possible is James Little.

For those who revere the ancient visual art of painting as the finest of the fine arts, there is not a lot to see at the current edition of the biennial survey at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Those expecting to see mainly painting and sculpture at a broad show of contemporary art these days are in for disappointment. Those wanting to enter a state of confusion about what constitutes art, or to be scolded politically or lectured academically, will find a kind of entertainment at this Biennial.

Since early in the 20th century, when Picasso and Braque stuck pieces of newspaper and wallpaper in their paintings to liven up the perceptions of space in them, a branch of artists has been fascinated with the question of just what can constitute painting. Particularly since the 1960s, we have seen uncountable variations on the shape of the canvas, the placement of the image in real space, and the materials used.

Yet a flat, rectangular canvas is a shaped canvas — and it's one that, with paint on it, holds a clear, specified image. There is a reason why most painters since the Renaissance have preferred it.

The practicality of being able to move a painting from place to place has a role in this, but the longevity of this traditional format of painting is because it's a place that the greatest artists for hundreds of years have, for aesthetic reasons, found to be the best for painting, for deepest communication by marks on a surface.

Another modern diversion from the rigors of painting

The New York Sun

has come to be known as conceptual art. This also began in the early 20th century, when Marcel Duchamp decided that painting, what he mocked as "retinal" art, was too much trouble. He preferred to concentrate on some of the ideas and questions one might find in it and isolate from it.

This too resulted in a branch of art, still with us, that eschews painting in favor of philosophizing about it. Its practitioners fail to notice that these ideas and questions always have resided in painting and are much more interesting when found within the richness of real painting.

In the Whitney show of 63 artists, about 10 are working in this old-fashioned sense of painting. The one who addresses the art of painting in the purest and most complete way possible is James Little. In his thoroughgoing engagement with the nature of art, the integrity of his work is complete — it embraces what a painting is and what a painter does.

In the recent decades of his long career, Mr. Little's paintings have been made up of clearly defined geometric shapes and strips of highly specific color relations — indeed, so specific he has been mixing the paints himself from powdered pigments and mediums. Color is the main transporting mechanism of idea and feeling in his art; pattern is a major theme as well.

Unexpectedly, in this Biennial the artist is represented by paintings that do not — at first consideration — have much color in them. In a way this is a shame, because this artist's use of color and pattern deserves to be featured in a major museum show in New York City, where he has been resident since 1976.

Yet in the Whitney show his large, magnificent, and quiet triptych of three paintings, "Stars and Stripes," "Exceptional Blacks," and "Big Shot," is a major statement about what counts in painting, and by implication in all art. You can think about this if you are lucky enough to take it all in without interruption from passersby (contemplation is not something you are encouraged to do by the curation of this show).

These three serious objects stand with such dignity and the simultaneity of the large canvases makes you want to look at the entire triptych but it's hard to pin it down, to know how to look at it. This is not an accident.

Its many repeated shapes in insistent but gentle patterns are filled by only a few shades of gray. Mr. Little is inviting you in, to swim around in his arrangement of forms as you please, and to feel what this state of existence means. Turning the three paintings into a triptych has made this experience even more profound.

Are grays colors? Gray is made by mixing black and white, though added color can tint it. In paint and in light, black is the absence of light and of color. White is the mix of all colors. Yet black is as insistent as white.

So, this painting is a pattern of no color and all color, but also of black and white. Of insistence and of calm. Of intensity and of chilling out. All the more, it is a stunning work of art.

Mr. Little does not do authoritarian, political paintings. His subjects, and the viewer's experience of his paintings, are purely visual — but you can only fully understand this if you see that the abstract visual can carry emotion and meaning. And why would it be otherwise?

"[Clement] 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," the artist has said.

In the way Mr. Little sticks to principles and to the essences of the art of painting, his work is the most powerful in the Biennial.

As thrillingly lucid and authoritative as his art, Mr. Little is succinct about his inspiration: "What I ascribe to in my art are modernist tenets.... Modernism to me is like democracy.... 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.... It was liberating. I don't find freedom in any other form. It's up to you. You have to determine the outcome for yourself."

VOGUE

A Glimpse Into This Year's Whitney Biennial

BY MARLEY MARIUS, APRIL 2, 2022

In organizing the 2022 Whitney Biennial—the museum's 80th, somehow, in 90 years—senior curators David Breslin and Adrienne Edwards followed a series of "hunches." These related to the expressive capabilities of abstraction, as well as to notions like "a kind of lush conceptualism, auto-ethnographic methodology, language and narrative in visual art, and sinister pop," Edwards writes in the show's catalogue; adding up to a wide-ranging examination of the state of contemporary art in our strange and fractious times. Breslin and Edwards's efforts, which began at the end of 2019, have resulted in a commanding exhibition showcasing 63 artists and collectives—most living, some dead—working across painting, sculpture, photography, video, and choreography and spanning four levels of the museum. Among the biggest names are Charles Ray (who also has a show up at the Metropolitan Museum of Art right now), N. H. Pritchard, Yto Barrada, Ellen Gallagher, and Adam Pendleton.

The Biennial's subtitle, "Quiet as It's Kept," is similarly varied in its origins, alluding at once to the first line of Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, the title of a 1960 album by the jazz drummer Max Roach, and to an exhibition curated by the artist David Hammons in 2002. "[It] featured three abstract artists who are Black American—Ed Clark, Stanley Whitney, and Denyse Thomasos," Edwards explained during a preview this week, "and that show was really trying to pinpoint a set of ideas that have been very important to us: How can you talk about identity in a way that is not limiting; that does not confine or constrain the possibilities of what those identities can be?" In light of those ideas, Breslin added that he and Edwards had conceived of the Biennial as a living thing: "One of the hunches that we had was that the show should have a metabolism—that it should grow and change as we all do," he said. As such, some elements will look a bit different as the months go on (see: Alex Da Corte's ROY G BIV, 2022, a video work projected onto a cube that will change color over the run of the exhibition), while others will come and go—two good reasons to visit more than once.

Here, a glimpse at just some of what you'll find at the 2022 Whitney Biennial.

James Little, *Exceptional Blacks*, 2021.

Adam Pendleton, who recently took over MoMA's Marron Family Atrium with the text-, image-, and sound-based installation Who Is Queen?, has at the Biennial both a pair of abstract paintings called Untitled (Days), 2021-2022, and an affecting video portrait of the social-justice activist and scholar Ruby Sales. (In earlier works, Pendleton focused on the likes of Lorraine O'Grady, choreographer Kyle Abraham, and former Black Panther Party member David Hilliard.) "I was listening to WNYC in September 2016 and heard a voice. The character, the tempo, the tone made me pay attention.

VOGUE

It was the activist Ruby Sales. She was posing a very simple question: 'Where does it hurt?' It's a question that urgently gets to the heart of the matter about being American," Pendleton notes in the Biennial's catalogue.

His paintings bracket three compelling canvases by James Little, whose work in geometric abstraction—executed in oils mixed with beeswax—hinges on its feeling of freedom.

"Abstraction provided me with self-determination and free will. It was liberating. I don't find freedom in any other form," [Little has] explained.

ARTnews

A Sharp, Understated Whitney Biennial Looks to the Past to Process the Grief of the Present

James Little, *Borrowed Times* (detail), 2021.

BY MAXIMILIANO DURON, MARCH 29, 2022

IN THE ABSTRACT

The market-supported craze for figurative painting isn't going anywhere, but you wouldn't know it based on this biennial, where abstraction is the dominant mode.

Some artists are keen to put their own twists on age-old art-historical tropes.

Dyani White Hawk's painting *Wopila | Lineage* (2021), featuring two rows of triangles whose tips touch, may resemble the abstractions of 20th-century giants like Hilma af Klint and Barnett Newman. But its medium—glass beads, a traditional material in White Hawk's Sičangu Lakota community—differs this painting greatly from anything af Klint and Newman ever produced. Awilda Sterling-Duprey's abstractions, with their swirls of impasto paint against dark backgrounds, recall Georges Mathieu's paintings made in postwar France.

Sterling-Duprey's works are the product of a performance that occurred during the installation of the Biennial in which the artist blindfolded herself and performed movements drawing on Afro-Cuban traditions to apply the paint. A smattering of striped abstractions by James Little, done in shades of barely distinguishable shades of black, draw on the perception-bending Op art of Bridget Riley with a sly tweak to her formula.

The tendency toward abstraction even winds its way here into photography and film, two mediums which produce figurative imagery by default. Lucy

Raven's masterful film Demolition of a Wall (Album 1), 2022, predominantly features static shots of deserts in the American Southwest that feel reminiscent of Edward Weston's photography. These are interrupted by slices of pure color that are punctuated by a loud boom caused by explosions that go unseen.

White Hawk, Sterling-Duprey, Little, and Raven's works excite because they recall art from the past that we know all too well and then subvert it before our very eyes. In their hands, art history is not a given but something to be redefined.

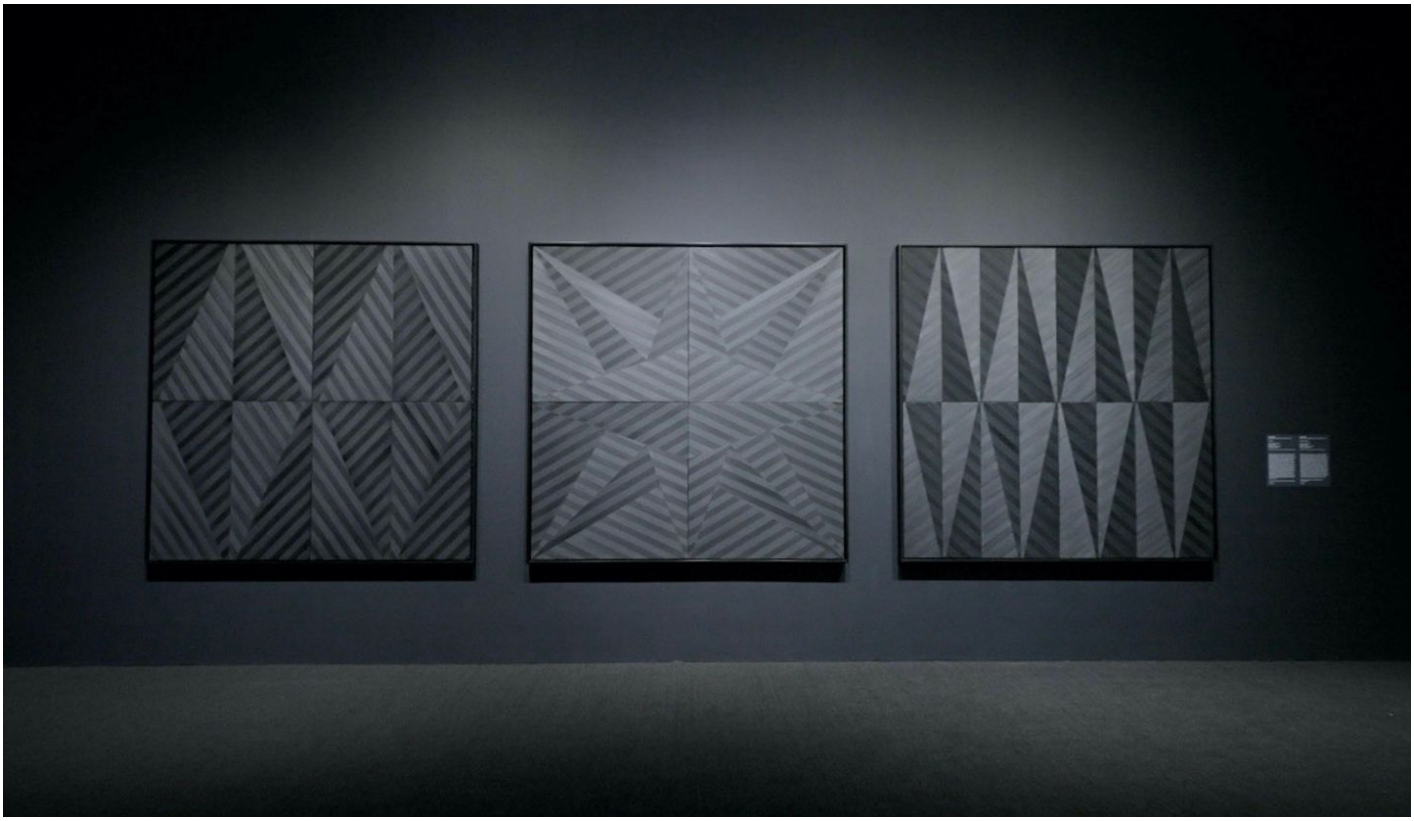
Take Little's words for it. "I'm not trying to reinvent the wheel," he told the biennial's curators for an interview quoted in labels for his paintings. "I'm just trying to improve on it."

The emphasis on abstraction also suggests a state of life in which figuration is not enough to picture the chaos we all experience. And with communication breaking down as Covid continues to wreak havoc, it's no surprise that even language is broken out of its typically orderly form and rendered anew.

Whether it's the wall of text that greets viewers in Jonathan Berger's installation or the concrete poetry of the deceased writer N. H. Pritchard, words in this show verge on abstraction itself. Bureaucracy is short-circuited in the process.

OCULA

Whitney Biennial 2022: Artist Installations That Stole the Show



Left to right: James Little, *Big Shot, Stars and Stripe*s, and *Exceptional Blacks* (all 2021). Exhibition view: Whitney Biennial 2022: Quiet as It's Kept, Whitney Museum of American Art.

ADVISORY PERSPECTIVE, APRIL 8 2022

There is a strong presence of abstraction at this year's edition of the Whitney Biennial. Among the exhibition's reviews, Alex Greenberger in ARTnews suggests this reflects 'a state of life in which figuration is not enough to picture the chaos we all experience.' From James Little's hard-edge minimalism to Woody De Othello's bulging, glossy ceramics, as well as Charles Ray's pensive sculptures, we've selected some of our favourites from the presentation.

JAMES LITTLE

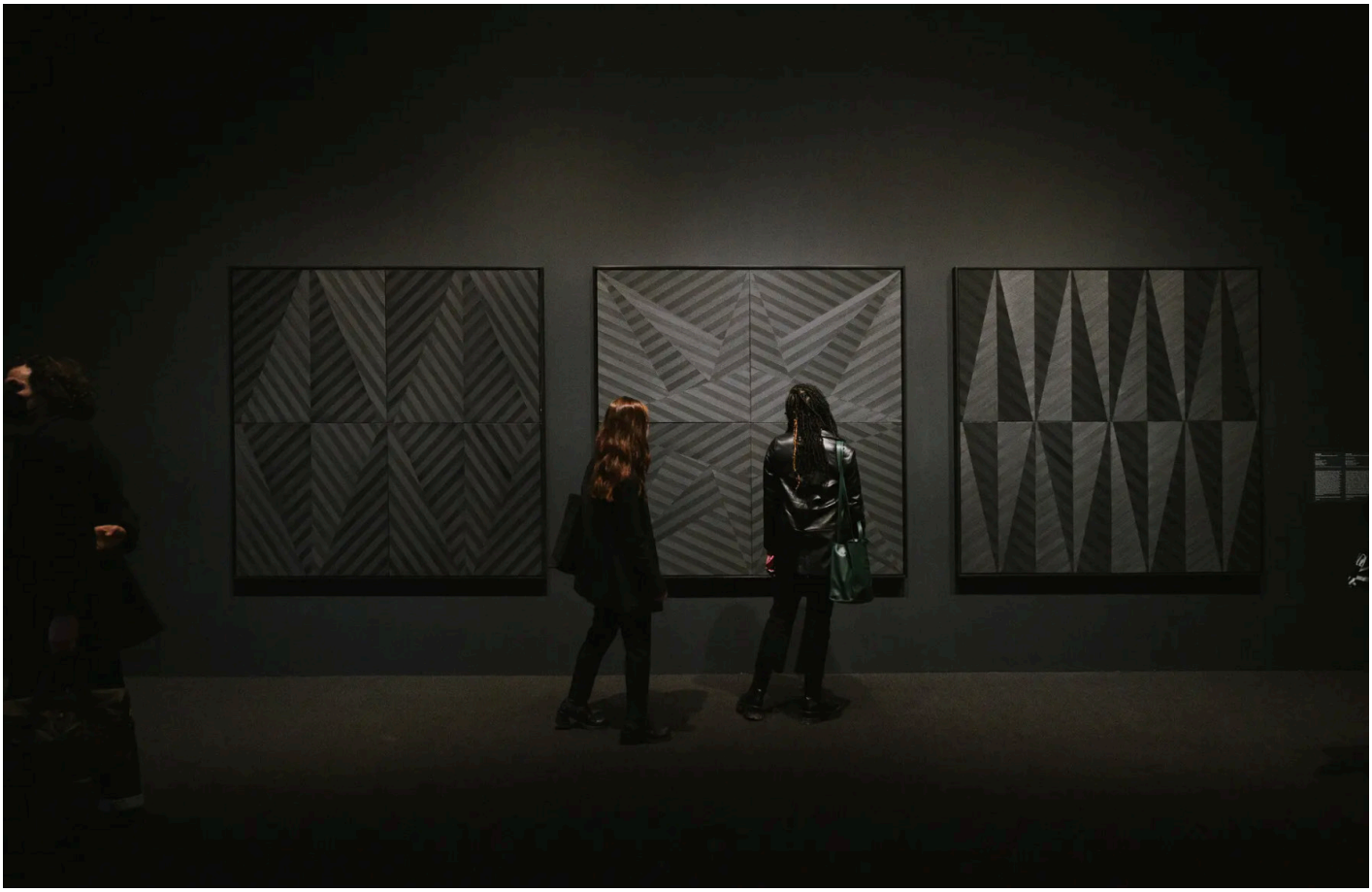
As Holland Cotter observes in The New York Times, in James Little's 'magisterial, all-black, oil-and-wax "Stars and Stripes" (2021), it's hard to say where the bars that make up its geometric pattern are converging or colliding.'

