

Modern Painters

May 23, 2011

The Big Hearted Paintings of James Little

By Benjamin Genocchio



Artist James Little discussing his artwork at June Kelly Gallery

Photo by Regina Cherry

James Little's "Ex Pluribus Unum"

**June Kelly Gallery, 166 Mercer St #3C, New York
May 12-June 21, 2011**

Does anybody really care about the craft of painting anymore? For those who do, I cannot recommend the James Little exhibition at June Kelly gallery highly enough. It is a graceful, even gentle show of half a dozen abstract paintings produced over the last two years.

Little's art is not complicated to understand: he uses simple geometry and combinations of sunny, eye-pleasing colors to create subtle spatial movement. That is basically it. But this immediacy masks the extraordinary technical complexity of the work.

Encaustic is the artist's medium. But this is no lumpy wax and pigment mixture. He likes to work thin, boiling the wax to a very high temperature and then limiting the pigment to get a delicate, watery liquid. Then slowly, slowly, he begins to apply layers of color.

Each piece here took many months of patient labor, much of which I suspect is lost on the casual viewer. To begin with, there is the variety of colors, usually at least 12 per picture, with each color needing dozens of layers. The artist even makes his own varnishes.

Working with very thin paint gives these paintings an extreme flatness. This is not easy to do in any medium. Flatness also helps with creating the sense of spatial oscillation, which is, you might say, the subject matter of these paintings. Little knows what he is doing.

Those familiar with Little's previous work will notice the shift to a higher-keyed palette in the current show. These days he likes to work with blues, orange, and different kinds of gray. His forms are more complicated, too, although you have to look carefully to figure out the differences.

Little's imagery may be geometric, but these paintings are more expressionist than abstract in orientation. Take notice, for instance, of the soft, fleshy texture of their surfaces. I love this work, for its sensuality as art as much as for its craft. The more you look the more you see.