

Contextualizing Black Exceptionalism: James Little's *Black Stars & White Paintings* at Kavi Gupta

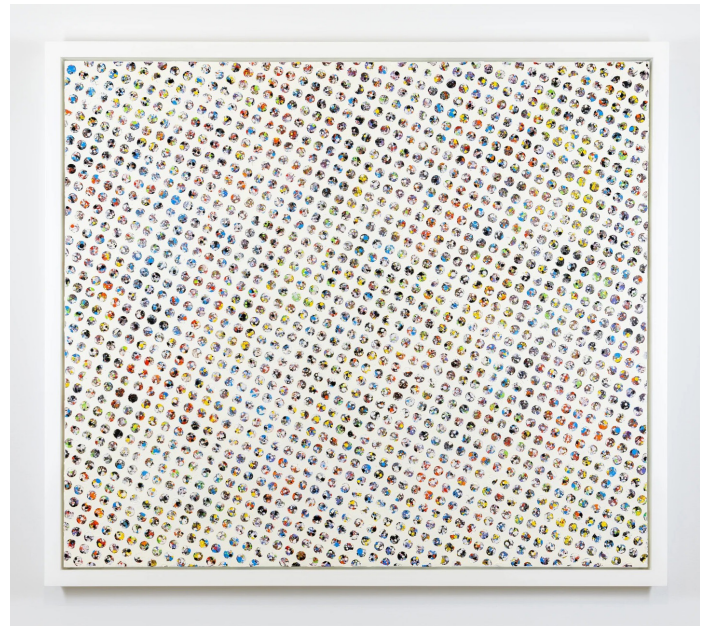
BY VASIA RIGOU, FEBRUARY 9, 2023

There are black stars. “Fat Star,” “Cute Star,” “Spangled Star,” “Selfless Star,” are all oil and wax on linen; all created with just two tones of the same color: black. Then, there are white paintings. They look like prismatic rainbows that are about to jump out of the canvas. The tiny squares and circles form a chaotic whirlwind of color that somehow has an ethereal quality—almost meditative. The contrast within James Little’s “Black Stars & White Paintings” exhibition, on view at Kavi Gupta, is striking.

Using abstraction to comment on the sociopolitical issues of today, Little conveys a powerful message without compromising aesthetics or being head-on and in your face. He wants you to take your time, examine the works and look beyond pitch-black stars and hallucinatory checkerboard patterns. The subtext of cultural identity, discrimination, racism and police brutality is subtle but undoubtedly there. But there’s also optimism, hope and Black excellence breaking down barriers and redefining the world as we know it despite the fact that there’s always one more mountain to climb.

The works collide with one another and the gallery space becomes something else depending on the angle you look at it and the way you walk through it. The conversation between paintings is intense. So is the one between the artist and the viewer.

The New York-based artist emerged from the 2022 Whitney Biennial as a rising star. It’s hard not to draw a parallel between Little and his paintings—a precise geometrical representation of two multilayered entities: artist and artwork—both Black stars—are at times indistinguishable. The paintings, on one hand, are the result of a laborious process. A key element of Little’s practice that includes layers and layers of hand-mixed pigments, hot beeswax and varnish—a painting technique used by ancient Egyptian and Greek artists. The artist, a seasoned painter working in his studio for around forty years before he made headlines, is equally, if not more, multilayered. Originally from Memphis, Tennessee, Little grew up in a family that was unafraid of hard, at times



James Little, *Colored Neighbors*, 2022. Kavi Gupta Gallery

repetitive, “from scratch” work—his father was in construction, his mother was a cook. That informed his process immensely, turning him into a step-by-step craftsman whose work is a direct response to history, identity and life at large.

His main ingredient? Emotion. “It’s about getting as much feeling out of the work as you can,” he says. “You’re not gonna get a syllabi on my Black identity, or anything like that. The art world is overloaded with rhetoric and jargon. Just stop and put it on the wall and let’s see what happens.”

The bottom line: deeply committed to portray the challenges, complexities and possibilities of the Black experience, through the expressive capabilities of abstraction, Little explores Blackness outside of the historical lenses of misery and oppression. Instead he adds a sprinkle of stardust and magic to it.