It is the result of James Little's technique, in which raw pigment is combined with heated beeswax to create rich colours, adding a material depth to the tradition of Western abstraction.

Inspired by artists including Alma Thomas, Mark Rothko, and Franz Kline, Little has investigated colour relationships over nearly five decades. In November 2022, a solo exhibition of the artist's work will be on view at Kavi Gupta in Chicago.

The New York Times

A Whitney Biennial of Shadow and Light



James Little's sixth-floor installation, with *Big Shot, Stars and Stripes*, and *Exceptional Blacks*, from 2021. Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

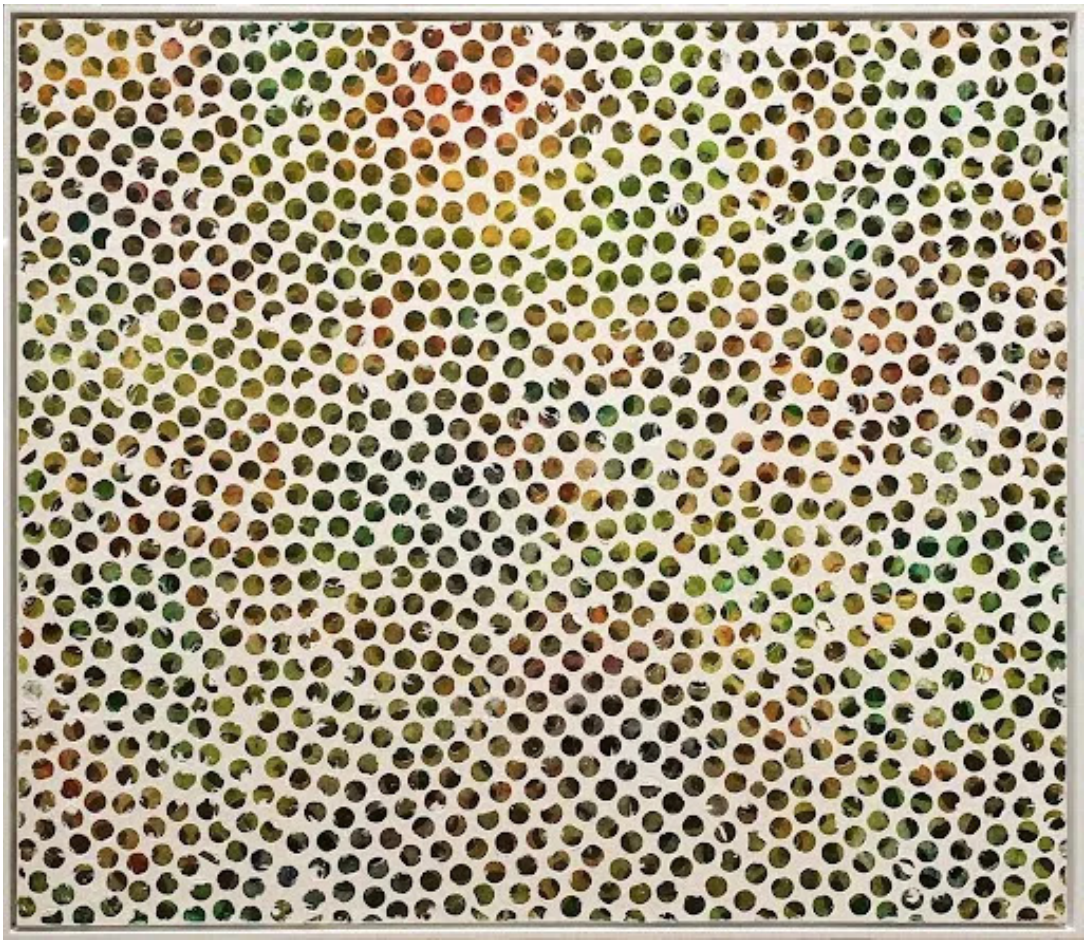
BY HOLLAND COTTER, MARCH 31, 2022

Painters of an older generation, James Little and Denyse Thomasos (1964-2012), whose work appears to fall into a Modernist tradition of "pure" abstraction on which the Whitney itself was built, illustrate this dynamic. Two spectacular pictures by the Trinidad-born Thomasos are all about painterly gesture, but they're also all about the history of Black captivity, past and present, as their titles — "Displaced Burial/Burial at Goree" and "Jail"— reveal.

Little, who showed for decades with the veteran New York gallerist June Kelly and is now attracting wide notice, also lets titles tell a tale. In his magisterial, all-black, oil-and-wax "Stars and Stripes" (2021), it's hard to say whether the bars that make up its geometric pattern are converging or colliding.

ARTSY

At the 2022 Whitney Biennial, Compelling Works Are Overshadowed by an Inaccessible Space



James Little, *Borrowed Times*, 2021

BY AYANNA DOZIER, MARCH 31, 2022

James Little's latest work from his "Black Paintings" series (2015–present) similarly uses abstraction as a way to index cultural identity rather than represent it. Though in the process of creating these pieces, Little still draws upon cultural figures and experiences. Works like these open audiences to more expanded notions of cultural work that is not hinged upon representational likeness or completed narratives.

Abstraction as a space for the political is the running theme for the biennial, for even when representation is foregrounded, the pieces themselves move away from narrative resolution to leave audiences with open- ended answers

WHITNEY

James Little

Floors 5 and 6

James Little

Born 1952 in Memphis, TN

Lives in New York, NY

James Little is known for making hard-edge geometric abstract paintings such as those on view here. After moving to New York in the 1970s, he was part of a dynamic group of Black artists who were deeply committed to abstraction, including Ed Clark, William T. Williams, Al Loving, Jack Whitten, and Stanley Whitney. As he has written: "What I ascribe to in my art are modernist tenets, without replication or appropriation. I'm not trying to reinvent the wheel. I'm just trying to improve on it. Modernism to me is like democracy. They're these fragile experiments, these fragile structures that have held up, and they have to keep being supported one way or another, aesthetically or politically. Abstraction provided me with self-determination and free will. It was liberating. I don't find freedom in any other form. People like to have an answer before they have the experience. Abstraction doesn't offer you that. It's up to you. You have to determine the outcome for yourself. That's why I do it."

James Little, *Joyful Austerity*
From *Whitney Biennial 2022: Quiet As It's Kept*
Floor 5

-1:14 TRANSCRIPT

NARRATOR: Artist James Little.

JAMES LITTLE: I don't find self-expression, and freedom of expression, self-determination in any other form other than abstraction. You want to know why I did this, how did I do it, and what does it take to arrive at a point like this and, it takes a lot of pain . . . takes a lot of discrimination it's a big struggle, it takes a lot of hope and determination, and those are the things that I try to bring to my painting.

Modernism to me is like democracy. You know it's these fragile experiments, these fragile structures that have held up and they have to keep being supported one way or another aesthetically or politically. But they are structures and so that's one of the things that I try to pursue in my art. I always go for structure.

It has to have a feeling. But the thing that makes it work in the end, is whether or not it has synthesis.

An artist, to me, is just a conduit. I mean information is here . . . it travels through him so that we can get this art.

NARRATOR: James Little grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, in the 1950s. He and his siblings were prohibited from attending the school right across the street from their house; it was restricted to white students only. His parents taught him lessons about survival in the segregated south.

JAMES LITTLE: I mean the way I grew up you're not encouraged to become a visual artist. You know that's off the charts—that's not even an argument. You try to learn something practical. Because your whole thing is to try to get financial security.

NARRATOR: After earning an MFA at Syracuse University, Little moved to New York and delved into modernism and his career as an abstract painter. He's been painting for nearly fifty years since then. Recently, Whitney curator Adrienne Edwards visited him in his studio and talked to him about how he makes his white paintings like this one:

James Little, *Exceptional Blacks*
From *Whitney Biennial 2022: Quiet As It's Kept*
Floor 6

-2:43 TRANSCRIPT

ADRIENNE EDWARDS: So, Mr. Little. Will you about how you make those white paintings?

JAMES LITTLE: Okay I'm gonna give you, step-by-step technique. So if you took a piece of paper and you want to draw some circles and you cut them out okay so, then you have a stencil. What's left is a reversal. So I take what you cut out, put it on the canvas after I worked the surface, put it on the canvas, I may paint over it then I'll

take it up. So what I take up is what you see.

ADRIENNE EDWARDS: Do you paint, sort of all over? The variation in color?

JAMES LITTLE: Not the same color.

ADRIENNE EDWARDS: No, no, I know, but is it the total surface of the canvas?

JAMES LITTLE: I only want the shape of what was there. It could be a square or circle or triangle or or whatever.

ADRIENNE EDWARDS: And then you paint it white.

JAMES LITTLE: No, I paint over it take it up.

ADRIENNE EDWARDS: I see.

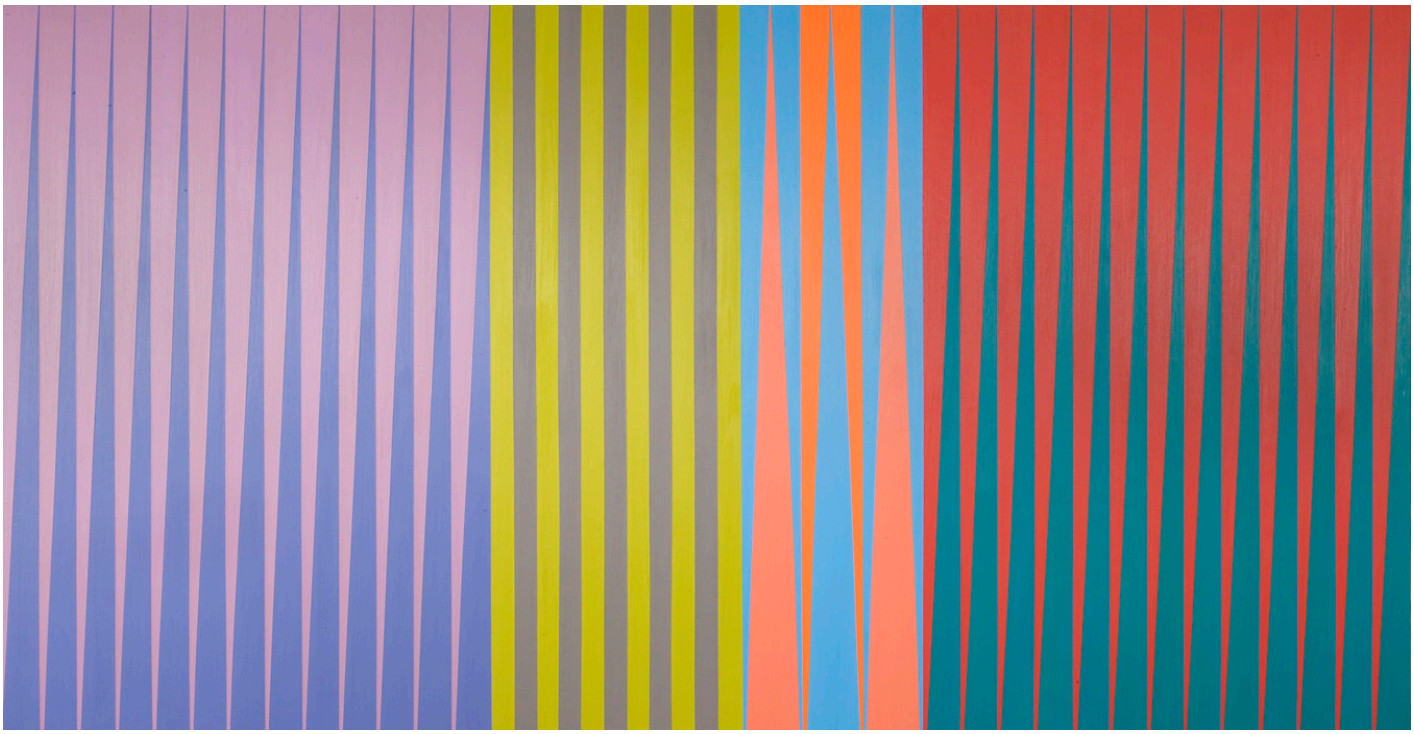
JAMES LITTLE: And then I allow it to dry and I go back over. I go over the white surface with something else or color or mark making or whatever and I'll use another shape. Over that, and I'll paint over that shape and put it up, so I get another effect, so I have two layers. So then I'll decide on a combination of colors. And textures and surfaces, and I will find another shape to put down. Now paint over it. But I don't stop there, I have to mix the liquid paint make the paint into a liquid form and I pour it. And I have to leave it there for a couple of days to set. So, then, I came back and I removed the last shape from the canvas and then everything I did before that is what you look at when you look through those shapes.

ADRIENNE EDWARDS: Amazing.

JAMES LITTLE: I have to think about the colors all the way through from the first layer to the last one. So I

ARTnews

Taking the Title *Quiet as It's Kept*, 2022 Whitney Biennial Names 63 Participating Artists



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

BY MAXIMILÍANO DURÓ, JANUARY 25, 2022

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, 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,

The New York Times

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.

BOMB

James Little
by Leronn P. Brooks

James Little at the Alternative Museum, New York, ca. 1984.

BY LERONN P. BROOKS, APRIL 19, 2017

James Little has worked nearly half a century at mastering the craft of painting. While our conversation here delves into his painterly "alchemy"—he makes all his own paints and mixes beeswax and varnish into it—it also documents a life in painting. Born into a family of artisans with high expectations in a segregated Memphis, the artist learned the value of hard work, creativity, and persistence. His experimentation with the transformative properties of his materials reflects these emphases, and his search for excellence mirrors the work ethic of the community that raised him. This is to say that memory has its textures and its colors—their own connotative ends; Little's paintings demonstrate a quest for the perfection of craft, but do not covet certainty despite the precision with which they are ordered. His paintings are guided by intuitive responses to form, color, and feeling. This approach is not overly calculated, though its complexity may suggest so. His expression is personal—visceral exchanges between memory and its hues, between emotion and the logistics of its use, between logic's place in the fog of the human heart, and the ways that rationale can be envisioned as painterly "surface." Here, to speak solely of order is to imply, in some way, process, but this implication does not necessarily suggest the course of a method as the ends of his labor's purpose. Little's "purpose" cannot be narrowly defined by his methods nor is it all a simple matter of procedure.The imagination has its own speculative ends and its interchanges with the world are, in Little's paintings, as vibrant and curiously bedecked as any prism thread with light. What follows is a conversation about artistic vision, practice, and the importance of perseverance. It is a document concerned with valuing painting as of form of experiential evidence, and the imagination as a vivid context for human worth, history's propositions, and a life's purpose.

— LERONN P. BROOKS

LERONN P. BROOKS: So James, I'd like to start by speaking about your childhood in Memphis, before you became an artist. What was the South like when you were a child?

JAMES LITTLE: Memphis was a very segregated city when I was growing up in the '60s. It's just north of the Mississippi border. My family is from Mississippi. My father, Rogers Little, his family migrated from Georgia. There were a lot of Irish, Native American, and black people in his family. My mother's family came out of the Carolinas and the West Indies. Somehow, she ended up in Mississippi. That's where my mother was born along with a lot of her siblings. When I was growing up we were very poor. And my father worked very hard, so did my mother. But we weren't as poor as the majority of the people around us. You know, we actually lived pretty well. My mother was a great cook. Both my parents grew up growing their own food. They knew how to survive. They were very efficient, hard-working, and God-fearing people. But you know, that was kind of the way it was.

It was very segregated in those times. We used to live in a neighborhood where there was a white-only elementary school. It wasn't even a block away from where we lived. It was just down the street, a white school that me and my six siblings couldn't attend. We had to walk way somewhere else to go to school. And the white kids had to walk a ways away to go to the school across from our house. So, it was that kind of segregation. But we were sheltered from it by our parents because there was so much crime being committed by racist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and that kind of thing. We just knew that there were certain places we didn't go at night. There was a certain time you had to be home. A lot of things that are going on now with the police used to go on all the time in Memphis. It happened on a regular basis in my community, when I was growing up. So, the only thing my folks wanted us to do was to survive.

And the question you asked, What was it like when I wasn't an artist? For me, most of what I remember is being an artist. I started painting when I was about eight years old after my mother bought me a Paint by Numbers kit for Christmas. But I had shown her that I had a penchant for drawing early on.

LPB: Did you know any other artists in the area?

JL: No. The first time I saw anybody making art was my older brother, Monroe. He's almost five years older than me. He could draw pretty well for his age. He used to bring home his assignments from school. I saw his drawings and I liked them, so I started drawing too. I copied comic strips and that kind of thing. I immediately fell in love with it. I tried other things though, like sports and what have you. But art was the thing that I enjoyed the most and I stuck to it. After my mother bought me the Paint by Numbers kit, I quickly finished the entire set. I just used the remainder of the paint to copy old masters.

LPB: She knew you had a proclivity for the arts.

