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ART & DESIGN



Julian Kent's painting "Grey Gardens" (2023) at Kerry Schuss

Julian Kent

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Through July 14. Kerry Schuss Gallery, 73 Leonard Street, Manhattan,

With his “Everyday Life” paintings the 21-year-old artist Julian Kent is already past the “looks promising” stage of his career. As seen in New York at the Independent Art Fair and especially in his current gallery debut, his paintings exude a youthful perfection. They operate as both narratives and objects with utmost efficiency; nothing is wasted or left over.

Kent’s small, stylized canvases depict specific moments in the lives of one or two Black people, seen in close-up, often tightly cropped. The setting is usually domestic; the action is primarily psychological and emotional, conveyed in subtle glances and gestures. Kent outlines his shapes in black and uses a palette of inspired plainness; his robust textures are particularly engaging. His small repeating brush strokes can evoke Robert Ryman, Philip Guston and Robert Thompson, only neater; their changes in direction or rhythm, create a sense of sturdiness and care that is implicitly optimistic.

The paintings at the Independent were fraught with apprehension — the racial stress that are far too constant to Black American life. The paintings at Schuss replace tension with moments of quiet enjoyment and togetherness cherished by all people. In “Late Afternoon,” a young woman and man sit in their living room; he touches her arm. In the background, a television shows a hand reminiscent of the hand of God bringing Adam to life in Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling. Did this cue the man’s light touch, or does it underscore the transformative power of touch, and love?

“Grey Gardens,” takes its title from the Maysles brothers’ 1975 documentary about the eccentric mother-daughter pair of high-society dropouts, Big Edie (Edith Bouvier Beale) and Little Edie, who lived in a squalid mansion in East Hampton with several dozen cats. But he substitutes a visibly less eccentric couple: a Black father and son with their cat. Their eyes convey different emotions: happiness, worry and watchfulness. WASP propriety is embraced and mocked by one of the painting’s largest shapes: the son’s tattersall shirt.

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