

Petzel

Saul Appelbaum, “James Little,” *Curator Guide*, May 2025.



James Little Studio, New York, 2024. Photograph by Saul Appelbaum

In this conversation, Saul Appelbaum visits James Little in his studio to explore the layered terrain of his abstract painting practice. Together, they delve into the formal rigor, historical depth, and social dimensions that inform his work—examining not only the visual ‘language’ of abstraction but also the risks, processes, and civic engagement embedded within it.

Saul Appelbaum James, will you tell me a little bit about the white paintings for your first solo exhibition at Petzel Gallery?

James Little: I did them for this particular show called *Conversations*, and they’re an extension of my ideas around white painting, color painting, shaped forms, and patterning design. It’s pretty much me talking to myself aesthetically. And I just go back and forth, back and forth.

If I hadn’t had this show, I would still work these ideas out. It just so happened that everything aligned, and it worked out perfectly. The gallery space uptown is in a townhouse, and it’s beautiful. Tall ceilings, very intimate. I decided that was what I wanted to do. I wanted to make something that would fit nicely in that space.

Petzel

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SA Within your larger body of work, there are the color-field geometric abstractions, similar to the studies behind you. You have the black and white paintings that were in the Whitney Biennial. Will you tell me more specifically about the white paintings in this context?

JL It's going to be different iterations of the white painting. This is ongoing. None of these things is a pit stop. They are my ideas, but because I did a group of these doesn't mean I won't do that anymore. I probably won't do that particular thing, but it's going to be something that came out of the idea.

It's like a crosscurrent of ideas. I don't just stick with one. That's not me. I like to paint about what I'm thinking about, and I have a lot of different thoughts every day. I wake up and get something I might want to explore. It doesn't mean these thoughts are simple. It's a science of problem-solving.

I can't tell you what the next painting will look like. I have an idea, but I have to mentally prepare myself for my next painting because it's a lot of work. I just know what's in front of me. The canvas you're looking at will be a painting at some point, and I have to do a lot of work to get there. Then there'll be another one and another one.

When you look at the history of painting, there's always an -ism or catchphrase. I don't see it that way. I look at what I consider to be the best paintings out there, most of which were twentieth-century, and some nineteenth-century paintings. There are a few contemporary artists that I pay attention to, but my ideas expand the whole canon. So if somebody did something interesting to me one hundred years ago, then I'm certainly interested in that, like Manet, Vermeer, or Dubuffet.

Over the years, I've tried to develop a really close relationship with my painting, almost like a physiological relationship. I'm immersed in what I'm doing, and I want to be connected to it in a certain way. It's all about problem-solving. It's not about developing a great skill set and just pounding that out till the sun sets. You have to continue to take a risk, risk, risk, risk. And that's what makes the difference. If you don't take risks, it becomes an exercise. I don't know the value, the significant value, in that. I can't measure the pertinence of something when you don't take risks—noticeable risks—in painting. And that's the only way you can forge ahead.

I've been engaging with some of these ideas for most of my life, and then new ones arrive or arise. I'll go for it. But there's a lot of contemplation that goes into what I do. And over the years, I've just narrowed it down to where my interests are. There are

Petzel

Saul Appelbaum, "James Little," *Curator Guide*, May 2025.

some theoretical interests that I have, and then there are some other physical interests that I have, and there are also some scientific interests. I try to merge that in a significantly aesthetic way. And that's the way I go about abstract painting.



James Little, *A Matter of Time*, 2023, oil on linen, 47 x 57 inches

SA Within your larger body of work, there are the color-field geometric abstractions, similar to the studies behind you. You have the black and the white paintings that went into the Whitney Biennial. Will you tell me more specifically about the white paintings in this context?