JL: Yeah, she knew. She encouraged me. Most parents would prefer their kids to pursue practical professions. When I was growing up you would get a job in construction or you'd get a job that's going to pay you some money. You know, you're getting a paycheck every week. So, parents wouldn't usually encourage their kids to go into a profession that wasn't practical. But nonetheless I did it, and I did it during a dark period of extreme segregation.

LPB: Can you say more about that? What was segregation like at the time?

James Little, El-Shabazz (B), 1985, oil and wax on canvas, 24.8 x 24.8 in.

JL: It was horrible. The blacks had to go to the rear of the building to see a doctor. You could see the same doctor, but you couldn't sit in the front of the office. My father and mother grew up like that, so they were conditioned to follow orders. But when we were growing up we broke the rules. My brother, Monroe, was especially rebellious. He started going to the front and the doctor didn't really say anything. But the norm was that you didn't really do those things. And when you're a kid, when you're growing up, some of those scars last a lifetime. There are certain things I live day-to-day as

an adult that have carried over from my childhood. You know, scars of racism and discrimination. That's one of the reasons why I don't deal with race in my work. I've had such bad experiences with that stuff that I just want to get around it and try to show just straight excellence. Take it for what it's worth, like it or not, but I strictly base my work on quality, skill, intuition, and vision.

But we've been fighting racism forever. I was sixteen years old when Dr. King was assassinated, right in my hometown. Memphis is a city in the middle of the Bible Belt. It probably has somewhere between 1,200 and 1,500 churches. When I was growing up there was a church every two blocks, no matter what direction. So, you went to church. They were put there to keep the peace. When we went to church the preacher would tell us this, that, and the other. But during the week you were going out in the streets and getting abused. Even the churches were segregated. It was Dr. King who said that the most segregated hour in America is church on Sunday morning. That's what we grew up in. And we had to invent our way out of this stuff with morale and community care. The most significant problem was that there wasn't any built-in support structure other than the Church and the family. But a lot of families were in unstable environments. You know, people were in such dire straits. Alcoholism and crime were rampant. We used to fight a lot to protect ourselves because the police didn't protect us. It was that kind of thing. So, I grew up a bit of a pugilist.

James Little in Memphis, 1971. Photo by Nancy Bundy.

LPB: (laughter) That's a good way to put it.

JL: But that's the way I grew up. And, somehow, I stuck to art all the way through. My father started me out working with him in construction at an early age. I worked entire summers with him. I had about a week or two before school started for vacation.

LPB: So you acquired these real skills?

JL: Well, he taught me a good work ethic. And I do have some skills in construction. A lot of that skill went into my painting. So, that's why you see the attention to surface in my paintings. I like to mix and make my own paints and colors. Because at all these construction sites when everything was done manually—mixing the mortar, for example—it was all done incrementally. So, some of that still informs what I do today in my work.

LPB It's procedural: one thing after the other.

JL: That's right. One step at a time. And then there's the drying time for certain things. You had to wait twenty-four hours, thirty-six hours, forty-eight hours...

LPB: On the clock!

JL: But they were masters at it. Most of these people that did construction were black men; some were Native American. There were a lot of Native American groups and tribes in the South and Mississippi. My mother was a culinary master too. I mean nobody could cook like her. Nobody.

LPB: And that takes time. It's a procedure.

JL: And it's protracted. She learned a lot of stuff by reading cookbooks, but she always made the food better. She added something to it. She put her signature on it, her stamp on it. And she was very popular as a result. She would sell cakes to the church. Basically, she just made this stuff for us, for the kids. There were like seven of us. And we grew up eating like kings and queens, no matter what it was. It could just be beans and rice and it was amazing.

LPB: That's creative activity.

JL: It's very creative. And my grandmother was a seamstress. My grandmother, Ruth Smith, was probably no more than a generation, maybe two, removed from slavery. She grew up as a sharecropper. It was indentured slavery; they were cheated out of everything. Most of them had very little education. But they had a lot of practical knowledge—common sense.

LPB: My parents are from Alabama.

JL: So the survival instinct is there, even when they used to talk to us about the Depression. When the Depression hit, all of the millionaires in the North were jumping out of windows. But for black folks the Depression was like a little soft sucker punch because they were fully prepared for it. They lived it. They are still living it. So, it didn't really affect them as much.

LPB: Survivors.

JL: That's right. This was their life. What these people were calling the Depression was what black people were living day-to-day, every day. And they were just looking forward to going to church. All my father and his gang were looking forward to was drinking on Fridays after work. But I come from the deep South, and the deep South is still... It's made some progress, but it's still a very racist section of the country. And they show it with their Confederate battle flags, race killings, and guns.

LPB: Had you seen any paintings or any art while you-growing up in Memphis?

JL: I think it was the paintings of Thomas Eakins that I saw in an encyclopedia. My mother bought a bunch of books when I was younger. So, I was primarily exposed to reproductions and illustrations. The museums in the South were second or third rate. They would have derivative examples from private collections from all over the South. You know, a lot of it was regional. I didn't really see any great painting until the '70s when I went with my school to visit the Art Institute of Chicago. Before that I was just copying old masters from all these books. And then I started setting up still lifes to work from.

LPB: So, your parents allowed for your creative activity to be in the house.

JL: Yeah, I had a little room upstairs that I could go up and paint in.

LPB: That's pretty amazing. So, you had a studio.

JL: Well, it was actually a bedroom that I turned into a studio. It was my sister's room. It was small and intimate. It had a little window. And I would just go there all the time.

LPB: How long before you started showing your work to other people?

JL: Well, I started getting some praise from my family. When I went to school my art teachers noticed my talent.

LPB: What school was this?

JL: I went to several schools, but it was at Hamilton High School where I had my best teacher. His name was Ivory Walker. He was a guy that knew how to take talent and nourish it. He was a good teacher and a good role model. And when I graduated I was accepted to the Memphis Academy of Art in 1970. It was probably the most integrated situation I had ever been in, but this was after Dr. King was killed.

LPB: So what was that like? Dr. King was assassinated and here you are in this integrated school for the first time.

JL: Well, there was a sense of urgency. I mean a lot of blacks went to school during the '60s and '70s, no matter what people tell you. Right after King was killed there was this national urgency to get us into these institutions 'cause everyone was pissed off, and it was very volatile. And if we weren't going to be in school we were going to be doing something else. And we had been denied entry into a lot of these places. When I was growing up there was this park right next to where I was going to school. Black people were only allowed in that damn park on Tuesdays or Wednesdays, I can't remember, but only one day out of the week. And then when integration came through we had a mayor named Henry Loeb who decided to close all the swimming pools so that the black kids couldn't swim with the white kids. As a result, you got a generation of black and white adults in the South that can't swim. (laughter) And so it was that kind of thing; it was endemic and silly. And that's why I'm so cautious when we entertain race the way we do. If you're doing good work and you're doing scholarly work, and you're doing the very best that you can do, you will be noticed. I don't know if people really care whether I'm black or not. I think society as a whole acknowledges race and racism, but I don't think, over the long term, people really care. People always return back to their bad habits.

James Little in his studio at the Memphis Academy of Art, 1973. Photo by Nancy Bundy.

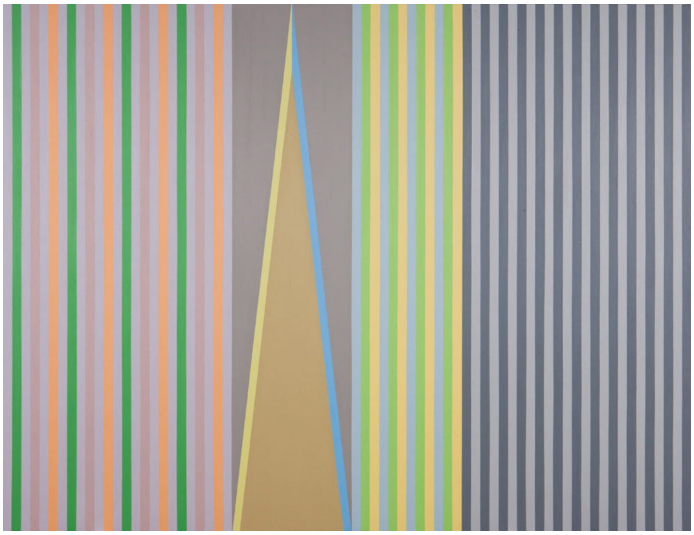
LPB: So here you are in the world, starting to get acclaim for your work. Did that start in high school?

JL: Well, I won a few awards in high school. But it didn't really kick off until there was a big time critic, Gerald Nordland, who acknowledged my work. He's still alive by the way. He was the chief curator of SFMOMA. So there was this big exhibition at the Arkansas Art Center, where they invited curators from all around the country

to select works by southern artists—Kentucky, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Texas... And so all these artists would enter their work to be considered for this show. Up to that point not much had happened. Though—when I was in art school—I had some really good teachers, but a few of them were bigots too. Some of them I still don't like to this day.

LPB: What would they say about your work?

JL: Some would say some insulting things that went-beyond the pale. But I was there to get a degree. And people like that try to discourage you. Another problem is that you don't have many role models that you could take your problems to. It's like calling the police on the police. Anyway, what happened is that Gerald Nordland came down and curated the 16th Annual Delta Exhibition at the Arkansas Art Center in 1973. And one of my professors was there and called me all kinds of names—I think he called me an insensitive clod.



American Dreamers Denied, 2011, oil and wax on canvas, 72.5 x 96 in.

LPB: That's strong language.

JL: It was strong and I was pissed off. Believe me, like I said, I was a pugilist. I really wanted to kick his ass. But I was in school trying to get a degree. When Nordland put up the show, he chose a painting of mine from my sophomore or junior year, and the painting won the top prize. This is when I was at the Memphis Academy of Art. It's called Memphis College of Art now.

LPB: What kind of painting was it?

JL: It was an abstract painting done in oil and wax. I had just started doing oil and wax paintings in 1973. The title of it was Umber Drift #1 and it was five by seven feet. Big painting. And I won the prize. Up to that point I had gotten an A in maybe one or two classes. But I hadn't gotten any A's in painting or anything like that. When I got the award, I started getting all A's in everything. So after I got the award, I went back to the guy who called me an insensitive clod and said to him, "It's amazing what an insensitive clod can do isn't it?" And that destroyed him immediately. He melted right in front of my eyes. So, I'm just saying that with patience and time, if you stick to it and you believe in what you're doing, no matter what the outside forces are, you'll come out on top. That's what I believe.

LPB: It seems like the work ethic that you learned as a child... You started making the thing and you kept at it.

JL: I do it until it reaches fruition. And I know when I get it there. I change things rarely. If I screw it up, I throw it in the garbage. I want quality in art. I respect all forms of art, but I'm not really interested in a narration of what the thing is supposed to be. I don't want to know. I want to make that decision on my own. I want to see what you've done, how you've organized your space. How you've treated space, color, and your subject matter. I want to see how it connects to the art of the past, see what you bring to it and what I can learn from that. But in today's art world it's different. So, I just stick to what interests me. Good design is fundamental to my art. In my later years, I began to appreciate the Neo-Plasticists and the Constructivists, and that's the kind of art that seemed to make the most sense to me. Piet Mondrian and El Lissitzky. I also like some of the American Color Field painters like Ken Noland and Alma Thomas. And I like Jacob Lawrence and Stanton Macdonald-Wright. Not so much the storytelling, but just the way they organized the damn pictures.

LPB: Well, even with the figure, the structure in Lawrence's paintings is just so strong. It's important.

JL: It's as important as the figure.

LPB: Sometimes I don't even consider those figures as actual beings, but more or less structures brought into a sort of human image.

JL: That's right. They are structures and they're flat. And the other thing I've tried to do is figure out ways of flattening the picture and keeping it flat. You know, when I went to Syracuse University—that's where I got my MFA (1976)— I studied up there, had seminars with Clement Greenberg and I met Hilton Kramer too, among others. I know you know Greenberg, but Hilton Kramer was the art critic for The New York Times. He passed away some years ago. But you know, I was in a critical thinking environment. They didn't really talk so much about painting as they did criticism, and the art criticism was what

helped you develop your theories around painting: What it meant and where you wanted it to go.

LPB: So, who were your peers at the Memphis Academy of Art?

JL: There were many people there. I studied painting under Edward Faiers. He was from Canada and he studied under Will Barnet. There was also a sculptor there, a good friend of mine, Luther Hampton. He's still with us. And there was also a painter named Veda Reed who taught me design and color. Carroll Cloar, who became pretty well known. He was a Regionalist painter. He chronicled the South and worked a lot in egg tempura. There were some quality artists in Memphis.

LPB So there's this idea of leaving the nest.

JL: So I left to go to Syracuse University. They actually recruited me. I met the Chair of the Department, George Vander Sluis, who came to my studio in Memphis to see my work. He was very excited about it. He asked me what schools I applied to. I told him Syracuse was one of them. It was top on my list with other schools like the Art Institute of Chicago and Yale.

LPB: So why Syracuse?

JL: Syracuse awarded me an African American Studies Fellowship. They had a great painting department too. And they really wanted to make a difference. I mean they really wanted me. I was set. And you know all art schools teach the same shit. I don't care what school it is. A school is not what makes you a good artist. Don't get me wrong, school credentials are important, but when you get out into the real world it's bare knuckle stuff. It's competitive as hell. You gotta be extremely smart. You have to be resilient and you're going to take a lot of hits. You're going to get discouraged. But if you get in there and gain the respect of your peers, things start to happen. Everybody has an idea of what's most important. Everybody has an agenda. When it comes down to this stuff, agendas go out the window if you don't have success. If you don't make good art, I'm not interested. It just doesn't matter to me. I think it's important to go to school and get good degrees, but when you're doing things with your hands and the result is based on intellect and vision and talent, then you gotta come up with it on your own. A college or school is just not going to produce that.

LPB: What was Syracuse like at that moment?

JL: Well, it was a hotbed for art at the time. Like I said, Clement Greenberg was up there. Him and Hilton Kramer had symposiums and lectures. They turned out to be very similar. Sol LeWitt, Barbara Kruger, Elton Fax, Charles Hinman, Marilyn Minter, Bill Viola, and Robert Goodnough graduated from there. LeWitt would show up every now and then. A lot of big people came out of Syracuse. Peter Plagens, the art critic, was there. Star running back, Jim Brown was there. A lot of stuff that had nothing to do with art, like football player Floyd Little. You want to be associated with him though. I mean if you go to a great school and Jim Brown and Floyd Little went there, that's a sales pitch. I wanted to be there. I wanted to be a part of that.

James Little and Al Loving, ca. 1986.

LPB There was a discussion going on, not just in art but the whole environment...

JL: It was critical thinking all the time. You don't get that anymore in the art world. You just don't get much of it. We need more of it.

LPB: So it seems there was this relationship between criticism and the arts that was much closer than it is today.

JL: And people expected it. Some of the best artists during that period were ones that came out of the world of criticism. It doesn't just come down to a competition between abstraction and figuration, but really what your oeuvre is or was all about. And sometimes people would be hostile in their response. But I've never been one to believe in destructive criticism. But you get that when you're out there. And to a large degree race also played a role in that. But I didn't have much of a problem. Syracuse treated me very well. I sent two of my kids to Syracuse University. It's a fantastic place. Probably the best place for me. I had everything I needed.

LPB: It seems like you found a home at Syracuse.

JL: It was even more than that. Top people in their profession were coming up there all the time. I had never been exposed to that. That's what these big league schools do. Syracuse only accepted seven painters a year and it still does today. So to get in was no small task. The College of Visual and Performing Arts had Vanessa Williams, Taye Diggs, William Powhida, you name it.

LPB: There were a lot of talented people there.

JL: Yeah but a lot of it you didn't see. You go there you gotta put your nose to the grindstone. And the environment during the winter is just brutal. There's really no reason to be there unless you're at the university. People don't just move there to live in Syracuse. It was good for me and my top choice. A lot of things that I do today I developed while I was there.

LPB: Were you concentrating on painting full-time or did you have to do other things?

JL: When I was at Syracuse I was painting full-time. I taught voluntarily. I didn't have to. They asked me if I'd be interested. I taught two classes in figure drawing the first year. The second year I taught Advanced Drawing. I had a strong background in drawing. I've also been back as a visiting artist.

LPB Were you in conversation with other students there?

JL: I was. I talked to a lot of students. I had one friend from Chicago. His name was Audubon Lucas. I don't know where he is today. But he graduated before me. We were pretty close when we were in school. Some of the students were good people. But when you become a fellow in one of these places—this is one of the top awards they offer—students take notice. Sometimes people don't take it too warmly. So I just kind of moved away from that. I've always been a private person, so people misinterpret my temperament as being arrogant or highbrow. The only thing I do is come in and try to produce the work that I do, which is extremely time consuming. I have to stay focused. I have to pay close attention to what's going on. I mean this stuff doesn't just fall from the sky. I have to think my way through it.

LPB: So people are bringing their own assumptions.

JL: In large part, but then you also have people in your corner who really want to see you succeed: your family, friends. There's a lot of things that get into it. You know, basically I don't like the art world... I love art.

LPB There's a difference. I understand.

JL: The way the art world functions is nothing to be attracted to.

