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James Little: Never Say Never, Recent Work

[June Kelly Gallery](#)



James Little, Maasai Re-Construction, 2011; Oil and wax on canvas; 72.5 x 95.5 inches

James Little, a painter like no other, is back at June Kelly Gallery. This time, before the opening of the exhibition, I made a point of visiting his studio in East Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Born in Memphis, Tennessee, Little studied painting at New York's Syracuse University through its Afro-American Studies Fellowship. During his time there in the 1970s, he was able to cross paths with two of the school's most famous art-world graduates, Clement Greenberg and Hilton Kramer. Influenced by both critics, Little has now gone on to push his compositional forms through a decades-long study of the process of painting.

In her catalogue essay for the latest show, 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 shapes, colors, and value to energize his forms.

A labor-intensive wax medium, which he developed himself, gives the work its signature molten finish (reproductions always do these pieces an injustice). The process requires constant adjustments and an attention to detail. Without studio assistants, Little's hand is at work each step of the way. As I learned through my visit, much of his studio space, as well as much of his time, is dedicated to the creation of his paints. To ensure purity and consistency, he sources his own turpentine and oil. Glass jars of various formulas line the studio. As a final step after mixing the pigments, Little adds heated beeswax to create an encaustic that is poured in several layers on a horizontal canvas. The silky finish of the surfaces, combined with the precision of the lines, adds to the work's attraction.



James Little, Zulu Boogie Woogie, 2012; Oil and wax on canvas; 72.5 x 95.5 inches

Because of the time he puts into each canvas, Little may create only four large paintings a year. Four such paintings now make up the heart of the exhibition at June Kelly. And each have four quadrants of forms, arranged horizontally, with chevrons and zigzags sandwiched between vertical bars of color that move the eye up and down while scanning left to right.

Little draws from a long history of pattern-making, from non-Western sources to Renaissance tile work to neon street signs. Additional African influences come through in the titles, such as *Maasai Re-Construction* and *Zulu Boogie-Woogie*. These names should serve as subtle reminders that as collectors seek out a younger generation of cartoonish “identity” artists, true trailblazers such as Little continue to contemplate the same issues in far more profound and lasting ways.

This work may not serve as political tokens for power-brokers. In its range of expression and feel, it refuses to play it safe. Fortunately, there are still dealers like June Kelly—who managed the artist Romare Bearden for over a decade before his death—dedicated to a diversity of artistic expression that James Little represents.