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To get to something that functions as art is an extremely difficult thing to do. And for it to have merit and hold its own space in time is something to be noted. It's something to be celebrated. And that's what I've always tried to do. I've always tried to make paintings that you could put on a wall in my time, put it next to, I don't know, anybody. Cezanne, Pollock, de Kooning, whomever you want to choose, anybody. I've always felt like my aim was to make work good enough to belong there—whether it was there or not, it belonged. A place like the Whitney gave me that opportunity, which was appreciated. It was celebrated. They saw what I do, what I can do. Everybody saw it,

Petzel

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and it was immediate. People coming off the street saw it. Everyone gravitated to my work, and they spoke pretty highly about it. I think that that's what art should do. When it becomes too complicated, then it disconnects. It loses its purpose. And the purpose is for people. Quality counts, and you can take a position against anything. The conversation is not the conversation that's out there in the art world, in the criticism, in the trends of the moment; the most important conversation is one you have with yourself.

So that's what I've tried to do, to figure out where my strengths were even when I was a kid. The things that I like to do or what I want to focus my attention on. Being a Black artist, I never thought about it once or twice because that was a societal thing. They cut us out. I wasn't represented by any galleries and wasn't making any sales, and the museums weren't paying any attention. It's just part of the way African American history and literature have been treated. I'm not unique in that way. There were some fabulous writers like Zora Neale Hurston and James Baldwin, who did have some success, but they took a beating to get there. And so you just stick to your craft, your art, whatever it is you do. The sociological design wasn't designed for me to succeed. It was obstructionist. I wasn't supposed to do anything. Why would you want to be a Black abstract painter? Well, I can't answer that question because it wasn't a rational question to me. Because the question is loaded.



James Little Studio, New York, 2024. Photographs by Saul Appelbaum

520 W 25th Street New York NY 10001

Tel 212 680 9467 Fax 212 680 9473 info@petzel.com www.petzel.com

Petzel

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SA When you talk about ideas, I'm struck with the thought that it's not just an idea; it's the idea. The idea is something that consolidates many of the thoughts you've had. You wake up every day with many thoughts, and the big idea brings these together.

JL All of them are prevalent, but you have to make it concrete. All of those things add up at some point. You have to edit to get to what's the most essential. But all of it is relevant on some level.

SA I was struck by the white space and some of the tighter configurations. I started thinking of the function of color and Impressionism and these tiny gaps between punctuations of color. The fascinating thing is that the white does not function as a negative space, as something behind or as a backdrop, especially with the impasto. Sometimes the tighter configurations of the colored patterns have an optical effect where the patterns start shifting based on what the eye is looking for in a pattern. And in that case, the white supports the experience. But it's not a negative space or a background.

JL It's mutual. Both need each other. If it is just color all over the place without the white, then that's what that would be, and vice versa. There's what I like to call a complete synthesis. They both have a mutual function in painting. One doesn't hold any more space than the other. And all of it is a positive space. There's no such thing as negative space. That just doesn't exist in these pictures. I control the painting up to a certain point, and then there are certain things that you have to allow to happen, and there are certain things that you will never know what's going to happen. Some of it is improvised, and some of it is discovered. And what makes it all related is that it came from the same hand.

SA In some of your other interviews, you've talked about music. You don't play music in your studio when you're painting.

JL Rarely.

SA And then you've also made analogies in the past to music within your paintings or a kind of musicality. Is it fruitful to talk about music and patterns in abstract painting?

JL Music has color, and music has rhythm. So does painting. So does the type of painting that I do. If it's just those two things, then I agree. But music does a lot more than what we hear, and painting does a lot more than what we see. They have

Petzel

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connections, but they also diverge. The things that are attractive to me when it comes to music, different types of music, that I can see some sort of parallel in painting, then I comment on that. Music doesn't inform my work that way. And if it does, it's a subconscious act. It's not an objective. But they are two different disciplines that I respect. And like literature, same thing. Literature can have color and design and all these other wonderful things. But writers do what they do. I respect what they do.

SA In other interviews, you have voiced that you want to keep the social aspects of your life separate from abstract painting.

JL Separate from my work. Not abstract painting. That's for somebody else to comment on.

SA You would prefer to leave that mapping to authors?