LPB: So the social aspect, the economic aspect—

JL: I just can't do it. I don't need to do it. I had several opportunities when I first came to New York. I've won some big awards and grants: the Joan Mitchell Foundation Artist Grant (2009) and the Pollock-Krasner Award (2000). I made some big sales to important museums. Some great reviews and articles have been written about me and my work in Art in America, Art News, The New York Times, The Village Voice, and The New Criterion, among others. I've done quite a bit of stuff and it's still ongoing. I have a big project going on as we speak.

LPB: The commission at the LIRR Jamaica station in Queens. That's where I'm from.

JL: That's where you're from?

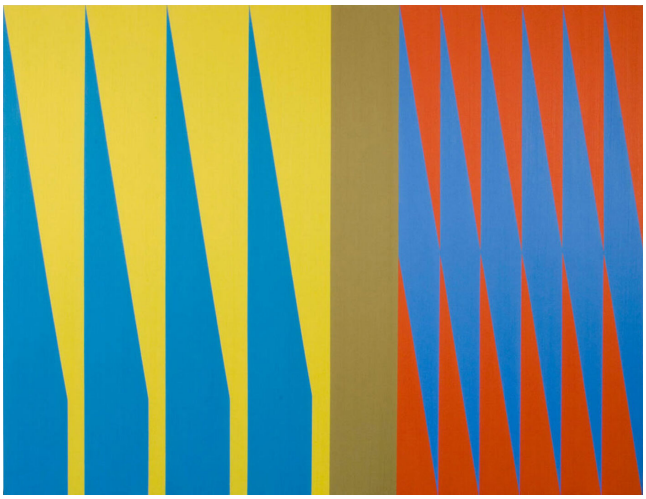
LPB: Yeah, I'm from Rosedale.

JL: You'll see it every day.

LPB: I live in Harlem now, but that's where I grew up.

JL: Governor Cuomo just announced it. It's a huge commission that I won. I was in another universe when I came up with the design. It's unbelievable that I won it. So it's going to be out there, and I think they say 4.2 million people a week go through there. It's quite beautiful.

LPB: But you also have artists who are primarily social animals.



Picasso's Funeral, 2006, oil and wax on canvas, 76 x 98 in.

JL: That's right. They are not good artists. But if you want to make headway, you do this full-time. You can't have a rest at this.

LPB: Who was the first person, whose opinion you

respected, to look at and value your work?

JL: Well, I can't say that there was only one person, but probably at the top of my list is Harold Hart, who was the director of Martha Jackson Gallery back in the '60s and '70s. He was black. He hung out with Bob Thompson, Joan Mitchell, James Brooks, Willem de Kooning and others. Martha Jackson was one of the top five galleries in the world at that time. They had de Kooning, Bob Thompson... Ronald Kuchta, who was the director of Everson Museum in Syracuse, also admired my work. When I was at Syracuse he gave me a show at the Everson Museum before I graduated. After that I moved to New York City. I asked Ronald what I should do and if he had any contacts. He told me to go see David Anderson at Martha Jackson. "Tell him I sent you," he said. I went to see David, who is Martha Jackson's son. He said, "Well go and talk to Harold." So I went down to see Harold. We talked and he liked my work. He said, "I want to see it in a year." I mean, when somebody says that to you, a year is like a fucking lifetime.

James Little in his Chelsea Studio, ca. 1989.

LPB: (laughter)

JL: Are you kidding me? So I needed a studio space. A friend of mine, Manuel Hughes, he lives in France now. He's a black artist. He said, "Look I have a student that has a space that she can't afford and she wants to share it. And I said, "Okay, I'm interested in that." So, I went over to meet the student and I said, "I'll take half of this space." It was on West Twenty-Fifth Street, top floor, 12,000 square feet. There were other artists up there, too. And that's where I met Al Loving. We became life-long friends. So, Al and I hit it off. And Al liked my work when he first saw it and I liked his. But Harold Hart was probably the single most important person at that time for me. The other person was George Vander Sluis at Syracuse, the chair and dean of the painting department. When he saw my work, he immediately responded to it. And he went out of his way to get me there. He really did.

LPB: Was your work then similar to what it is now?

JL: Some were geometric and others were very organic and playful. I was building up really thick surfaces. I was using baby diapers and stuff. And I was using commercial paints over gesso, and then I would pour wax over it.

LPB: So it was three-dimensional.

JL: It was relief. It was paint over fabric paper—very robust painting. But when I left college, I stopped doing that. I was just painting. And they liked the ones that I came in with and even liked the ones that I left with. But George Vander Sluis was very important to me, as well as Harold Hart. And it was very important to meet Al because he knew everybody. But the most important people in my life were my mother and father, in terms of how far I've gone with this. But I'm just getting started. I got to finish this thing off right now in Queens, which is the biggest project that I've ever dealt with. It's huge. There are forty-six windows, and they're each seventeen feet high and about three-and-a-half feet wide. I have these engineers, these contractors working with me.

LPB So how long do you have for the project?

JL: I mean I've done my part. I'm waiting for the drawings. Once we get the dimensions, I'm going to be flying to Germany. We plan to have it installed by 2017–2018. And I think we're going to make it, because we have to. We don't have a choice. It's been a circuitous journey for me. I've shown at the Studio Museum in a couple of group shows. But I've never shown in any of the major New York museums, which is ridiculous. Not the Whitney, MoMA, or the Guggenheim. I've shown at the Newark Museum, the Alternative Museum, the New Jersey State Museum, Everson Museum, Frans Hals Museum in the Netherlands, the Brooks Museum of Art in Memphis, the Studio Museum in Harlem... Kellie Jones did a show with Alison Saar, Whitfield Lovell, and myself called New Visions back in '88 at the Queens Museum. I've shown all over the country.

LPB: Yeah, I remember that show at the Queens Museum. I remember the catalogue.

JL: Kellie put me in the show Malcolm X: The Man, the Meaning, the Icon at the Walker Art Center. I did a series of paintings way back before the X thing... before the movie, before all of that. Kellie knew it and decided to show my X paintings. So 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.

LPB: So history—it's around the work but it's not the concern of the work, specifically.

JL: They are separate things. One doesn't dictate the other. History is very important. Make no mistake about it. I remember one of the darkest days in my life was when Dr. King was assassinated. And if I was going to entertain something like that, that was the time to do it. But Dr. King was trying to get the best out of us. That's what he was talking about. It was about excellence, content, character and self-motivation. I think he said, "If you can't walk, crawl, as long as you move forward." It was inspirational. And the 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. I want to address the history of art. I have a painting called Picasso's Funeral (2006) and I was down in Texas and one of top dealers there walked up to me and said, "Why did you name that painting 'Picasso's Funeral'?" And he was a little aggressive in asking me that. I said, "I'll tell you why. Because I'm trying to get around that motherfucker. That's what I'm trying to do." That guy is so big I'm still preoccupied with him. And he's been in the ground for twenty, thirty years or whatever. That's what I'm trying to do. That's where I want to be.

LPB: He's in the ground but you're still trying to make him fall asleep. (laughter)

JL: That's right! Another nail in his coffin. Because he was that important, historically. So that's the kind of stuff that I'm addressing. The only way I could fight it is through excellence. And believe 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. 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.

LPB: You're conscious of it, but it doesn't define who you are. And you've experienced enough of it in your life, more than most.

JL: Absolutely. And my wife, Fatima Shaik, is from New Orleans. Louisiana, Tennessee, Mississippi... I mean these were some hellacious places. They really were. And poverty was the key to a lot of the oppression. Keeping people down and that kind of thing. But I experienced it and I've tried to move away from it and try to address it through my art. And it's turning out to work that way. But it's still all done in solitude. I don't have any assistants. Everything I do starts from scratch, from the bottom up. My hand touches every phase of the work. Even when people try to restore the painting I say, "Don't do it. I'll take care of it."

LPB: And you're right at the point where you understand your own intent. And you understand where the work is going, and what it's about.

JL: I'm comfortable in my own skin. I look at the different categories that they put people in. And I talk to people about it all the time. Take Jeff Koons's balloon dog. Somebody will pay fifty million dollars for it. You start talking about all of the African-American masters: Roy DeCarava, Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Alma Thomas; you take everybody together and it doesn't even come near that amount. So, I don't take my eyes off that kind of thing. I'm going to get what I'm going to get, but I'm going to get it standing. I'm not going to get it laying down.

LPB: (laughter)

JL: It's like the segregationists said when I was growing up: "Blacks have to make their own way." So the art world was a lot like that. You have to make your own way, by and large. And you can make it if you get lucky, if people are impressed by what you're doing. It happens to some artists. There are always outsiders, those who are always living on the edge of popular culture. And those are the ones—the sleepers—who you have to look out for because some of the greatest artists in the history of art have been sleepers.

LPB: What do you mean by "sleepers"?

JL: People that go unnoticed throughout their career, but are mostly respected among other artists. There were certain artists, like Johannes Vermeer or William-Adolphe Bouguereau, who were well-known, part of the elite, and enjoyed a lot of success throughout their career, selling a lot of work to the very wealthy. But there were a lot of other painters that were making incredible work who weren't part of those social circles. There wasn't a whole lot of attention paid to these

artists. Those are sleepers. But nevertheless, history usually corrects itself.

LPB: The Paris Salon exhibited mostly wealthy artists who could churn out a lot of paintings. They had a factory going on.

JL: Yes. The same way the old masters employed apprentices and assistants to make the work, artists do the same today. Like Jeff Koons, who I mentioned earlier, he does that exclusively. But there's always someone in the art world who's doing all the heavy lifting. You take people like Giorgio Morandi or Van Gogh or Horace Pippin or Bill Traylor. They went through their whole lives making great art and no one paid much attention to them. But they were respected by their peers. But then you have other cases where artists know how to work the market, how to be social, and build their careers from that. I'm not one of those people. I'm not good at that.

LPB: Is that something you want to do?

JL: No, it's just something I'm not good at. I just prefer to let time do its thing. I mean I lay it all out in the studio. It's everything. It has to be done that way. I don't have anything else to say beyond the product, my work.

Native, 2015, oil and wax on canvas, 60 x 60 in.

LPB: I mentioned the official Salon in Paris, but there was also the Salon des Refusés across the street. It was in the tents outside the official Salon where you had the sleepers, the Impressionists, the Post-Impressionists, etc. You know, we were talking about Syracuse and Greenberg, and you being influenced by Greenberg as a graduate student. But you had certain critics who were writing in the Paris Review and later October in the late '80s, who didn't consider African-American artists to be part of the discussion. And so this idea of the outsider, as an artist who is participating in the major language of the time, abstraction, and you're making great art within that language, but as an African-American artist you're immediately considered an outsider.

JL: The present moment is like a renaissance for black artists and African-American art in this country, and I consider myself an outsider within that as well. Most of the tendencies lean toward socio-political content, installations, text, and what have you. I am not a part of that. If you're not in sync with popular culture or popular taste at the moment, you're always going to be somewhat of an outsider. But the thing I was trying to explain with Greenberg is that the kind of art that I like, the kind of art that I gravitate towards, has always been art that has theoretical underpinnings based on formalism and modernism; art that has never been about narrative. I've always tried to figure that out, and I've always taken an analytical approach to my art. I've always tried to reach in and come out with something that was experienced or imagined. I think when you look at art, you should feel and experience it. And when I say "experience" the art, I mean the aesthetic experience. If you're not having an aesthetic experience, the work categorically falls somewhere else within the history of art. You know, there's high and low art. People don't like to say that, but it's true. There's great art and there's good art, and then there's art that's not so good. When you say there were black artists working at the same time who were outside of the art world proper—which is a white-male dominated, Eurocentric world—some of those black artists weren't very good. Some were very good, but of course not all of them. And it's the same thing today. A lot of them still aren't that good. But as I said before, in the art world the market corrects itself. And sometimes it will happen in your lifetime; sometimes it will not. But if it's great art, it will prove its resiliency. That's why we can look back and appreciate people like, again, Horace Pippin, Bill Traylor, and William Edmondson. Great artists.

But it wasn't something economically driven. And don't get me wrong, race was still at the forefront of all this. I had a guy tell me once, when I was in school, "You know you'd be rich if you were white," talking about my work. This guy was a white guy from Mississippi who attended the school, and he was just being honest. I said, "Well getting rich is not going to be an issue for me." I was just going to make the best art that I could make. But for him to say that, meant that race was still part of the issue. It's never that far way. But I'm interested in making American art. I'm interested in trying to advance the way

we see and experience art, especially abstract art. And I think the job of the viewer is either to accept or reject the experience. It's always been like that for me. I know where my strengths are. I know I'm good with color. I know I'm good with design. I have a great relationship with the medium, the materials. I know the things that I primarily focus on. There are certain formal things that you have to do as you go along making paintings. And one of the more important things that I learned as a student, is that all these people that may be your heroes or artists you admire, when you leave school and get into the real world, those artists become your competitors. So, you have to try to get around a lot of stuff and continue to grow and look at art, and take charge of every opportunity that presents itself.

LPB: It's one thing to be a student, right? But when you consider yourself a professional out there in the world, do you see your work in conversation with artists that you once looked up to?

JL: Yeah, I do. But sometimes the people that you looked up to when you were in school don't excite you as much anymore. You could look at them and say, "This guy wasn't as good as I thought he was when I was a student." But sometimes artists gain recognition right out of school. But as you mature and you see how people move in and out of the art world, you realize that you have time.

LB: What do you mean when you say you have time?

JL: Well, you have time to develop your work. You have time to spend with your work. You have time to explore your ideas. So the immediacy, when you're young, to get it down, to make as much work as possible, is not necessary. You don't have to do that. If that's your forte, then that's what you have to offer. That's your style. Working fast and getting things done. Then that's what you have to do. The main thing is to try to find your voice. And I found mine through a painstakingly long process. And I have all of these ideas about how I want things to look, my surfaces to appear, my design elements to relate to each other. All this stuff that I deal with basically comes out of a certain kind of formal strata, although it's just information that I acquire through observation.

LPB: What I'm hearing, and correct me if I'm wrong, is that there are two different things going on. On the one hand, there's the outside world in terms of the art world, it's economies, it's social relationships—you can see that moving in terms of people having shows and working to have all this kind of acclaim. But on the other hand, I also hear you saying that there's a space that you need to make for yourself that's not congruent with these larger concerns.

JL: That's right. It has nothing to do with that stuff—shows, the art market. Those structures are already in place. And there's no real entry, unless you do something extraordinary, you know. And that doesn't necessarily mean you make extraordinary art. You have to do something extraordinary, and if you do that, then that's your entry. In my case, I'm having considerable success. Things happen. I've had shows and I've gotten some great reviews. You end up in certain collections. There's a buzz. People start talking about you. And then there's a kind of demand for your work.

L to R: Al Loving, David Hammons, Fatima Shaik, and James Little, ca. 1984

But the smart money and the critical eye always seem to end up getting their hands on things at the right time. Affordability has something to do with it too. A friend of mine once told me that "the best dealers and the best collectors are the ones that make the fewest mistakes." Mistakes can be extremely costly in the art world. You go out there and spend a lot of money on something and if it doesn't grow any legs, then you are taking a huge risk. So you to try to minimize the risk from the economic side of things. As a painter, you gotta have thick skin. You gotta take a lot of hits. And you have to know when it is opportune. But you can't control the market. People will spend their money on whatever they want to spend it on. People promote whomever they want to promote. I have opinions about a lot of things that are not consistent with the opinions of many people in the art world. But it's my opinion. I think that I've always felt that I was as good as anybody out there. I still do and that has always driven me. I mean, I don't consider myself a narcissist, but I do see a lot of art.

And I see a lot of abstract art. I've been doing this for a long time. I know what I'm doing and I know when it's not being done well.

So to go back to your questions about my peers, you have to put yourself up against them. Somebody was asking me about figuration and why I didn't do it. And I have no issues with figuration, but I said, "I just felt like if I couldn't take it past Cezanne or Vermeer or Caravaggio, there's no need for me to bother with it." I found more opportunity, more self-determination, and free will through abstract thinking. Speaking of being African American, coming from a background where most of us come from, free will and self-determination are very important. So I determine what goes into my work. So that translates to me having a steady license to do these things I want to do. So a lot of time you talk about black artists not having or getting a lot of recognition; a lot of that is based on the issue of free will. If you succumb to public expectations, you must paint black images and subject matter. You see, I never thought about that. I didn't go that way. I've always tried to move away from that. And I never looked up to the white artists either. If they were good at painting, they were good at it.

LPB: You think some artists are choosing the figure in an insincere way?

JL: I do. I think that it just seems to be a nice, juicy, and rewarding thing to do right now. Proportionally, the amount of figuration in the art world now, compared to abstraction or even, say, landscape painting, is insurmountable. The majority of artists are working in figuration. But these things change. There've been times where abstraction was more popular. And artists go back and forth between abstraction and figuration all the time. But the best abstraction comes from artists who have been driven and committed to it over a long period of time. This is not something that you just gloss over. Or something you decide to get into because you saw how it was done. It's not like that.

LPB: So you could look at a figurative painting and say this person really wants to be an abstract painter.

