

Graham Little

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A Quiet End of Days
By Hettie Judah

Shall I start with the fox? I'm going to start with the fox. I can't look at the fox. Let that disruption wait.

Graham Little's art is coolly distanced, soothingly controlled. His meticulously plotted compositions are of this world, albeit a highly manipulated version of it: he offers us views onto a sequence of sets on which performers enact the minor dramas of the everyday. Each element, from the still-life arrangements of fruits, lamps, bowls, and bread to the uncanny poses held by the figures, has a staged quality. It is a world of beautiful things and beautiful people, clean vistas, new shoes, dispersed light. Even his titles are placed protectively out of reach, as addenda, between parentheses: *Untitled (Ball)*; *Untitled (Bridge)*; *Untitled (Squirrel)*.

Little's confected interiors are studded with markers of refinement and taste. Many nod to the 1970s and 1980s, a period during which disposable income, the mass-production of consumer goods and a flourishing print media placed a new kind of connoisseurship in reach of the middle classes. This was an era of lifestyle aspirations and status symbols, of color magazines and adventurous art direction.

In *Untitled* (2018) a young man in a burgundy robe sits in an Art Deco chair beside a glass table with a tubular metal base, drinking coffee as he reads a newspaper. His sophistication is indicated by his taste in art: a geometric abstraction hung on the wall behind the table. Little takes this pictorial irony, this inside-joke, and goes to town on it. The right angles flying across the abstract painting are answered by the crook of a knee, arm of a chair, bend of an elbow, leg of a table within the painted room beyond. He invites us to notice a pattern underpinning the whole painting.

The tonal antithesis to this palace of angular neutrals is *Untitled (Parlour)* (2014) with its Lego-block primaries, fussy swags, and scalloped edging. Both paintings are studies in close tone—in this case, reds on reds. As so often in Little's work, there's a picture within a picture—a crepuscular landscape of gothic pine trees and fog which performs as a window. *Untitled (Parlour)* is also anchored by a piece of art: a vase on the window ledge, with a swirling dotted glaze that carries the painting's saturated but reduced palette. Forms within the painting find echoes across the composition: the knobby curves of the scalloped napkins are answered by the decorative top of the braided loaf, and the tightly clustered leaves of cyclamen and African violets.

Like so many of Little's paintings—particularly those derived from magazine photographs—*Untitled* (2018) and *Untitled (Parlour)* occupy a dustless world, a stressless world, a place safe from harm.

But not the fox.

The first time I saw *Untitled (Fox)* (2017) I found it unbearable. I couldn't look at the painting face on—this mangled thing, with its body discomposed, its fur dank and matted, perhaps long dead. The fox carries with it all that you can't see in Little's stagey figure paintings. It is darkness, death, disease, decay, dirt. It is the un-picturesque ungovernable wild. It is the element of *vanitas* that has been omitted from the tabletop still life arrangements. Yet measuring the length of its body along the bottom of the painting is a patterned line punctuated with curves, dots, swoops, and lozenges of pierced blue.

This crucial, mystifying detail makes me think of Hilma af Klint's fine watercolor studies of flowers, mosses, and lichens in which each likeness is accompanied by a spirit portrait rendered as dissected geometries and symbolic colors. I don't think Little is offering a schema for the spirit of the dead fox. More, I think, he's contemplating the numbing power of decoration. In a companion work (not shown in FLAG's presentation) a dead strawberry plant

in a white neoclassical vase sits at the bottom of a painting beneath fragments of pattern and decorative design rendered in pale lines, as though an incomplete sketch.

Little is interested in the language and pictorial rhythm of pattern, whether in architecture or design. Think of how the extravagant molded ceiling of *Untitled (Ballroom)* (2013) unsettles the composition, pulling weight downwards in the painting as though this upper third might crush the glossy scene glimpsed through the open door. Look at how the incongruous, fluted column dominates *Untitled (Boutique)* (2019), its position echoed on the other side of the picture by the standing man, and the white uprights of the Memphis-era hanging rail. The classical allusions of that column tempt me to imagine of the standing man as a Roman sculpture. He has the trim physique, delicate contrapposto, and close helmet of curling hair, though the brightly colored 1980s leisurewear is a distraction. *Untitled (Boutique)* is polyglot in its design references—classical, modernist, postmodernist—a reminder of how decorative conventions are constantly reimagined.

Painted in papyrus tones, *Untitled (Bedroom)* (2021) has the radical flatness and strong horizontal lines of the Ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. It is a scene that draws attention to its own high artifice. The woman gestures while supported on a great pile of cushions and pillows. The man is standing right up against the shelf carrying the bread and bowl. Logically he can't be behind the woman—they are level with one another—but in this depthless image there is still space in front of him to accommodate her hand, which points beyond him, out of the picture.

Many of Little's paintings explore modes of display—the art direction of magazine photography, and highly designed interiors. As with *Untitled (Boutique)*, in *Untitled (Silk)* (2022) we find ourselves inside the fashion store of another era. Like a pair of surrealist ready-mades, two artificial legs stand displaying stockings on an inlaid wooden cabinet. Beside them is an impeccable study in white—a waxen-faced man in white slacks, a cable-knit sweater and white shirt and tie. As with his counterpart in *Untitled (Boutique)*, he might be a statue or mannequin: the white smoke rising from the tip of his cigarette is the picture's only hint of life.