JL Well, not necessarily leave it out, but it's just not something I'm going to engage in that much when I'm painting. When I'm in a situation where that's the topic, and it's outside of what I'm doing in the studio, then I can engage. My social history is parallel to a lot of people's social history. I come from Memphis, Tennessee. Dr. King was killed when I was sixteen. I came up in a segregated background. You can look at all the things happening today in the South. It's the same kind of thing. If I'd been painting about that stuff forty years ago, I'd be painting the same damn thing. So it doesn't align with what I'm trying to do.



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A You've also commented on the titles of your paintings.

JL Yeah.

SA It's one of the spaces where a painter can think about language. I'm curious what you think about that.

JL Well, I mean, people use all types of titles for their work, but it always has something to do with your history or what you're thinking about or your education or your social condition or the political climate. So that's where I get my titles from. Some titles are happy, some are sad, some are piercing, some are direct political statements, some are celebratory. It goes on and on. I don't just title things arbitrarily. The painting speaks to me in a certain way, so it asks for a title. Some paintings don't ask for anything, so you don't title them anything.

SA It's like giving little hints about the many thoughts that you wake up with.

JL Yeah, they do sometimes give you hints.

SA In your painting *Inmate Number 7053 and Her Followers*, 2019, is there a correlation between the title and what's happening in the painting compositionally or how you've painted it? For instance, there's a seriality to that title.

Petzel

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JL That painting was Rosa Parks's arrest number when they arrested her for sitting at the front of the bus. The painting is loaded with moving shapes and colors. That's all. That's it.

SA No alignment of the title with the composition?

JL No, none of that.

SA I'm laughing because it is like a little hint. It's related but separate, too.

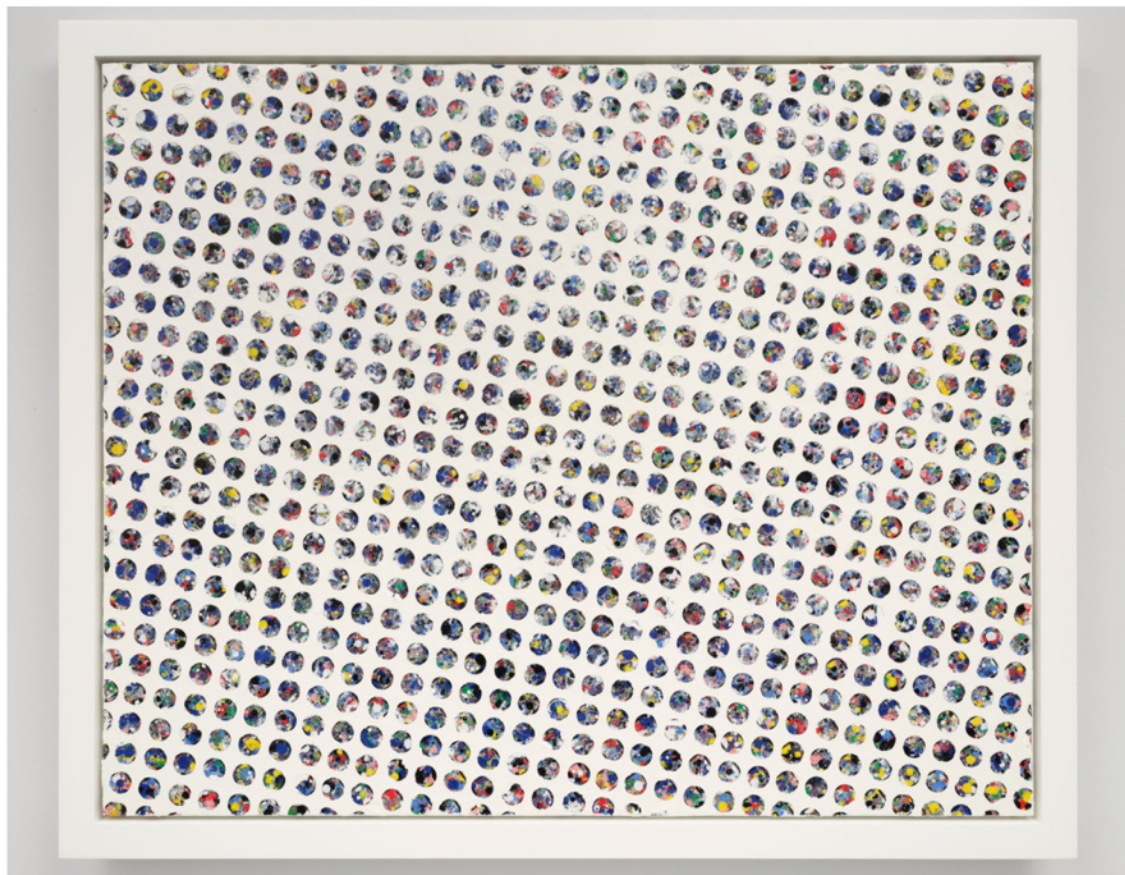
JL It is.