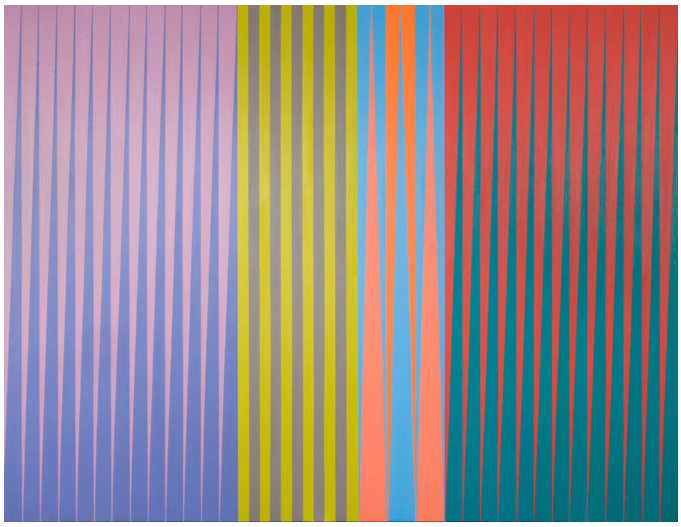
JL: Or I could say this person is a really good painter. I was talking to somebody today about figuration and abstraction. And I said to them, "Well, the figurative artists that I know, in my time, that I thought were very good, were also very good abstract artists." And some of them just changed. Some of them move from abstraction to figuration and vice versa. If you learn the formal issues that are required to make good art, and you have the skill set to move seamlessly from one discipline to another, then there's not a problem. What I'm saying is that if you don't understand abstraction, then you can't make the move towards doing it. Or you could and it'll be a disaster each time.

LPB: So to be a black artist making abstract work you felt like an outsider, even within the black community. So how do you deal with that particular relationship, insomuch as there are a lot of black artists making figurative work who are becoming more successful than black artists making abstract work today? And there's a long history of black artists making abstract work, too. So there's a tension there.

JL: It's a sociological issue as well. I was talking to my younger brother, Perry, who's a Pentecostal minister. I told him that I won an award for my work, and I was kind of cautious when I got around to talking to him about it. I also did an interview with Artnews, and I said some things in there about race and aesthetics. I was a little reluctant and cautious as to how they were going to respond. But I always try to be very honest. So I told my brother this, and I was really surprised at his response. He got behind me. My whole family and the black community were just glad I was in the magazine. They were happy with what I said. They were delighted that I took the risk. You get this platform when you start talking about Malcolm X and Dr. King and the Black Panthers. And the people that help you get there are a lot of white folks. No doubt about it. Everybody helps you. It's not a linear thing. But you get there and a lot of people will just say, "Well, I take the Fifth. I don't want to blow this." But at the same time, you got a whole lot people out there that just want to hear that voice. They want to hear somebody articulate that for them. A friend of mine called me up and said, "I'm just glad I know you." I thought he was going to come at me with clubs because of what I said. But it didn't work out that way. And that's my whole point. We are all the same no matter what we do subjectively in our work, or no matter what story we tell. The whole thing I said about being alienated in the black community, that happens because sometimes people misinterpret what you're trying to do or what you're trying to say. Sometimes we have missions and responsibilities that come along the way—I mean further along, in the future.

Sometimes we have to do things that are more immediate. And if you have a strategy and you take your time, sometimes people just miss it. It doesn't have that kind of urgency that the public wants. But you have to have a whole lot of confidence in yourself because to be a black abstract artist in the US—especially in the environment that we were in today—they look at you like

maybe this guy is some kind of freak. "I love his work but he must be some kind of weirdo." But that's not the case at all. Everything that I do you could find in black culture, in African culture. One way or another. You can't look at a painting of mine that's not somehow connected to or influenced by those traditions. You just can't. Now you may have to look a little harder, 'cause I'm not giving you any information that's going to lead you a certain way. My work tells stories, but it doesn't tell literal narratives.



Near Miss, 2008, oil and wax on canvas, 72.5 x 94 in.

LPB: There's certainly a design element going back to West African patterns.

JL: And American culture: Gee's Bend. I like rhythm in my work. Music and dance. Speed and color. And those are the things that I see that are just as important as what we say or how we act.

LPB: Well, people who act politically, there's also the issue of, Are you being true to what you're saying and what you're doing?

JL: A lot of times they aren't. That's why I think Malcolm X was right when he said that you have to think for yourself. The proof is in the pudding. I'm really suspicious of a lot of stuff. As I've said before, the work I admire the most is primarily theory-based work, and work that comes from analytical thinking such as Piet Mondrian, John McLaughlin, Josef Albers, Kandinsky, Theo van Doesburg, and Georges Braque. I like to use the mind to get there. I know what I can do. I know what my skills are. But I want to make contributions to a whole cannon of styles, trends, and movements where there's no black painter to speak of. That doesn't stop me from admiring the work. I told a reporter once in Memphis, they were talking about how cubism affected Europeans, Picasso and all the great painters. And they asked me what I do in relationship to that. I said, "They looked at African Art and I looked at them." And that's pretty much what happened. And a lot of times they had the liberty to get their work out there. But you know, I remember once, David Hammons and I were talking about art or something, and I said, "The wrong people always end up with it." I was referring to wealthy whites. And he said, "Well, black folks don't have that kind of money." And there's some truth to what he said, but there are some black folks that do have that type of money. So, the issue is, how does one group become sophisticated enough to appreciate a white square on a white ground? And why can't some people appreciate the same thing coming from a different source that's just as good? Sometimes it even predates the other thing. It baffles me. What it comes down to is self-determination and free will. When you begin to free the mind, you have these kinds of experiences. I mean it's no joke. When you determine for yourself how to deconstruct and reconstruct these ideas and theories, you can get to the essence of abstract art.

LPB: You know, a lot of members of my family in Alabama were carpenters, seamstresses, quilt makers... and I remember my father appreciating a well-made thing. And of course that well-made thing was not a figurative drawing, but it was something that he put together with wood. It was something that he labored over. That he formed into something practical, more or less. It's a deep appreciation for the craft that sits at the base of what you're saying.

JL: My mother and her siblings grew up very poor. So, my grandmother used to make their clothes out of almost everything that was available in the house. But she learned how to do these things. She was very efficient. So a lot of that spills over. If I see something that's not made well. No matter how great they say it is. I'm always looking at how it was put together. A lot of those issues came out with the Abstract Expressionists. Some of it was great work but it wasn't made well. The ideas were great, but one shouldn't supersede the other. It has to be a complete synthesis of the two. Good craftsmanship, high skill, is very, very important. And I always try to make art that doesn't go too far away from that.

That's why we call it visual art. It's something that entertains us socially and visually. I try to put things there that you want to look at and want to be a part of. This thing I'm doing for the MTA and LIRR in Queens is all about the environment, and how I want people to feel in the space. How do you want to feel when you're waiting for the train to come? And who is the space for? It should be interactive.

I've been misinterpreted in a lot of ways. But I've also been appreciated in a lot of ways. And what I've tried to do, basically, is make art for everybody. I really do. I think the reward for me, as far as black folks are concerned, is that if I can excel as a black artist and get to where I want to go, I'm doing good. I'm representing black folks. I'm one of their sons. But aesthetically I'm not going to be pigeonholed. Where I go will not be determined by anybody other than myself. You know, there'll be some people that appreciate my work, and some that don't. But I think that if you live long enough, you'll stick to your guns and put quality first. But we live in a very fleeting society, and a wasteful culture. And people just don't pay a lot of attention to these things. They like stars. They want their fifteen minutes of fame. But there's more at stake than just me and my art. You go back to the black community and you say the wrong thing, there's a price to pay. You don't want to pay that price because they could draw blood. But, primarily, they just want you to succeed.

LPB: It's interesting because there's who you are, and then there's what you do. And the two need not be intertwined necessarily. So who you are as a citizen, as a person, can be very progressive, but in terms of how that translates into what you do, it doesn't take away from who you are.

JL: I was in Memphis this past summer. Some folks I've known my entire life are still there, and others moved along and did other things. But basically when you look at the big picture, you could just see how difficult it was to grow up there, and then also see how fortunate you are to be where you are now. So when you go back, you can see the importance and the effect that it has on people, in a myriad of ways.

"Lead by example." That's what my mother used to always say. "Start doing some of the Lord's work." And I said, "I am doing God's work." And then she sat there and just looked me straight in the face. She said, "You mean, your painting?" And I said, "Yes, precisely."

LPB: So you are coming from a theory-based place. And that was very solid in terms of the thinking around the ways in which artists were practicing, especially non-objective artwork. And we live in an era that's not really theory-based. We don't really have a lot of theoreticians thinking about art, but you do have trends.

JL: You do have thinkers. But you don't have theoreticians. You don't have analytical thinking—very few at least. I was talking to somebody the other day and he asked me if I want to go to a museum lecture. Some of the people that were meant to talk, I knew what they were going to say. And I said, "They can't teach me anything. I know this stuff. I want them to bring me something that I don't know. I want to come out smarter than I was when I entered the room." And that's not to demerit anybody, but I've been to many lectures and sat through the entire thing, and didn't learn anything.

LPB: Even with the histories of African-American art, you have people like James Porter and Alain LeRoy Locke, who were, in their particular ways, forming theories around what black artists should represent, and what kind of art black artists should be making. Even if you want to compare them to their white counterparts moving up to the 1950s, you have generations of theories that are butting heads. But now you have a lot young artists coming out of MFA programs, who are building a practice that's about instant fashion or fundamentally connected to the market. I don't see this kind of deep intergenerational dialogue in terms of how the work is being made.

JL: That's true. Having artistic skill or artistry doesn't constitute you being a great artist. It has a lot to do with how you figure out problems. How you resolve aesthetic issues. How you resolve complicated issues, pictorial issues. For instance, look at Duchamp. He started out as a painter and a decent painter at that.

LPB: Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2 (1912).

JL: That's right. He did several paintings. But at the time, he just wasn't in league with Picasso and those guys. And he knew it. He was brilliant man and he was able to take what he knew and transform that.

LPB: So his strength was his thinking?

JL: That's exactly right. Mondrian painted flowers in New York to make a living, to pay the bills. But to come up with Neo-Plasticism, that all comes from right here. (points to his head) Breaking it down to a structure, and still making it pictorial, interesting. And you could put it up against anything else.

I got this book by Clement Greenberg, Late Writings edited by Robert C. Morgan. It's all about advancing the plane, modernism, structure, design, and how all of that overlapped with architecture. That's the stuff I was taught. I'm very comfortable in those areas. But as you said, these kids today are being taught the wrong stuff. It's fatal. I was at a talk a few years back, and this young guy, who had gone to art school—I'm not going to say what school, but it's in Connecticut—said that they didn't teach him how to paint. He said, "I know all this conceptual art stuff, but that's not really what I want to do anymore. I really want to paint." I said well, "You're getting a late start. I would say go for it. It's just one of those things where it gets back to feeling. It just

can't be a clinical exercise." When I paint a painting it's not just about me, it's about you. It's to be shared. It's community property. That's when people go around saying so-and-so stole such-and-such. Well, you didn't steal anything. You put it out there; it's public property. If you got something you think you could take from my painting, be my guest. But that's just the way it is. Your soul has to be in it, that's all. You have to know that this is what you're going to do, that this is your voice. You have to go from there. And you're going up against a lot. There's no cheerleading section till you hit a grand slam, let me tell you.

Maybe I'm just a pessimist looking at the glass half empty rather than hall full. That's what drives me. I want more in that glass.

LPB: There are some young painters, when they get out of school, who make fashionable work that's in conversation with contemporary dialogue. But then they may make the choice to sell those paintings very quickly. The stuff they made in graduate school, and the few things they made outside of graduate school... and then they're often left with the bare bones or nothing in the studio. I'm wondering do you think in terms of the choice of work that a young painter or a young artist should make? I mean how then do they make the turn to say, okay, selling the work is fashionable now. How do they mature after that?

JL: It's development. You gotta take your time. I was twenty-one years old once. When you're that young you're really not that good. I could tell you that much. Every now and then you'll get a young artist that will shoot through. Those who have that rare talent: Basquiat, Bob Thompson... but I don't know any of them who lived very long. So you wouldn't know what they'd be doing today. Was there any room for transition, for development? But young artists today want instant gratification. We live in a consumer culture. If you work with something that has shock value, or some sort of commercial value, I mean you could get it. You could even get on TV. Dancing with stars or whatever... But that doesn't mean development, that's not a body of work. That's not something that's going to help a large number of people. That's not something that you could resort back to, and it might be something that you're not really proud of to begin with. You just don't know. When you're that young your work is not mature. All these kids have some talent. If you get in these institutions, when you go to art school, basically we teach pretty much the same stuff... some schools have artists with bigger names, some have lesser-known artists, but that doesn't determine who's the best teacher. You could paint a bad painting and write a thirty-page essay on it and have people believing that it's a great work of art. But you have to be cautious of trends. This stuff changes all the time. I think quality in art is one of the most important things, period. But then the question comes up: What is quality? There was a period where nobody even wanted to mention quality. "That's subjective." I don't think it's subjective. The story about me in all of this is that I've always tried to look at the best, try to find the best art, period. No holds barred. I know a few good painters of my generation, but only a few, at any given time, make it big.

LPB: What are some of the fundamental differences, in terms of your approach to painting, between when you first got out of graduate school and now?

JL: Well, some of the paintings I made in graduate school, the ones that I thought were great, weren't that good. The most important thing was that I was taking risks and my professors liked that. And I had a pretty good resume going into school at that time—and I was black. And I was smart. All those things were working for me. But when I came to New York it was a bigger stage, and there were a lot of different approaches to art. Some I appreciated and some I didn't. Some of it I thought was moving too fast, it was too experimental. So I just figured out where I wanted to be. I used to go to experimental music concerts, and performances where people would get naked and roll around on the floor. It just didn't measure up to the work that was so important to me. I'm a painter.

LPB: So a deep investment in what you're doing rather than...

JL: I just wanted to improve on things, and continue in the tradition of painting. Not discredit or discard it. I recently was looking at some Latin-American art, something that I hadn't really looked at over the years. When I first laid eyes on the work, I looked at it with a bias and I shouldn't have. I was looking at it through a Western lens, from what I learned through school. I thought a lot of these Latin-American artists were just rehashing what Barnett Newman and people like him had done. But then you look at the dates and some of it was done either at the same time or even before. They just didn't get the recognition. And that's the dilemma that a lot of black artists have experienced here in the United States. But we can't continue to sit and complain about those times. And we can't continue to play the role of a victim. Just get out there and make some kick-ass art and walk away. Let the art do the talking. That's where I'm at. That's why my work is not in conversation with the race thing. I like who I am. I'm proud of who I am. I don't have a problem with the way I look. I like me. And that's one of the reasons why I like Muhammad Ali so

much, because he was like that too. When the conversation is about race I'm just always on the fence because it could go in so many different directions. And the perceptions that people have, you know, the multiple perceptions. You're as good as you are. There's always some room for improvement. Sometimes you gotta just look the other way on some of this stuff. I am more powerful now than I would have ever been if I had become say a civil rights spokesman or a minister. And nothing against them, but the reason I say that is because a lot of people are not cut out for that. I'm a civil rights person because of my art.

LPB: So tell me more about your public works project at the Jamaica, Queens train station. Governor Cuomo has to sign off on what you're doing, right?

JL: Yeah, and he wants to look at some of my designs for other potential projects. The folks at the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) liked what I did. So now, people are taking notice. They want to hear what I got to say. They want to know how I arrived at these things. It just so happens that I'm a New Yorker and I'm a black American.

LPB: There is this conversation between authenticity and affirmation. A lot of people from your generation have experienced the same type of discrimination and segregation that you have. They know what you have been through and can confirm its authenticity. I can understand why you don't feel the need to transfer that experience into your paintings.

JL: With abstraction you're coming in with a clean slate. You can't go looking for anything. I'm not going to give you anything to look for, except some lines, some colors, some designs, and some structure. That's all I'm going to give you. And the thing about endemic racism when I was growing up—and I told you earlier that my parents kept me and my siblings away from it—we didn't know about it until we were teens. Restaurants, grocery stores, everything was segregated. When I went to art school that was the first time that I was ever in close contact with white kids. First time! But I never even thought twice about it. I mean because that was the way my mother raised us: to be proud and beautiful, and have self-affirmation and determination. One of the reasons why I have these issues with bringing race into my work, is that when you experience something like that, when you live it, and you see people thirty years later that weren't even born during the civil rights movement, and they start using that imagery. You could see that it pales in comparison next to the experience. It almost seems superficial to me. I can't respond to anybody making work about the garbage strike in Memphis [the Memphis Sanitation Strike in 1968], or the riots in Alabama [Birmingham riots of 1963], or the assassination of MLK in 1968—there's nothing pictorial that can replace that experience. I was right there and it scarred me. But it also energized and reinvigorated me. Dr. King left so much, man. That guy touched everybody in different ways. Malcolm X, too. I'm sort of in between the two of them. I like Malcolm X. I've always followed people that stood up for human rights. I like Dr. King's rationale, his reasoning, and his inspiration. He was so inspirational. That's the thing I just never gave up on. He also taught me how to survive racism.

LPB: And your ability to translate that in your paintings is an act of freedom.

JL That's right. I'm rebelling in my own way. It's my self-determination and free will. That's pretty much me in a nutshell. And I have a lot of ideas right now. Every time I do something, something else rolls out. I had a little painting I did back in 1999 that did pretty well at an auction recently. It was a white painting. No one ever knew that I did white paintings, but I did. But none of them were racially motivated. These were all formal ideas and theories that I had about cause and effect. I wanted to see how certain things would work in certain contexts. That's basically what it was. When it comes to this political stuff my mouth is just as big as Al Sharpton's, but that would never get into my work. It just won't.

