

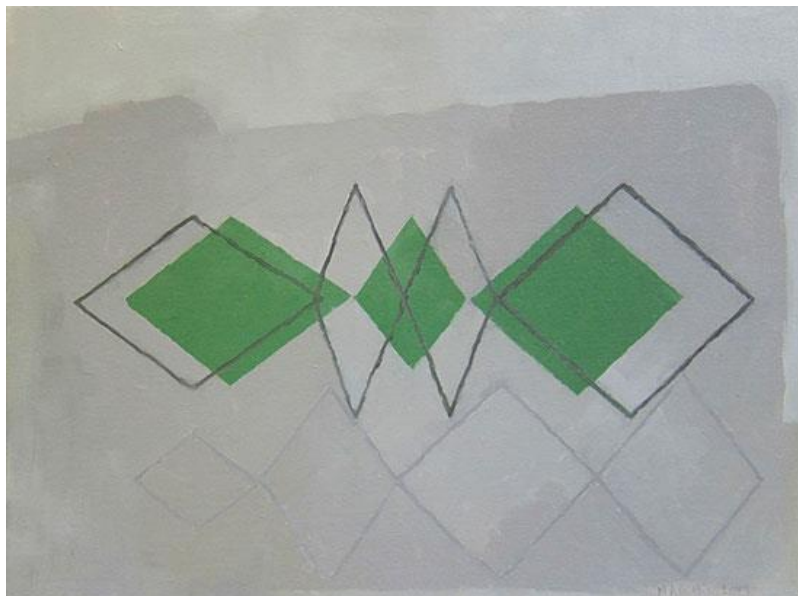
# artcritical

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## Light is Beauty: Sharon Butler talks art, life and blogging with Leslie Wayne

by Leslie Wayne



Sharon Butler, March 1, 2017, 2018. Oil on canvasboard, 18 x 24 inches.  
Courtesy of the artist and Theodore:Art

Sharon Butler is known as much for her art blogazine, [www.twocoatsofpaint.com](http://www.twocoatsofpaint.com) as for her own work as an artist. She has been running Two Coats since 2007 (in 2016 Time Out New York named it one of the top ten art websites in New York), while also teaching, lecturing, traveling, parenting, and making paintings. Sharon's love of art, the art world, her art students, and the process of making art, distinguishes her as a particularly generous compatriot. She is all in.

But it was on her painting that we focused during a recent studio visit, a week before the opening of her second solo exhibition at Theodore:Art in Bushwick. She had just returned from a month at Yaddo, where she produced virtually all of the work for the show. Her studio was lined with fifteen 18 x 24-inch painted canvas boards and two large un-stretched painted canvases. We talked about her Instagram drawings, the source of her imagery for her paintings, her personal life, how that impacts the work, and about her love of process.

Sharon Butler, March 1, 2017, 2018. Oil on canvasboard, 18 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Theodore:Art

**LESLIE WAYNE:** Sharon, last year during Dumbo Open Studios, I bought your little book of daily Instagram drawings. I was struck by what you wrote about them, that they were created using a phone app called PicsArt to be viewed specifically on a phone, and that you made them as an antidote to the frustration you felt when viewing images of people's paintings on their tiny phone screens. I totally get that frustration and I think it's pretty hilarious that you took the devil in this detail and turned it into a workhorse for yourself. Looking at these images, it's hard to believe they're not photographs of paintings. But I also notice that this book contains only a small fraction of the more than 700 Instagram drawings you made over the course of two years, posting one a day. I know that these last couple of years have been particularly challenging for you, so what was it about these Instagram drawings that really kept you going through it all? Was it the daily ritual, as a kind of meditative practice? Was it a way of marking each day, like On Kawara? Or was it a testimonial to your own thoughts and observations, the way perhaps an artist like Tom Nozkowski translates his daily experiences through abstraction?