Installation view, James Little, *Conversations*, Petzel, New York, 2023

Petzel

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A Matter of Facts, 2023, oil on linen, 47 x 57 inches

SA Early in the development of abstract painting, I'm thinking of Kandinsky or Mondrian, there was an optimism about modern times and modern art, and there was also a spiritual dimension to it. There were aspirations about the heightened qualities of abstract thought. Is there a spiritual dimension or optimism in play in your paintings?

JL Well, I like both of them. As I said before, it's problem-solving and spirituality comes through humanity. It's a tall order, and you can't separate feeling from that, from spirituality. I relate to what they were saying, and I relate to how they arrived at it. It was independent of everything else around them. To get somebody like Mondrian and to come up with what he came up with—something you hadn't seen before. Who had seen a Mondrian? Whoever thought somebody would come up with something like that and make it work? All of the components, the parts, the theory, the analysis. Same thing with Kandinsky and improvisational painting. When you talk about music, there it is, right there. Improvisational painting, improvisational jazz. Black American jazz

Petzel

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influenced a lot of this stuff—improvisational blues and jazz. The tradition of American artists, Black American artists, music and musical tradition, and the church, and the gospel: there’s your spirituality and your color.

When it came to visual artists, they weren’t going to pay attention to that. When I say “they,” I mean the American public and the powers that be. And that’s not to say that everybody was even ready. I mean, there were a handful of good artists. There were probably more that were just decent, and there probably were even more that just weren’t that good at all. And so, the same thing with music. Everybody couldn’t play the trumpet like Miles Davis or sing like Mahalia Jackson or Leontyne Price and those kinds of people. But some people were really good who went unnoticed. So it depends on how far you can take it and if it weathers the critique. And the critique is not necessarily a written critique. It’s usually a public discussion. But when you hear it, you know it. And when you know it, it’s universal so that everybody can hear and appreciate it.

I was talking the other day and said, “Look, when you and I walk out of this building, we will be looking at the same things, everything out there, but we won’t see the same things.” I will see something totally different than what you will see. You’ll be looking right at it. You’ll see it, but what’s behind you seeing it doesn’t play the role it does for me. I’m looking at it and seeing it in completely different contexts, which is primarily an aesthetic context—all of it, everything out there. When you see the building, you see the building. When I see the building, I’m looking at how it was built, the structure, the organization, the bricks, the environment, the people, the sidewalk, the whole thing. And so it means something different to me than to you, and I use it differently.

SA Do you think with abstract painting, we can tighten that gap of me seeing something different than what you see, where we’re both closer to seeing the same thing?

JL That’s what painting does. It shares it with you. I’m out there mining through all of this stuff. I’m scavenging. I’m looking at stuff. I’m trying to get stuff in here. That’s what the art does. The art shares that with you.