James Little and LeRonn P Brooks at the artist's studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, 2016. Photo by Terence Trouillot.

LPB It's a dynamic experience. The sort of pandering to popular taste, as an exercise, is something that artists have to decide whether that's what they want to do in order to be successful.

JL It's a tough decision for a lot of artists. I remember somebody was talking about Warhol's Brillo boxes and how much notoriety he got off of them, and he said, "I wonder what they would have said if a black artist had done that. Probably nothing. They would have just been some Brillo boxes on the ground, and that artist would have taken a beating when he got back to the community." That's what I was talking about before. But that's not the way it works. The structure was in place for him to make it, not anyone else. It was a racist structure. But it still worked for him. I mean it was exclusionary for sure. And he exercised his free will to show and exhibit and put money behind whatever the hell he wanted to. For black artists and black people, it's always been different. You've always had to work harder. You've always had to navigate around things to get to exodus. And then you had to protect it when you got there, because they would steal it from you. Look at our music. People just came in and copied the music, took the music from us. So even in the arts you have to protect it because that gets to be the base. Every time someone looks at one of my paintings they try to connect it to a white artist, almost every time. Somewhere down the line they're puzzled by it. I've always tried to do something personal, something that can't be gotten to unless it comes through me.

James Little and Ellsworth Ausby, ca. 1996.

LPB You know, being published in catalogues and having exhibitions are ways of putting your stamp on history, of protecting those ideas. Do you see that or...?

JL You have to have visibility and documentation of what you're doing. That's very important. There's got to be a record. Once that's done, it's done. People can come around and plagiarize, but, as I said before, it's a reference for anybody. I've always tried to be very honest about that. There are certain things that I just firmly believe in. And that's pretty much what makes me tick. But it's not just about me.

You asked me earlier who were some of the people who influenced me and my work, and I think I said my father and mother. And then I said Clement Greenberg and George Vander Sluis, but there was another teacher. His name was Dr. Jameson Jones. He was from Mississippi. He studied at the University of Mississippi in Oxford. He got his PhD at Duke University. He taught me philosophy and aesthetics. And he was as good as anybody, apart from Greenberg. Jameson was brilliant, but Greenberg was just the smartest guy in the room. I got ideas from all these people and they've stayed in my head. The type of things I could go back to and that give me peace. I try to apply that and teach my kids about having a structure, being organized and determined. But art is something like... I don't want to call it a drug, but it is. It's certainly something that I have to do. But what I want is for art to teach people how to see from another perspective. I want you to go home and wonder what the hell this artist was thinking about when he made that picture. "I like it. What's going on? I want to see it again." It's just this whole effort to keep pushing things forward, because I've been in New York for a long time and I've seen how, when some of us get near scoring a goal, they move the post. I've seen it many times. You're at the top of your game, making fabulous paintings, and next thing you know they're talking about somebody who blew up some balloons and fill a gallery with 'em. That's America.

LPB So this makes me think of the 1936 Olympics. If Jesse Owens hadn't jumped from behind the line, visibly behind the line, in the long jump, they would have disqualified him. And he still won the event, even at a disadvantage. And then you mentioned Basquiat. How come he never had a show at the Whitney?

JL He kept changing the rules. He got more attention than any black artist in history, but he didn't live long. And he didn't make a lot of money during his lifetime. And he was so damn young. And he had a drug habit. He gave them what they wanted and they saw something that needed to be exploited. Unfortunately the guy is dead. But you talk about moving the line back for Jesse Owens. Look at what they did to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, when he came up with the slam dunk. They disallowed it. It was called the "Lew Alcindor rule." They took that out of the college game for a number of years. He was unstoppable. And then they reinserted it later. He came up with the skyhook, too. So that's the kind of shit that I'm talking about all the time. You gotta keep turning the page. You can't always have your right hand know what the left is doing. You just can't. And like I said, you have

to protect yourself. You have to protect your art, your creativity, your imagination. I've never had that many allies, and my best friends are gone, like Al Loving and Harold Hart. But I have other friends. I knew this painter up in Syracuse, Jack White. And Jack must be eighty now. He taught at Syracuse University. He lives in Texas now. And then I have other friends, some of them are white, like Thornton Willis, and there's Charles Hinman and a few others. Ed Clark who's ninety; Bill Hutson, he's eighty. All these guys are older than me. And I've learned a lot from them.

LPB Ed Clark, Norman Lewis...

JL I'll tell you a guy who's underrated: Samuel Felrath Hines down in DC. He was a good abstract painter who didn't get very much recognition in his life. Alma Thomas didn't really get any attention until the '70s. She died shortly after I came to New York. But she didn't really start painting until her late '50s. And it's just the way it's been, for whatever reason. Like I said, I've never shown in the major museums in Manhattan or Brooklyn. The Museum of Modern Art, Bronx Museum, the Guggenheim, the Whitney Museum—none of them have exhibited my work. So people ask me about that, "Are you in the Modern?" I just say, "Not yet." They say, "When are they going to do that?" I say, "I don't know. It's inevitable."

LPB (laughter)

JL That's just the way it is. But they have to start looking at our culture through a different lens. I mean white folks look at our culture through a white lens, and black folks look at our culture through a black lens. We are more complex than that. We just are, man! We cannot be defined with one big stroke of the brush. It's just way more complicated than that. I just think that there's room for it all to come in. And I think people have to start looking at us individually. White people are really curious about black culture. And it's amazing how little we know about each other, after all these years. What is it? Four centuries? We still don't know shit about each other. And we're still dealing with some of the same issues that we've been dealing with for the past four centuries. And I just think there has to be some kind of improvement with that on some level. I don't think I have anything to add to it verbally, that hasn't already been said. So the problem for me is trying to get things done nonverbally.

LPB It's interesting to hear you speak about your paintings as an extension of a work ethic born from a segregated Memphis. It's the craft, your attention to detail that is an extension of that community. And I can't think of a blacker thing. (laughter)

JL That's what I've always tried to do. It's hard to get that across though, because I'll tell you man, I want to be on the front line. I really do. No matter what happens. I want to be on the front lines. But we have to, on some level, allow ourselves to realize that there are other opportunities. This is not a linear thing. It's not something that should be taken lightly. Our narrative is a complex narrative. There are a lot people whose voices haven't been heard. And there's voices that have been heard. I just think that you have to try to find your own voice. And you go with it. I was telling a friend of mine, an older guy—a lot of older painters are very disappointed because they feel that they were overlooked—I said, "You know what? You just have to do what you do. And you have to be confident in what you do. And you have to let it come to you, man. If you missed the bus, take the next one. But you can't be blindsided by things that are out of your control." You just can't.

I had a professional athlete that wanted to buy some artwork and I made him an offer for these works on paper. He bought them. He called me the other day, wondering how much those works are selling for now. I told him they went up 500 percent. Somebody bought the works on paper from him, and he got a 500 percent profit from it. I try not to think about money. When it comes, it comes. I'm doing okay. I can't complain about anything. It's just been hard to do, man. It's just been real hard and with little help, you know. Like I said, I just think that when you do your best work it will show. No matter what you do. You're a scholar and you have a standard and if you stick to it, it's going to shine. And that's just the way it is. But you must stay there. You must take a position. And you have to hold a position. I'm not saying you don't change it or tweak it along the way, but you must have something strong you believe in. Almost like a religion; something that works for you. And you stay with it and get shit done.

LPB So you were talking about surface and how your surface has changed.

JL Well, my painting, Untitled (9-77), that's in Circa 1970 (2016), the show at the Studio Museum that Lauren Haynes curated. I've always done a large number works on paper. I see them as drawings or as studies—as a means for recording ideas. They are also independent, individual works of art. I play around with colors and designs, and use simple materials. I make my own paints and I've always had this alchemist approach to painting. I've never been able to really get what I want out of manufactured materials. I've always been somewhere in between. That's inherent to my background because my mother and my father were like that. I grew up in a culture where people just took things and recycled them.

We made new things out of old things. We were all utilitarian. You know, it was tough doing those kind of paintings because they called me a Minimalist, a mainstream painter and all this, and there was a lot of pressure to do work that had some sort of black imagery in it, or reflected some cause for revolution, that kind of thing.

LPB In the '70s?

JL Yeah. But I was being radical in my own way. I just don't have a race-based aesthetic. I don't use figurative imagery, but underlying all of my work, for instance, my Shabazz series, is a revolutionary spirit. I've always been very conscious of that, but I've also been a little laid back in terms of what kind of social effect I want my work to have. So when you look at my paintings now, like the one you're sitting in front of called Black Star (2015). Sometimes I'll go back to art history, like with this piece called Titian's Cube (2016). And then I have other paintings that are more direct, that have visions of war. I have paintings that have to do with immigration. One called Desert Delivery (2010-11). This pregnant woman from Mexico was trying to cross the border and they caught her and sent her back. She was in her third trimester. She said, "I don't care. I'm going to make it to the States, even if I have to deliver my baby in the desert." So, when you look at my stuff beyond the surface and you think about the titles, and what compels me to give these things these types of appellations, there's always some sort of social gravity that I am thinking through.

LPB But there's a difference between concept and theme, in terms of approaching your work and the themes that describe a world presence or energy or persona. Can you describe the difference between the two?

JL The physicality. I want a relationship with the material. I strive for that. If I don't develop a relationship with the material, then it's not working. It's just me and the materials. There's nothing in between that, other than the concept or idea. Now, to get back to the public response to the work, when you came into my studio today and you said, "Wow!" as you were looking at Black Star. That's the type of reaction I'm looking for. That's what you try to accomplish when making art. You're trying to get to that immediate reaction. Sometimes we make things that are too complex, too detached, and you have to overheat it to try to understand what's going on. There are certain sensibilities that we all share and respond to: color, design, temperature, smell, sound... that's how we all connect to music and art and feeling and emotions.

LPB You said, "overheat." Can you describe what you mean by that?

JL Well, when something gets too literal and complex, when it's too descriptive and you're not allowed to use your cerebellum, when you're not allowed to use your frontal lobe to navigate through this stuff. I mean, I'm here to raise questions. I'm not here to give answers. So if you want the answer, then I'm going to leave it up to you to find the answer. But I'm not going to narrate something to you, and I'm not going to give you the answer. The answers are hidden.

LPB It seems that you're suggesting for some artists, there's a level of insincerity or safety in being overly descriptive?

JL I think so. I think some of that has to do with tradition and some of it has to do with fear. You have to take risks, profound risks. And sometimes when you take these risks, there's a chance of failure. But you're not going to get better unless you take some chances. It's sink or swim. And if you want to be really good at this stuff... I teach a painting class at the Arts Students League. This kid came in and he's going along pretty well. All of a sudden he says to me, "I'm done with these paintings." I tell him, "They're looking pretty good. You've done six. I want you to keep going." He says, "I think I've gone through this idea and I'm not feeling it lately." I say, "Well, that's what painting is, man. You can't gloss over this. I told you when you came in, 'Painting geometric abstractions and mixing color is not easy.' There's nothing easy about this. Now you're at the point where you need to use that other part of your body, your imagination." He goes, "I need a timeout." I say, "Take your timeout. But if you want to mess with this stuff, you need to know this is serious business. This is not a hobby. Art is not a hobby." And that's where we are. That's what I feel like I'm doing. I'm a painter. And I've taken all the hits and it doesn't phase me, 'cause I know where I want to go. I know what I want to try to do. As I've said before, as artists, we are not going to be judged by our race in the end but on our body of work. That's the way it is. And I'm as black as anybody else you're ever going to meet for that matter. But trust me, I think there are more ways to get there. I'm stealth. I like doing things under the radar. And then when I get to a point where I can really affect the audience or the society profoundly, then I'm there. I'm that guy. But I'm not the guy going out there kicking the can down the road.

LPB When I came in here I was really in awe of all of these different strategies I'm seeing, right? You challenge yourself, in terms of how you approach your art making. And that student who made six paintings and then freaks out about what the possibilities are moving

forward—what is the next step? Because the work is getting further and further away from the recognizable, the figure.

JL He came in full steam ahead with ideas. And he worked them out; I helped him through it... but then when it was time for him to fly, he couldn't fly. So, I said, "Look. I'm not going to throw you a life vest. You either take the advice that I'm giving you or not, but I want to see what you can do at this point. He said, "I'm not there." I said, "Take some time off." But that's the way these things go. When I first came to New York, I met David Hammons, Houston Conwill, and some other artists from the West coast, up at Linda Goode Bryant's gallery, Just Above Midtown (JAM). I was one the first artists she showed, part of a group exhibition. I don't remember how it happened. I think I just walked in there one day, and then Linda and me hit it off and she told me she wanted me in some group show. Her and Marcy S. Phillips were running the gallery. A couple of my paintings that are in the permanent collection at the Studio Museum right now were in that show. And then later they decided to publish this book on African-American abstract art called Contextures (1978), which she included me in. Horace Brockington saw the book and was drawn to my work. And he saw some of my works on paper. Horace had the opportunity to curate a show at the Studio Museum in Harlem and decided to put a bunch of us in it. The art critic April Kingsley came to see it. She was writing for The Village Voice at that time. She wrote a great article called "Black Artists: Up Against the Wall" in 1978. Big long essay. And she mentioned my name. I had just hit the scene. From there, she curated Afro-American Abstraction (1980) at MoMA PS1. She included me in that show. There were nineteen artists. She came by and said, "I want to include you in this show that we're doing." I said "Great!" She picked a painting called Challenge of the Will (1979). It was a tough time for black artists. There literally was nothing going on and she helped us enormously. She was one of the first people to focus in on black artists in New York City.

LPB It seems like one thing led to another thing, right? Like a chain of events. What was the art world like for you, at the time? I mean, can you talk about the black art world in the 1970s? Was there a sense of camaraderie with the black art community?

JL Well, it was just us. All the black artists were friends. We went to all the same parties and openings. And there were some white artists there too. But we were outsiders. The art world was segregated as hell. I went to practically every gallery on Fifty-Seventh Street. I went to galleries on Madison Avenue, in SoHo. And some of them took my work to look at it but most didn't even bother. None of them would take us. None. The only black artist that was represented by a gallery at that time, when I first got here, was Al Loving. He was at the Fischbach Gallery, but he later parted ways with them for some reason. But we didn't have galleries. We were struggling and it was hard. Nobody had money. We had these conservatives being elected into office, and the crime rate in New York City was off the charts. We had mayors like Ed Koch and Abraham Beame who didn't give a damn. And then David Dinkins came along and that was a breath of fresh air. And after that we had Giuliani. So, it's always been like that. It's like we were invisible. I mean Ralph Ellison was right. They were not going to recognize us.

LPB So, you were raised in a segregated community in the South. You leave that environment, go to Syracuse and master your craft, and then you end up in New York and the art world is segregated as well.

JL New York was the most racist city I'd ever been to, at the time.

LPB How so?

JL Because it was accepted. There was no civil rights movement here. I mean there was immigration. This is the land of the free. The Statue of Liberty, we welcome all...

LPB And that contradiction was right in your face?

JL It was in your face! In the South, a lot of the racists were poor like us. They were just taught to be racist. I was talking to a good friend of mine, I said, "Man, we grew up very similarly. You were just on the other side of the track." It was almost identical. He said, "You're right, man." He was from Alabama. And when I came up North, you know, you expect it to be more liberal. We were taught that going North meant that you could do better. The underground railroad, Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series... People were going up North to get good jobs. We just thought that the mentality was different. When I came to New York, it was different. All these neighborhoods that you see right now, all of them were segregated, every last one of them. Extremely segregated! The Italians were here in Williamsburg. The Hispanics were in South Williamsburg. The Hasidic Jews were more over there to north, and the Polish were over in Greenpoint.

LPB And everyone knows the borders.

JL That's right. There's a border that separates every single neighborhood.

LPB Where were you living at the time, during the ’70s?

JL I was living in Chelsea. And I was one of the few blacks that you would see in Chelsea. There were none down there. Everybody was in Harlem or the Bronx or Brooklyn. And the lines were still drawn like that. When I came in, I just never looked at myself as being second to anything. Period. My mother used to tell me and my siblings every single day—and this is important for you to do to your kids—how beautiful we were. She would compliment you and tell you how lovely you were. That builds character. When I came up North though, no matter what my credentials were, they would look at you and judge you based on the color of your skin. I’m telling you it was bad news. So we all stuck together and had a whole lot of fun. But like Al Loving used to say, “We still didn’t have addresses,” which meant we didn’t have gallery support.

El-Shabazz (D), 1985, oil and wax on canvas, 24.8 x 24.8 in.

LPB That’s a great way to put it. But how did you manage these vulnerabilities? You’re pushing the aesthetics of your paintings, you’re changing and developing, all these different approaches, but you still don’t have a gallery or proper representation that can match and support your output.

JL No we didn’t have that. But there were still people who were interested in showing works by black artists, collectively. So, if you look at all of our resumes, mine and almost anybody else you could think of, we were stacked top heavy with black shows, all over the country, everywhere. Those were the shows that you took. And your name still got out there. There were a few situations where you could win an award or a grant. Every now and then one of us would end up on a committee or something and they would fight their ass off to get people to give black artists some money, because nobody was really paying attention to what we were doing. They just didn’t care.

LPB Yeah it seems like, from what you’re saying, you were forced to have a whole skill set that may be different for younger artists now, in terms of the ability or the access to institutional support.