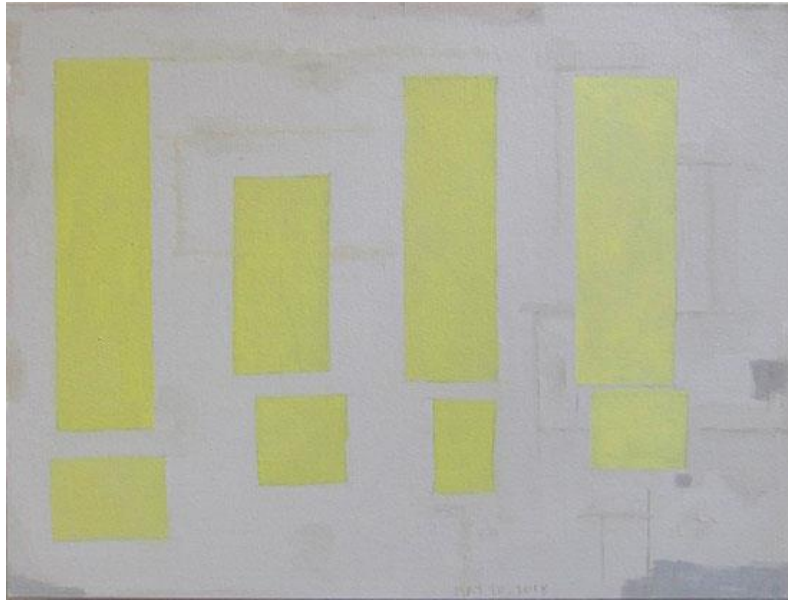
**SHARON BUTLER:** I'm not sure where to begin. Since I was a kid I've tried to create a record of daily life, at first by keeping notebooks about my activities, and later through drawing, painting, and book projects. I started the phone drawings after my last show at Theodore:Art in 2016, which was the year my teenage daughter got swept up in the opioid crisis and the country watched Trump rise to power. I was devastated by both. Making drawings on the phone was a useful way to re-channel my Twitter preoccupation and, at the same time, process my experience. The impulse to create a translation of life through abstraction is similar to Tom Nozkowski's, but making digital drawings seems more immediate and, well, casual. Like "I Got Up," On Kawara's 1968-79 postcard project, they have a time stamp, and, looking back, I see that many were posted around 4 AM, when I was often awake and worrying. Limiting the drawings to the geometric shape tools – the circle, the square, the triangle, and the diamond – I developed a visual language that is embedded with personal content. I drew through the crisis and now I have a record of the experience. As On Kawara might have said: WE ARE STILL ALIVE. My daughter has been in recovery for more than eight months.

Sharon Butler visiting her exhibition at Theodore: Art, with January 6, 2018 behind her. Photo: John Zinsser

**That's fantastic. You must be so relieved, and relieved to be in a space where you can start approaching your work in a way that's more deliberative rather than reactive. Though you have always championed the kind of resourcefulness that allows you to create within the constraints of your given situation. I know that the term you coined, "New Casualists" was to some degree based on your own peripatetic studio life, creating a way of working that accommodated your need to move studios every few months because of rising rents and short sublets. But now you're in a great studio with a long lease!**

**It's interesting that you decided to use these Instagram drawings as direct source material for your paintings. You've taken these records of very specific moments in your life and translated them from their digital form to analog objects. It's an interesting kind of visual transliteration. I'm assuming that you want there to be a dialog between the two bodies of work since you've written the dates of the drawings onto the paintings. It's as if you are still processing these experiences by reanimating them through another medium. On a purely formal level, the paintings have a soft and very lovely painterly touch, and a kind of ethereal light, both of which are unexpected given their hard geometric compositions. Painted light is very different from the light that's embedded within a screen. You mentioned that comment one often hears about**

**beautiful paintings having a “marvelous sense of light!” I take it though that that’s not what you’re aiming for here, right?!**



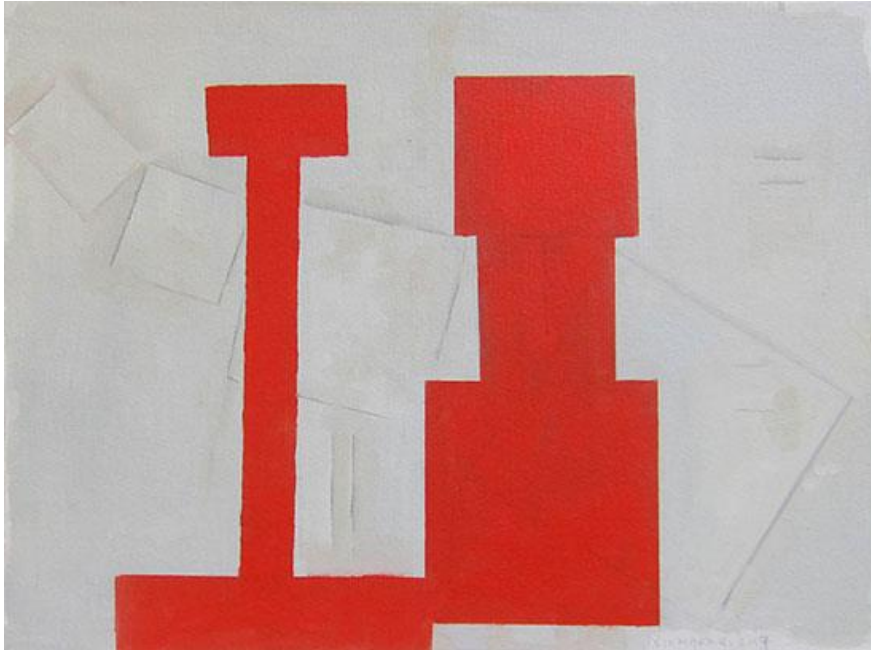
Sharon Butler, May 20, 2018, 2018. Oil on canvasboard, 18 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Theodore:Art

To address your first observation, yes, I'm more than relieved, I'm grateful to the universe and proud of my daughter for recognizing she needed help. My decision to use specific drawings as subjects rather than to simply adopt the visual language allowed me to connect to specific moments and has given the project deeper meaning. Making these paintings has enabled me to go back and really consider what we've been through.

