

ArtSeen

Sharon Butler: *NEXT MOVES*

By Adam Simon



Installation view: *Sharon Butler: Next Moves*, Jennifer Baahng Gallery, New York, 2022.

ON VIEW

JENNIFER BAAHNG GALLERY

NEXT MOVES

September 15 – October 22, 2022

New York

Many of Sharon Butler's Instagram followers are aware that most of the paintings she's been making over the past six years began as daily cell phone sketches starting in 2016, using a program called PicsArt, that she posted daily. That her subtle explorations of painting vernacular began as digital sketches is just one of the disjunctions in her current exhibition, *NEXT MOVES*, at Jennifer Baahng Gallery.

Butler's approach is an open embrace of rule breaking and the mismatched. The large four-panel piece, *Four Days* (2019–21) that takes up most of the first wall on the right when you enter the

gallery, manages to appear simultaneously as a multi-panel piece and as four independent works. It's possible to just appreciate the rich colors and nuanced paint handling, the monumentality of simple forms against atmospheric grounds. But it's hard not to wonder if Butler isn't also testing how strong the mental, perceptual glue is that binds paintings whenever two are contiguous. Is the glue strong enough that we assume the four panels were painted at the same time and were intended as one piece, or do we wonder instead if any or all the four could have been swapped out for different works?

It's a delicate high-wire act that has us falling neither to one side nor the other. This balancing act is played out differently throughout the exhibition, a constant shifting between appreciating the work visually and thinking about the decisions that were made. For example, also in the first room, *Bedfrence* (2022) consists of two joined panels, the smaller of the two looking very much like an afterthought, as if Butler wanted the two orange vertical lines at the bottom to be longer than the canvas would allow, and so stuck on a smaller canvas to accommodate. Why not? And then, she shifted them to misalign those orange lines. It is a simple but powerfully effective move.



Installation view: *Sharon Butler: Next Moves*, Jennifer Baahng Gallery, New York, 2022.

Two works that anchor the show, *Quasi-Believer* and *Addenda* (both 2022), remind me of the surrealist drawing game “exquisite corpse.” Butler is aware of the human mind’s ability to create coherence and she uses that to her advantage. It’s interesting to parse out how the individual panels connect and how they don’t.

Several of the larger works employ a background grid of small squares. Knowing the history of this series, the most obvious connection would be to the pixelation that might occur when the PicsArt drawings were scaled up to create the paintings. But there’s a dilapidated aspect to these

backgrounds that just as easily conjures mosaic on subway walls. Positioning isolated geometric forms against these grounds feel associative, a dreamscape that references nothing specific.



Installation view: *Sharon Butler: Next Moves*, Jennifer Baahng Gallery, New York, 2022.

Not to be missed is the grouping of smaller works, drawings, and ephemera in the back room. Here, Butler's humor and idiosyncrasy are on full display. One collage piece is made up of newspaper headlines. It takes a moment to realize that they are referencing not Sharon, the artist herself, but the former prime minister of Israel.

NEXT MOVES doesn't have any of the kind of abstraction that seems to be having a resurgence, the high-energy Ab-Ex moment held in suspension. Butler's restlessness and penchant for disequilibrium also doesn't lend itself to the kind of contemplation that tends to be associated with geometric abstraction. Her work can seem more theatrical than pictorial, her forms enacting some indecipherable narrative against a pixelated stage. You don't get Matisse's armchair (*"I dream of ... an art of balance, of purity and serenity ... something like a good armchair..."*). What you get instead is a seat at the table in the next room, where there is a lively conversation taking place of forms that sometimes agree but often don't, full of innuendo and wit and bad table manners.

Contributor

Adam Simon

Adam Simon is a painter living in Brooklyn.

Link: <https://brooklynrail.org/2022/10/artseen/Sharon-Butler-Next-Moves>