

FROM THE MAYOR'S DOORSTEP

By Piri Halasz

James Little: Slants and White Paintings at June Kelly in SoHo through May 15th

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James Little, "Near There," 2017. Raw pigment on canvas, 33.5 x 41.50 inches. Courtesy of the artist and the June Kelly Gallery, New York

LITTLE: DOTS AND DASHES

James Little carries on with the still far-from-exhausted “post-painterly” tradition of geometric abstraction of the 1960s and lives in our fad-happy Big Apple.

His current show of 12 paintings has six “white paintings” and six “slants.” All were obviously very complex in concept, yet work out being to amazingly simple in effect and more rather than less rewarding to contemplate.

The more experimental are the “white paintings,” whose top layer is off-white, of oil laid over stained linen. The white oil has a grid of rows of horizontal small ovals opening onto the under-painting in varied colors – apparently quite complex compositions lie below this white cloak.

All these “white paintings” are quite small –23 x 29 inches—and the ovals that form their grid are even smaller, maybe 2 inches long at most, and half an inch high – so that there are maybe 15 of them across each picture and more than 20 down. These “white paintings” were done in 2016 and 2017.

I liked best the ones where the underpainting was brightest and most consistent -- “Apache” (with blues and greens), “Soft Target” (with russet and white), and “Refugee” (mostly speckled white, with purple or dark blue touches to set it off).

Even better I liked the “Slants,” though they were more familiar and consistent with Little’s earlier work. Three of them were large (64 x 74 inches), and the rest were smaller. The smaller ones were framed, which in today’s climate, somehow made them look a tad regimented. The larger ones were unframed, and looked freer. In composition, all were similar: four or five vertical columns of stripes or bands of color that slant down diagonally from left to right. Although one’s first impression is that all of these stripes are differently-colored, further contemplation reveals that only a very limited number of colors are actually and most harmoniously employed. These colors are varied so adroitly that stripes of the same color only adjoin one another when they fit into the artist’s larger plan. Two of the three large “slants” in particular stood out for me. One, on the wall behind the reception desk, was “Re-Set” (2017). This was distinguished by a soft but radiant palette of just five colors: deep gray, lime, cream, strawberry and tan. The other, at the right-hand end of the gallery, was “Temporary Fixation” (2018). This was a blazing concatenation of red, pink, and a brownish maroon, with occasional accents of green and tan to complement them. Both paintings constituted an intoxicating mix of discipline with innovation.