(An aside on statues and mannequins. A mannequin is distinct from a statue because it performs as a display mechanism. However lovingly crafted, its form is subservient to its function. It strikes me that this distinction, into which are bound questions of artifice, display, status, and functionality, sits centrally in Little's work.)

Untitled (Silk) is a portrait of a place out of time—the black paper over the windows has faded and the strips of tape holding it in place are brown and ragged. A narrow gap between the sheets of paper offers a view out of the window and the suggestion of activity beyond the deathly stillness of this space. Apertures and portals are a recurring feature in Little's paintings. Frequently they punctuate a flat monochrome expanse, breaking up the clean, blocky geometry. As windows or doorways, the view they offer is incongruous. It might be a mannered landscape recalling the background of a quattrocento painting, or an unexpected wilderness like the snow-capped mountain peaks just glimpsed in *Untitled (Hand Mirror)* (2015) behind the distracted woman in peach silk pajamas.

Untitled (Mountain) (2021) plays with pictorial conventions of the sublime. Framed by a soaring dark archway, this landscape could have been borrowed from an early nineteenth-century painting of the Alps, complete with picturesque ruins and a lone figure trudging toward the barren wastes. Apparently balanced on an interior balustrade, a handsome young man reaches toward the landscape, his sweater the same pale yellow as the celestial light of the 'golden hour' tinting the high clouds. The heightened colors, the archway, the overblown drama of the mountains all nod to the great Romantic painter Casper David Friedrich. Unlike Friedrich's tiny travelers contemplating the greatness of nature, the figure in Little's foreground seems to have other things on his mind: love, perhaps, or escape. The whole composition invites the most fanciful interpretations.

In his paintings derived from twentieth-century fashion photography, Little brings things full circle. The artifice of the poses held by many of his figures derive from a long history of borrowing—the debt that painting since the Renaissance has owed to classical statuary, and the debt that fashion photography and advertising owes to painting. The young woman in *Untitled* (2000) is wearing a high-necked orange parka, but from her pose and the framing of her face, it might as well be an extravagant ruff in a portrait by Anthony van Dyck. The view through an open doorway into the ornamented interior of *Untitled (Ballroom)* (2013) is a dramatic framing device borrowed from Dutch genre painting. In its close tonal range, the coolness of the light, and composition, *Untitled (Ballroom)* seems to owe more to Johannes Vermeer than it does to *Vogue*.

I am not going back to the fox, but I want to end with the show's other *vanitas*: *Untitled (Sunflower Head)* (2022). This is a quiet end of days—the funerary sheet pulled back to show a flowerhead dried and run to seed, a bleached white rodent skull, and a dead machine revealing its patterned entrails. We can enjoy his perfections, but Little brings us back again, directing our attention with a whisper to the corruption that lies beyond all that artifice.

About:

Graham Little (b. 1972, Dundee, Scotland) is a Scottish artist living and working in London, United Kingdom. Little earned a BA in Fine Art from Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design, Dundee, in 1995, a MA in Fine Art from Goldsmiths College, London, in 1997, and was a research associate at Goldsmiths College, London, in 1998. Recent solo exhibitions include *dépendance*, Brussels, Belgium (2023); Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo, Japan (2022); and Alison Jacques, London (2021); among others. Little's work has been included in numerous group exhibitions, including at *Mixing It Up*, Hayward Gallery, London, UK (2021); *Atelier EB: Faux shop*, V&A, Dundee, Scotland (2020); *Manifesta 11*, Zurich, Switzerland (2016); *Mark Leckey: Containers and Their Drivers*, MoMA PS1, Long Island, NY (2016); *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions*, MoMA, New York, NY (2002); among others. Little's works part of the permanent collections of institutions including the British Council Art Collection, UK; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA; and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.

Hettie Judah is a curator, critic, and writer based in London, United Kingdom. Judah's writing has appeared in *Apollo magazine*, *Art Quarterly*, *Art Monthly*, *Art Review*, *Frieze*, *i*, *The Guardian*, and more. She is a contributing editor to *The Plant* magazine and has participated in television and radio programs such as BBC Radio 4's *Front Row* and *Art That Made Us*. Recent publications include *How Not To Exclude Artist Mothers (and other parents)* (Lund Humphries, 2022) and *Lapidarium: The Secret Lives of Stones* (John Murray, London, 2022 & Penguin, NY, 2023). Judah recently curated *Acts of Creation: On Art and Motherhood*, a touring exhibition presented by the Hayward Gallery, London, UK, and opening at the Arnolfini, Bristol, UK, in March 2024. The eponymous catalogue will be published by Thames & Hudson in summer 2024. In 2022, together with Jo Harrison, Hettie co-founded the Art Working Parents Alliance, a supportive network and campaigning group for curators, academics, gallerists, technicians, educators, and others working in the arts.