In terms of light, in early painting classes there is an emphasis on creating the illusion of light through color mixing. How light changes color is so mysterious and intriguing. I've been working on an artist's book for the past few years using text from a color theory devised by philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in 1810 based on his own detailed observations—how candle illumination changes the color of shadows and so forth—that I absolutely love. In representational work, changing color, whether from dark to light or warm to cool, gives the objects the illusion of three-dimensional shape. But creating a “marvelous sense of light” gives the painting a kind of beauty. Light is beauty. Josephine Halvorson's paintings are wonderful examples of this truth: paintings whose subjects are enhanced through the illusion of illumination. In the digital space, color is made from light, so illumination is a given. When I create the paintings from the drawings, I think about the translation from light to paint. In many ways the natural dullness of the paint echoes the experience of remembering a traumatic episode.

The sense of surface and touch, on the other hand, are inherent to a painting, while they must be invented in the digital space. I enjoy creating the illusion of worn backgrounds, fractured shapes, and broken lines – visual phenomena that occur naturally in oil on canvas – in the phone app. On canvas, I prefer a dull surface, like the ones on abstract easel paintings from the 1940s. I think about expectations – in particular, how they change over time – and this has become part of the content. One thing I have learned is that expectations have little to do with reality.

**Yes, well that certainly applies to the process of art making. We start out with an idea in mind and through the process of manipulating material, things happen and we inevitably change course – that is, if we're any good. To stubbornly stick to a plan is to forego the ecstasy of creating.**



Sharon Butler, December 4, 2017, 2018. Oil on canvasboard, 18 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Theodore:Art

**I'm interested in your attraction to a "dull surface" and the "natural dullness of paint." That's actually antithetical to everything one imagines when thinking about oil painting. We think about the lusciousness of oil, its buttery consistency, the depth of color one can achieve with it and its luminosity. If these paintings are evidence of a life lived, then it appears that right now you are still churning through the murkiness of your daughter's future, and I might add, the future of this country. We can go out and see Spike Lee's "BlackKkKlansman" or cry during Meghan McCain's stunning cri de coeur for her father, both powerful rebukes of our current president, and feel better afterwards for its cathartic value. But at the end of the day, we know that the forces that are driving our current culture are born from greed, fear and a hunger for power. The forces that drive our personal destiny, however, are somewhat more within our control. The fact that your daughter has turned a corner is testament to that.**

Yes, it is. I'm fascinated by the way the current political situation, the anger and powerlessness we all feel, has informed artists' work, especially artists who would never call their work political. Yes, I'm actually hopeful about the future. It's been murky for the past two years, but, fingers crossed, it seems that we are turning in a more positive direction. (Note to readers: Don't forget to VOTE on November 6!).

But going back to your point about oil paint, true that it is admired for its richness and luminosity, but I mean in comparison to screen images, the color is simply less bright. The comparative quality of light, brightness vs. grayness, has emotional content. I forgot to mention another attribute of oil paint that I adore is that the color changes over time. The paintings age. Which brings me back full circle to the notion of the future, which I find interesting.

**So tell me about your decision to paint on these canvas boards. To me, it's very much in keeping with the modesty and practicality of your Instagram drawings. I also love the way they're floating on the wall.**

For me, an 18 x 24-inch canvas board is like comfort food, which means I suppose that it isn't a challenge technically. The hardness suits pencil drawing, which is how I start all the paintings. And, of course, they are inexpensive so I can buy them by the box—like sheets of paper. Hanging canvas boards is a challenge, though, and when I was up at Yaddo photographer Regina DeLuise suggested that I make French cleats to offset the boards from the wall. Once we hung them at the gallery, Stephanie said that the size and the way they hover on the wall reminds her of computer screens. I hadn't thought of it, but I like the association.

**That's great. So without your even realizing it, you've enlarged the images from an iPhone format to a computer format! One last question—how do you balance your life as an artist with your life as an editor of a successful blog, and teaching as well?**

Honestly, sometimes I'm overwhelmed and just want to lie on the couch and read fiction, but I'm grateful that I can support art making through teaching and publishing *Two Coats of Paint*. Working in the studio, especially when the country seems to be falling apart, sometimes strikes me as self-indulgent, but the reality is that I wouldn't be able to cope if I didn't do it. I think most artists feel the same way. In turn, teaching and writing give me the opportunity to step outside myself and make a positive contribution to the art community. I love being part of academia because of the conversations and critiques. This year I'm affiliated with Parsons, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and the New York Academy of Art, where I have a slew of talented colleagues. And, frankly, I always learn something from the students, which is the best because it keeps my mind nimble and open to new ways of thinking.



Sharon Butler, May 11, 2018, 2018. Oil on canvas, 48 x 55 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Theodore:Art