JL Well, young black artists now have it a whole lot easier, thanks to Thelma Golden and the Studio Museum, for example. Thelma really has done a tremendous job with the artist-in-residency program, giving young artists a platform to succeed at a very high level. She put a lot these artists on the map. Lots of galleries have shown great interest in the people that come through that museum program. But at the same time, my generation of artists were people like Julian Schnabel, David Salle, the whole Mary Boone bunch. None of us were in that. Then Basquiat came along and got in through Warhol. But Al Loving knew Ken Noland, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Indiana, Brice Marden, all of them, first hand. But they never did anything for him.

LPB: Now that’s interesting—what good is it to actually know and be friends with white artists who have access to these resources? It reminds me of jazz or the beginning of bebop, where you would have white musicians come to the jam sessions and play with the black masters but at the same time they wouldn’t necessarily help those artists gain mainstream recognition.

JL: Talking about Benny Goodman, Wynton Marsalis said, “Back in the day he would have been a back up, not leading a band.” And by comparison when you talk about people like Count Basie and Duke Ellington, the proof is in the pudding. But I don’t like to draw comparisons like that. Artists are artists, but opportunity is opportunity too. In the case of visual artists opportunity shows itself through visibility. You don’t get opportunities unless your work is hanging on walls. There’s no intrinsic value associated with it if you don’t have visibility and, furthermore, there’s no discourse around the work. You just don’t get that.

LPB: It seems to me like the ’70s guys were working in total darkness.

JL: But you had artists like Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence who were very successful. You could get a Bearden piece for $7,500, which was a lot for the time. He was showing at Cordier & Ekstrom Gallery. All of

that was locked into the black imagery thing. But I just decided that I wasn't going to depend on anybody, in terms of where I wanted my art to go. As a result, I had to figure out a way to make enough money, live the way that I wanted to live, be able to afford a studio, and make the kind of art I wanted to make. I couldn't let my talent go to waste and I had to insulate myself from certain kinds of criticisms, because there was a lot of criticism from the black community too. They didn't think what we were doing had anything to do with blackness.

LPB: In terms of abstract, non-figurative art?

JL: Yeah. And there was a generation of artists that had been in New York for a long time. Vincent Smith and some others... Elizabeth Catlett. Look at how hard it was for Catlett. I mean she didn't start making it until her mid-seventies, early-eighties. She just lived a long time. She took a beating. She wasn't even allowed in the country for a while.

LPB: She went to Mexico.

JL: Yeah, because she was a communist. But she stuck to her guns. Now you can't afford to own a Catlett. But that's the narrative we're trying to break, and I think that it's been broken because a lot of younger artists will never have to go through that in today's market. But I will say one thing, a lot of the art that we see today won't last. Catlett's art will last.

LPB: In the '70s, getting the work out there was the biggest challenge.

JL: The '80s too.

LPB: But there's a level of skill and perseverance that pays off in the end. And so it's bittersweet, in the sense that you have younger artists who have access to more opportunities than you had, but at the same time it sounds like you're wondering whether or not that is ruining their work.

JL: There is a pitfall in trying to seek immediate gratification. I was talking to somebody the other day, and they were talking about a painting of mine that sold. I got a pretty good price for it. By comparison, you take white artists from my generation, you know, who are in their late fifties, early sixties, some of their prices are so inflated you can't imagine how it got to be so expensive. Even when you look at the black artists today that are making some good money, by comparison it doesn't measure up. It's just not the same. It's not a black problem anymore. It never was. They knew that this was some fabulous stuff—say, Jacob Lawrence, there's nobody on the planet that doesn't want a Jacob Lawrence. And it never was a black issue, but race in America has a way of infiltrating and affecting almost everything we do one way or another.

LPB: As the black middle class grows, you have more college educated professionals of African descent who are exposed to black art early on in their careers. For them, buying black art affirms their own existence within the art world, so to speak. It seems to me like you came to New York at a time where black people, in the Northeast, were going to colleges en masse.

JL: You're right. None of this would have happened if Dr. King wasn't assassinated. We never could have gotten into these places. They came out looking for us. The country went into a panic and there was this liberal guilt going on, and so we got into all these schools and programs. But still, they were being very selective about which black kid did or didn't get in. They were still cherry-picking. When I went off to Syracuse University it was big deal.

The church and the black newspaper, The Tri-State Defender, put out an article about me being accepted into the graduate program at Syracuse University. The whole community was affected when these things happened. So, they took up a collection from the church to send me on my way. There was all this pressure to succeed, mind you. You can't quit, because you'll let down a whole lot of people. So I went on and I did what I had to do to stay in the game. To be productive requires some really incredible stuff and I've always surrounded myself with bright people. I've always respected older people and older artists because they can see how much we don't know. And that doesn't change. Your parents, my parents, can see how much we didn't know. That's why they're your parents. And it's also determination. A lot of things are coming my way that I don't have control over.

LPB: So you built a network of support. Who's in that network?

JL: There weren't a whole lot of artists in it. The key person for me when I was in New York City was Harold Hart, as I've said. He was the person who introduced me to David Anderson. David Anderson is Martha's son. He's the one that bought those early pieces and donated them to the Studio Museum. Martha Jackson was a big gallery, and Harold stuck with me. He knew the game. He spoke four languages, came out of Washington DC, a class act. And he liked me and what I was doing. Most people were confused: "What does he see in Little?" But we became very close. He passed away a few years back and that was a big loss for me.

There was Al Loving too. I was real tight with Al. I met almost all the artists that I know today through Al: Bill

Hutson, Ed Clark, Gerald Jackson, Stanley Whitney, William T. Williams, Candace Hill-Montgomery, Howardena Pindell, Jack Whitten, Joe Overstreet, Peter Bradley, Fred Eversley, Danny Johnson, Frank Bowling, Mel Edwards, and so forth. I met all of them. But I've never been very good at being in groups. I'm very independent in that sense.

LPB: David K. Anderson originally purchased your painting that's in the Studio Museum show Ca. 1970. He was very important to you and your career. And now it's sort of come back around. Do you find that kind of thing happens a lot?

JL: Well, it's fascinating. Sometimes you're excited by it, sometimes you're not. Sometimes the work that you did, thirty, forty years ago, you want to change or restore them yourself, but you don't have control over that. But the peculiar thing about having my work up recently, is that they had the Carmen Herrera show at the Whitney and the Agnes Martin show at the Guggenheim up at the same time. I was doing work that was consistent with what they were doing, and I didn't know either one of them. I was working alone with ideas that were parallel to theirs, but not as minimal or reductive or puritanical. And Carmen Herrera too, same thing, I didn't know about her at all.

LPB: So there were these cross currents, right? In terms of conceptual approaches to the canvas, but when you see these particular cross currents, I mean how does it make you feel? Like the ones at the Guggenheim, do you see that as a lineage of privilege that came from—

JL: Not in Carmen Herrera's case. She's 105 years old. And with Agnes Martin, I don't really know that much about her either.

LPB: So you mentioned Thelma Golden, who has managed to change the art world in many ways since becoming the director of the Studio Museum. She's also helped usher in a whole body of black critics, educators, and writers. I'm a product of the Studio Museum. My internships were there—educational and curatorial departments—and the fact that I have a doctorate is a direct result of my exposure to the Studio Museum.

JL: Well, I showed there when it was on Fifth Avenue and 125th Street. I did two shows there. It was a loft, rickety floors. It was a desperate looking place. But we showed there. I was in one show that Brockington curated when Mary Campbell was the director at the old Studio Museum. And now it's just taken off. Thelma has fine-tuned this thing and it's working. It's respected around the world. I thought it was very daring and courageous for her to change the mission and show only artists from the African Diaspora. That was a bold thing to do, no matter how you look at it. And to make it work, it just seems unimaginable. But it works. I'm sure she had a lot of naysayers and pessimists all over the place, but she made it work. And that's what counts.

LPB: It seems to me you're talking about a lifetime of dealing with critics and boundaries that you always crossed over. This is a consistent narrative when it comes to black people doing things that people don't expect them to do.

JL: That's right. You can't allow anybody to define who you are. When you do your thing, you write your dissertation or you write your next book, you're going to have critics. They're not going to trust you immediately, for a number of reasons. You got your PhD so that will bring them in, but people are still coming in with suspicion. So it must be the body of work. Look at Jimmy Baldwin. Tell me, what opportunities did that guy have other than that pen? Nobody is better. Nobody. And that's what I'm talking about. The body of work, the quality of work, that's your voice right there. And that's what I stand for. I make American Art. It's African-American, but it's essentially American. I don't think I'd be painting these kinds of paintings if I was in, I don't know, Sri Lanka. You know, the urgency to do this kind of thing wouldn't be there. And we also innovate all we know through our mixed heritage. I mean we have to figure out how we are going to express this thing that we call African-American art. And I think the Studio Museum has done a tremendous job of doing that.

LPB: You mentioned that your community funded your travel to college.

JL: I got a fellowship, but I hadn't gotten the money yet. When I got to Syracuse they gave me plenty of money. They really did. But to leave the community, I needed some money. I had to go up there early and find a place to live. I stayed there for the month before the school opened. Didn't know anybody. Not one soul. And I needed some money, so my mother went to church, to the minister, told everybody what was going on and they raised some money. I had a professor, a very good friend of mine. His name was Dr. Jameson Jones. Brilliant man. He taught me critical thinking and he also loaned me some money.

LPB: So you have all these little investments, right? It's like paying a toll, a passage towards this long road, and in terms of moving forward into the future, one thing kind of led to another, and now you have these big commissions. And when you think about your career in the long term, what do you think has been the thing that has kept you going?

JL: I've just stuck to what I believe in. And I've stuck to my strengths, my talents. I haven't been affected by rhetoric or jargon. I haven't been affected by the kind of discourse that's going on in the art world today. The things that don't apply to me, don't apply to me. And I know what they are. And so it's like a religion to me. I believe in this and that, and if you believe in something else so be it, but I'm not going to convert, you know. You can't convert me. And so whatever people do and what kind of success they have, and whatever accolades, so be it. But it's not a comparative analysis. I choose to be abstract because that's where I found my voice, because it best reflects my self-determination and free will. That's why I love abstraction, it forces us to see things in a different way. It forces us to come out of what we have been trained and conditioned to see. It forces us to use another part of our brain. As beautiful as jazz is, I mean no one really respected jazz or understood it. We knew it was beautiful music, but the public by and large did not understand it, especially in the states. It took a while, even the French caught on faster than we did in the states. And all of them were masters. I mean this was a whole new thing. That's African-American to me, where it comes from. And it comes out of a necessity. And we make art out of necessity. We don't make art for the market.

LPB: That's an interesting point, when you say like Elizabeth Catlett didn't really become successful until she was in her seventies—

JL: I don't think she was that successful then. As she got older the prices went up. June Kelly represented her.

LPB: So there's this long period of silence, critical silence. And it just fascinates me, in terms of what is the thing that keeps you making work during these long periods of silence. And when you see the contrast in terms of your white peers making money off of work that's no better than yours.

JL: Some of it's even inferior.

LPB: Right! And what keeps you going, is the need to make art, rather than saying, "Okay this is for profit." Because you're not making a profit.

JL: Not for a long time.

LPB: But it's the need, there's something intrinsic in you that needs to do this or be proactive. Where do you think that comes from?

JL: Well, like you said before, all these moving parts from when you start out as a young kid, and so forth, being social, all of it is affected by society. It affects you in certain ways. It just does. When you live in a place where there's endemic racism and hostility, and you see people that you admire assassinated based on their beliefs and free speech; you see the kind of conditions, as you get older, what your mother and father had to go through to get you to be where you are... that affects you. I'm very political, but it's internalized. You know, I got some strong opinions about a lot of stuff. I'm a Democrat. And my mother told us when we were growing up, she said, "Don't ever vote Republican." She told us that. And I said, "Why?" She said, "Because they have always been the obstructionists when it comes to black advancement or doing the right thing for minorities." And she was right, but the social structure of our government, the Supreme Court, all the forms of what makes this country what it is, what makes it great, it still hasn't fulfilled its real potential. Because there's been obstacles, there's been unfairness. So we will see what happens as we move forward. But I'm fortunate in a lot of ways. I show with June Kelly downtown. She works as hard as anybody. I'm represented by Louis Stern Fine Arts in West Hollywood. He's the real deal, blue chip dealer. And so I'm pleased with that. But as far as doing the work, I mean that's what you do. You're a scholar, and that's what you do. And that's what people are going to be coming to you for. You already put yourself under the radar. You're there. So, there's going to be pundits and there's going to be people that are going to be very excited about what you do. But you have to realize what you do affects a whole lot more people than just yourself.

LPB: Do you still think you speak for people?

JL: I think so, inadvertently, yes. I know that people are listening. I said something to somebody the other day, who was criticizing Al Sharpton and I said, "Al Sharpton is really a voice for people that can't speak for themselves. I agree with a lot of things Al Sharpton says." Some of my friends couldn't believe it. I said, "Yes, I do." The thing is that when Giuliani was doing all that racist stuff twenty years ago, you needed someone to step up and speak out. You can't take a back seat. And when you get a guy like Sharpton who speaks out and puts you on the spot, that's when everybody starts acting up. But in the meantime you know, we can't relax in the arts. Relaxation is what hurts us.

LPB: Can you get into that a little more?

JL: Well, because you begin to take things for granted. But I think that you have to just keep your foot on the pedal, no matter what. No matter how successful you become—you can't go to sleep at the wheel. I mean things can change in seconds. We've seen that just from this past election. It can flip on you in seconds, man. The whole thing!

LPB: Mm Hmm.

JL: You know what I'm saying. You always have to have some sort of activism, one way or another.

LPB: Do you feel you're paintings anchor you into the world? Do they give you a place to reflect?

JL: It gives me a presence. It gives me a lot of satisfaction in a lot of ways. I want to try and leave the world in a better condition than I found it. And I hope that my art can do that to some level. But also I've said it to you earlier, I'm as good as anybody out there. Anybody. And I'm better than most. I'm not bragging or anything but I know this from being in the arts for half a century. I've seen how the rules have changed, how the game has changed. How they moved the goal post. How they just changed the terms of everything. How they threw it out the window and then they want to bring it back into the mix. All I do is hold my position. I have some territory, I have some space. I have some knowledge. I'm smart and talented. I know what I can do with the medium. I have a relationship with the medium. I have a thorough understanding of history of art. And I have the other thing: I'm hungry. I have an appetite and I have feeling. Those are the things that keep me in this thing. You can't control what you can't control. But I do believe that quality always trumps mediocrity. And if you just do your best work, there's nothing that could stop you. And we were talking about whether I was in the Modern or the Whitney, well no I'm not in any of those places, but it's inevitable that I will be. It's just inevitable that I will be. I'm not worried about it.

LPB: So this is not about instant gratification, this is about...

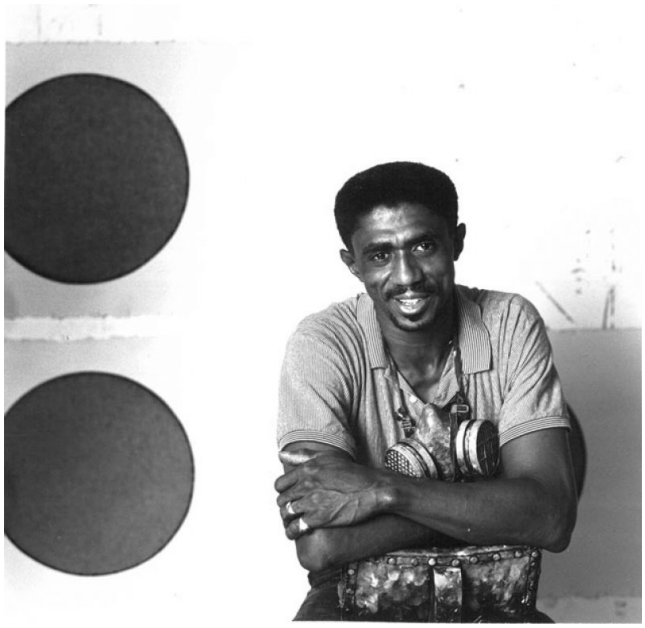
JL: No, not at all.

LPB: The quality will speak for—

JL: —itself.

LPB: Almost regardless of content or...

JL: Content and subject matter are almost synonymous, in a strange way. What's significant is what you choose to include in your work... I guess that's what gives it content. But that's a tricky one. Subject matter is important and it's even more important when it provides content. So content is meaningful subject matter to me, because you can take something and put it in a painting when the subject matter is not meaningful. So that's the way I see it. Content gives meaning to subject matter. I think a lot of it is based on content, but it depends how you go about it. You could go any way you want to go with it, I mean I've seen artists or an artist like Malevich use two white colors next to each other, and you got people that do all kinds of things that work as art, but you must be really smart to pull it off. And artists do it all the time. But I think being a black artist in the United States, it's one of the most perplexing, hardest things to do, especially in abstraction. But just being a black artist period in the United States, you have to carry all that with you. All of that comes with you, so now, we're at a point where they say, "Well everybody wants to work with black artists. We're in!" Well, what do you mean "We're in"? They see value. Before I said there was intrinsic value. People weren't interested, but there was value. I mean we were always "in," but we didn't have intrinsic value. That was the problem. And then now it's the second act. I mean they're beginning to look at us critically, really critically, and in the context of the moment, the now. Where is art right now? Who's innovating, who's pushing the envelope? Where's painting going? Does race matter? Does gender? All of it... Globalization has really helped this whole thing but there's still these specific categories, styles, and trends that people have to conform to.