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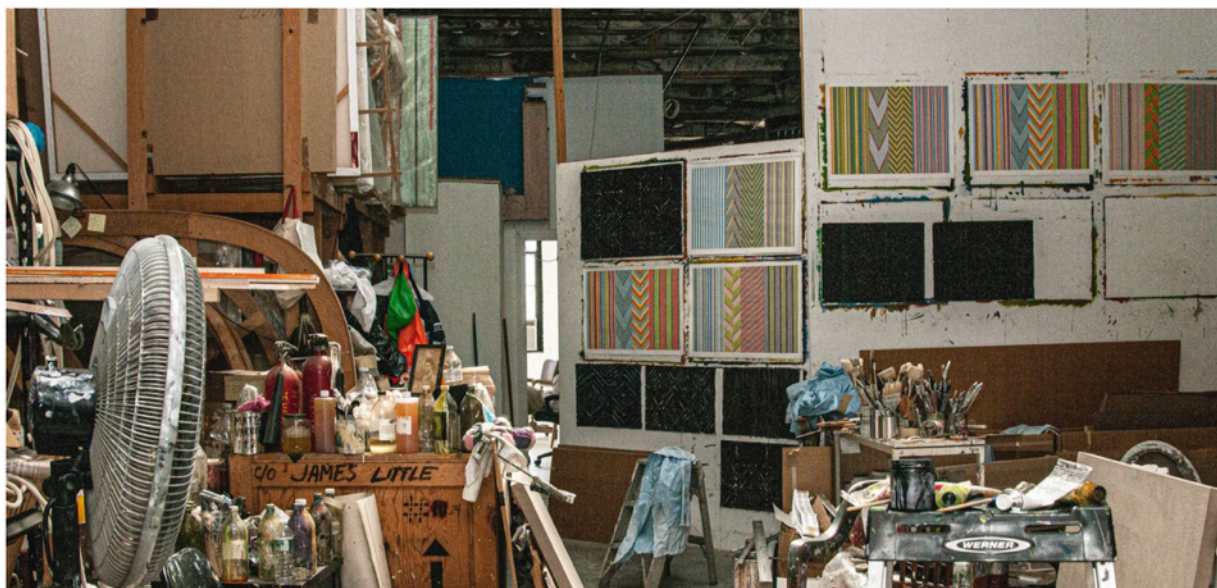
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James Little holds a BFA from the Memphis Academy of Art and an MFA from Syracuse University. He is a 2009 recipient of the Joan Mitchell Foundation Award for Painting. In addition to being featured prominently in the 2022 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, his work has been exhibited extensively in solo and group exhibitions around the world, including at MoMA P.S.1, New York; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville; Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond; and the Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C. In 2022, Little participated in a historic

Petzel

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collaboration for Duke Ellington's conceptual Sacred Concerts series at the Lincoln Center, New York, with the New York Choral Society at the New School for Social Research and the Schomburg Center in New York. Recent solo exhibitions include: Petzel, New York (2024); Kavi Gupta, Chicago (2022); Dixon Gallery and Gardens, Memphis (2022); Louis Stern Fine Arts, West Hollywood (2020); and June Kelly Gallery, New York (2018).

His paintings are represented in the collections of numerous public and private collections, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Virginia Museum of Fine Art, Richmond; The Studio Museum, Harlem, New York; The Menil Collection, Houston; Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis; Maatschappij Arti Et Amicitiae, Amsterdam; Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis; Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse; New Jersey State Museum, Trenton; Tennessee State Museum, Nashville; Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock; and the Newark Museum, Newark.

Appelbaum holds a Bachelor of Fine Art from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, a Master of Architecture from Cornell University, and a Master of Fine Art from the University of Chicago. He has worked with Harper's Bazaar, Serpentine Gallery, ASICS, Marian Goodman Gallery, Elle, Tony Cragg, The Broad Museum, FGP Atelier, Museum of the African Diaspora, Heidi Klum, The Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, InStyle, Critical Inquiry, the Kunstmuseum Bern, Grazia, Snoop Dogg, Adam McKay's Yellow Dot Studios, MAK Center for Art and Architecture, The Jewish Federation, Zión Moreno, Petzel Gallery, Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates, Nato Thompson's The Alternative Art School and Dreaming in Public, Perry Ellis, The Visionaries Agency, Atlanta Art Fair, Mick Jenkins, TRANSFER Gallery, Ann Hamilton, The Columbus Museum of Art, de Sarthe Gallery, TCAmgmt, Diego Boneta, Rocco Castoro's SCNR, L'Officiel, Hirmer Verlag, Kids of Immigrants, Natalia Reyes, Vogue, The Singapore Art Museum, Numéro, and Pope.L.

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