James Little in his Chelsea studio, ca. 1990.

LPB: It's interesting, when you said that the Studio Museum and Thelma opened the conversation to the diaspora, to the world, right? It would be interesting to see how this new categorization will look like when there are cross currents between your particular approach and then maybe someone in Kenya or South Africa. What are the commonalities, and how then do we begin to write about art from a black perspective?

JL The Studio Museum has opened up a lot of

possibilities for me, but I really don't fit the mold of its mission. So that's what makes it so interesting, because you have a whole group of black artists that wouldn't be considered in that context at all. So that's really smart. You don't get pigeonholed. It's like, Well, hey that guy right there is black too. It's not just the one whose talking about the police shootings. And all that is relevant but it just paints a bigger picture. You can't paint us with a broad stroke of the brush and that's just it. That's the part I like. It's a seminal place and I think that the fact that the seed has been planted and it's growing outward is a very good thing. But you know artists, everybody wants recognition on some level. But you have to find peace within yourself, man. You have to find out what you're going to do and you must stick to it. And if you have to have a critique... sometimes it's just okay to have a critique between yourself. But when I see something that I like, I know it works. I remember Clement Greenberg said when you have an aesthetic experience it's immediate.

LPB: When I walked into the studio!

JL: Exactly! That's what I'm saying. That was it, right there. When you first walked in you said, "Wow." It's that kind of thing. I'm just going to keep my foot on the pedal, I'm going to keep working with the people that I'm working with and see what unfolds. I'm having a lot of success these past couple of years. I got some big things in front me.

LPB: I guess this is last question, but to just take it back to the beginning with your student, so he made six paintings?

JL: Yeah.

LPB: So the question of what comes next, he said he needed a break, right? And so, for me that moment connects to something you said, which was really very important... do you find meaning, personal meaning, in what you're doing?

JL: Is it a necessity? And then when you hit that bump in the road or when you hit that wall, man, I mean you must figure out that there's more to get around. You have to challenge that. You can't get up there and get to the tough stuff and say, "Look I must go on vacation, but I can't." The reward is getting through the tough stuff. And that's what's perplexing about the art thing. When I was going to school there were kids that could draw their asses off. There were kids that were better draftsman than me, for certain. But no one was more determined than me. I had it in me, man. It was in my gut. I had a friend, Robert Sanchez, and he said, "You know, you are what you eat." And we were damn near eating art. I couldn't wait to get to the studio, it was almost like a revelatory experience when I was young. Now I'm discovering this stuff, how to master my craft. Took me a lifetime to master that material right there.

LPB: And also you grew up in a family that invested in your craft.

JL: Well yes, that's true. I was living with folks that encouraged me to work hard. You know, everybody was trying to push towards a practical profession. Getting a job. You get yourself a wife. "How are you going to support your wife and kids?" Well, my marriage is to painting so I'm going to support my wife because painting is my wife. Now, of course, I have a real wife and I had to figure out how to support the real wife and support the painting. Nothing was going to work if I was going to lose either of them. To be acknowledged on the level that I am now, I mean... I didn't see that coming. I just knew I was working hard and this big commission came up, which was tough as hell. Real hard.

LPB: In Jamaica, Queens?

JL: Yeah, that thing was hard as hell because I had to use another part of my brain to pull it off. It's going okay. I'm pleased and I'm blessed. I mean I grew up in a completely segregated environment until college. That was the situation, which was fine with me. It was fine. It didn't bother me at all. We were having a great time.

LPB: (laughter)

JL: I'm serious. We were having a great time. It was wonderful. Then all of a sudden, we got this idea about integrating and busing people, and from that a lot of other things unfolded. And even today they say busing still didn't work. We're right back to square one. But the thing I can say is that, and I stress this, man... The most urgent thing in front of us right now is education. I think kids must get a good education. You can't take this stuff for granted. There has to be a way to develop ways for kids to get a very good education. It's very doable. I think that if I didn't receive a good education at very early age... I almost blew this thing many times along the way, just doing silly shit. Hanging out with the wrong people. But I was always pretty smart and lucky too. I think that's one of the things that holds us back today: lack of good education. When I was young, I thought everybody went to college. No. Not at all, brother. In the real world, we are a very small number. Anyway that's it, that's my story.

James
Panero

Studio Visit: James Little

James Little in his studio in Brooklyn, image couretsy 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.

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

THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

James Little with Benjamin La Rocco

BY BENJAMIN LA ROCCO, MAY 7, 2009

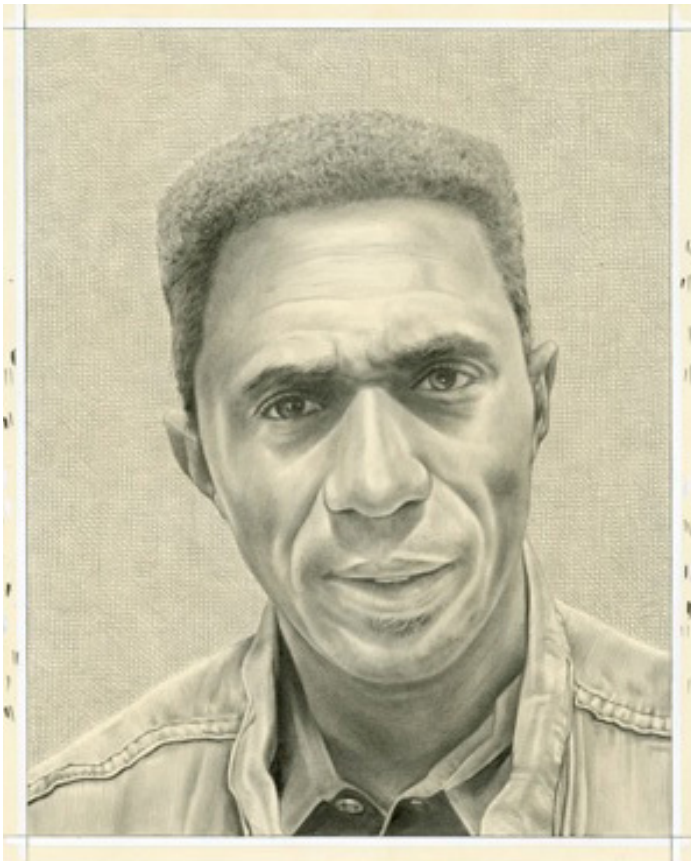
In the midst of his preparation of the new one-person exhibit *De-Classified: New Paintings* at June Kelly Gallery, which will be on view from May 7 til June 9, 2009, the painter James Little took time to visit *Rail* Headquarters to talk to Managing Art Editor Benjamin La Rocco about his life and work.

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



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

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 fellow-ship, and earned an MFA there. While I was there I

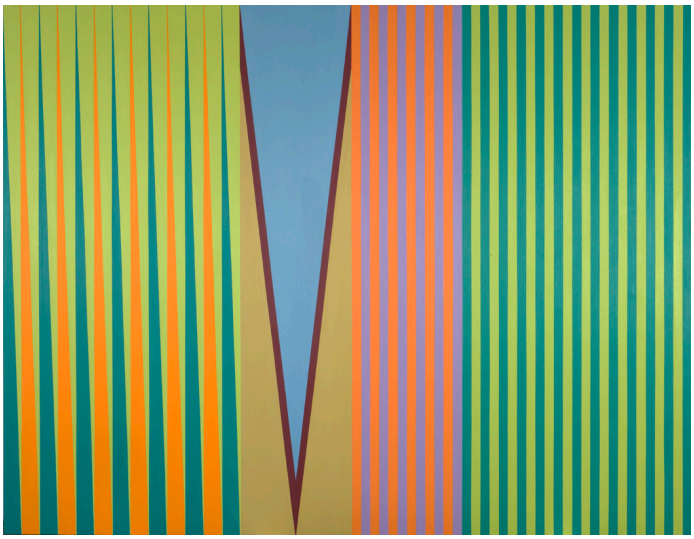
met Clement Greenberg and a number of other people, Hilton Kramer, Sol Lewitt, you name it. It was a

prettyhigh-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.

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



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

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, its 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 its 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 ref-erence to your paintings. You do use tape and you work with diagonals sometimes, verticals, and no hori-zon-tals. 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 specifi-cally 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 inter-ested 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 com-positional 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 Green-berg 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 understand-ing 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.

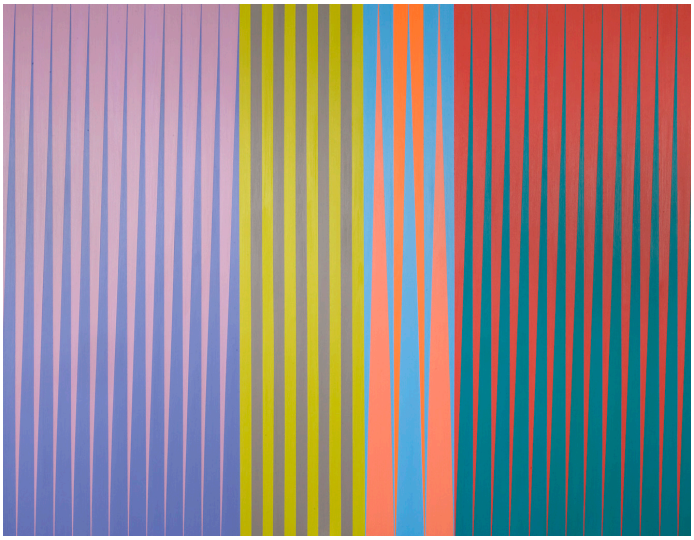
Rail: Would you talk about it as a sort of historical awareness?

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 paint-ing 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 dis-cord 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 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



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

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 that 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.

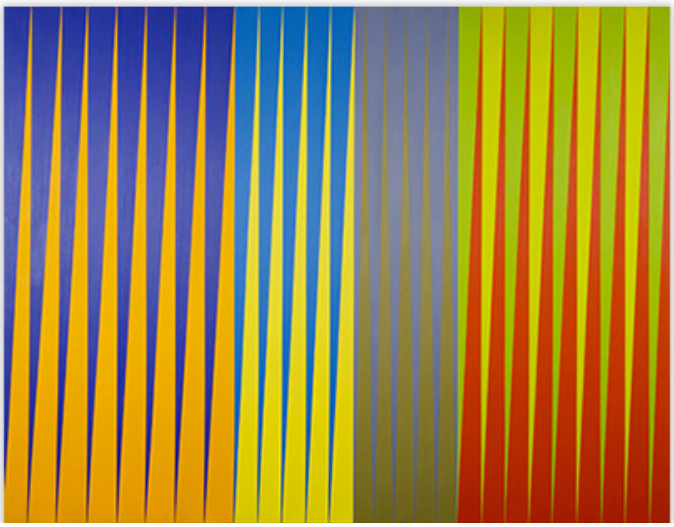
Rail: A multiplicity. You've said that you borrow from all over to arrive at your forms and color—certain Native American art, West African art, Mexican art, and you've even talked about commercial color relationships as influences. So I'm interested in how you think about taking in all these influences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

Little: Well, we're in the business of visual phenom-ena 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 politi-cal 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 paint-ing, but the reason I called it "The First Black" was because it seemed endless that anytime there was a black person to 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



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

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.

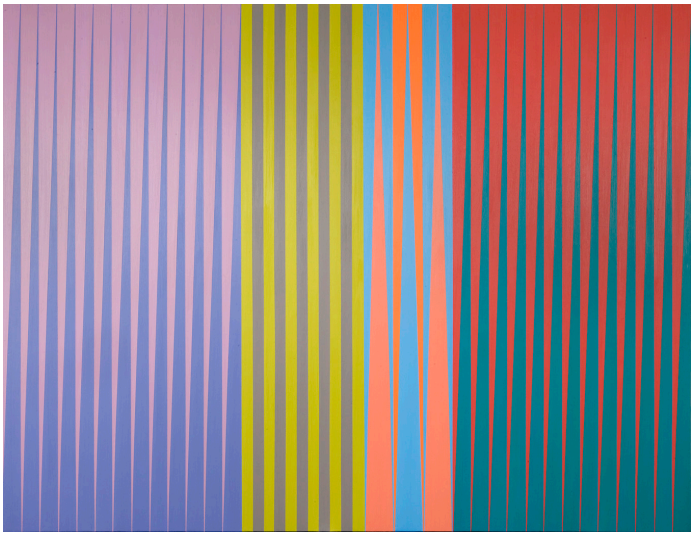
Rail: All this generates this really intense optical quality in your work. What are your thoughts about that specifically? There's a whole tradition of optical art which you don't seem to associate yourself with, and I don't think your paintings are really in that category. But nonetheless, they have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

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.



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

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.

culture type

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.

"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."

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.

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 became 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

ARTnews

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 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.

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."

GOTHAM

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

Courtesy of Gotham.

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 Land eld, 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

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 *Black Stars & White Paintings,* Kavi Gupta | Elizabeth St. Fl. 1, Chicago, IL
James Little: Homecoming, Dixon Gallery and Gardens, Memphis, TN
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 *In These Truths*, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York
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*, Duchess 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
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY
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
Moody Arts Center, Rice University, Houston, TX

SELECTED PRESS AND PUBLICATIONS

2022 Sheet, Hilarie M. "James Little, Unapologetic Abstractionist Painter, Catches the Limelight." New York Times, October 20, 2022.
"What To Do in New York City in August." New York Times, August 4, 2022.
"What To Do in New York City in July." New York Times, July 13.
Davis-Marks, Isis. "With a Whitney Biennial feature and newfound commercial representation, James Little's commitment to abstraction is finally paying off." The Art Newspaper, June 21.
Morici, Abigail. "James Little: Homecoming," Memphis Magazine, June 20.
Yates, Christin. "Dixon's 16 Gallery Spaces Each Hosting a Mini-Exhibition." Daily Memphian, June 6.
"A Long Overdue Recognition: James Little Finally Gets His Turn in the Spotlight at this Year's Whitney Biennial," ARTnews, May 2.
Chiu, Vivian. "The 2022 Whitney Biennial Expands the Scope of 'American' Art." OCULA, April 27.
Gordon, Dana. "The Single Best Work in the Whitney Biennial." The New York Sun, April 18.
Fisher, Simon; Fuchs, Eva; Mitchell, Rory. "Whitney Biennial 2022: Artist Installations that Stole the Show." OCULA, April 8.
Marius, Marley. "A Glimpse into this Year's Whitney Biennial." VOGUE, April 2.
Dozier, Ayanna. "At the 2022 Whitney Biennial, Compelling Works Are Overshadowed by an Inaccessible Space." ARTSY, March 31.
Cotter, Holland. "A Whitney Biennial of Shadow and Light." New York Times, March 31.
Greenberger, Alex. "A Sharp Understated Whitney Biennial Looks to the Past to Process the Grief of the Present." ARTnews, March 30.
Durón, Maximilíano. "12 Standouts at the 2022 Whitney Biennial, Where Poetic Reflections on Past Two Years Shine Brightly." ARTnews, March 29.

2021 *James Little*, Kavi Gupta, 2021
Chromatic Rhythm | James Little: Paintings on Paper, Sarah Moody Gallery of Art, 2021
Voon, Claire. "Chicago: Six Must-See Exhibitions." Art Basel, December 18.

2020 *Louise Nevelson + James Little*, Rosenbaum Contemporary, 2020
*James Little | Beyond Geometry–Selection*s, The Lobby Gallery Park Avenue and 59th Street, 2020
The Shape of Abstraction: Selections from the Ollie Collection, St. Louis Art Museum, 2020
Valentine, Victoria L. "James Little's Black Paintings are a 'Volley of Minimalist Ideals' Exposing the Drama, Richness, and Contrasting Values of Black." Culture Type, October 22.

Corwin, William. “Going Beyond Geometry: James Little’s Social Abstraction,” Arcade Project, August 15.
Sheets, Hilarie M. “Color and Design Matter. So Does Optimism.” New York Times, March 19.
2019 Kistner, Matthew. “Interview: James Little Talks ‘The Shape of Abstraction: Selections from the Ollie Collection’ at Saint Louis Art Museum.” ReviewSTL, October 23.
Duff, Gary. “A Curator Finds Inspiration In Abstract Expressionism at The American Fine Arts Society Gallery.” Gotham, April 3.
Corwin, William. “ArtSeen: New York-Centric.” Brooklyn Rail, March 5.
2018 *Color / Line / Form,* Rosenbaum Contemporary, 2018
2017 Brooks, Leronn P. “James Little by LeRonn P. Brooks.” BOMB, April 19.
2013 Panero, James. “Studio Visit: James Little.” New Criterion, May 3.
2011 McGee, Celia. “Driven to Abstraction.” ARTnews, January 1.
2009 Cotter, Holland. “NY Times Art in Review: James Little.” New York Times, June 5.
La Rocco, Benjamin. “James Little with Benjamin La Rocco.” Brooklyn Rail, May 1.
2007 Harithas, James. *James Little: Untold Stories,* Station Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007
2005 N’Namdi, George; Loving, Al; Costa, Robert; Brockington, Horace; Morgan, Robert C.; Harithas, James, *James Little: Reaching for the Sky,* G.R. N’Namdi Gallery, 2005
1981 Kingsley, April, *Afro-American Abstraction*, 1981