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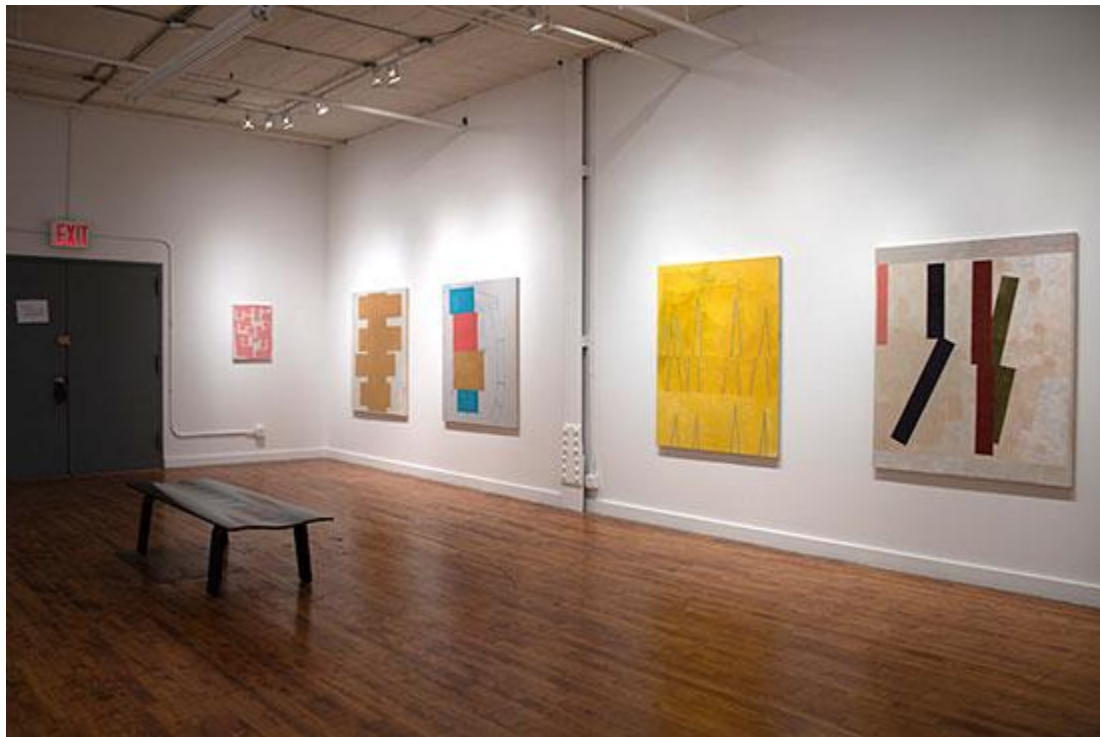
Accidental on Purpose: Sharon Butler at Theodore:Art

by Laurie Fendrich

***Sharon Butler: Morning in America* at Theodore:Art**

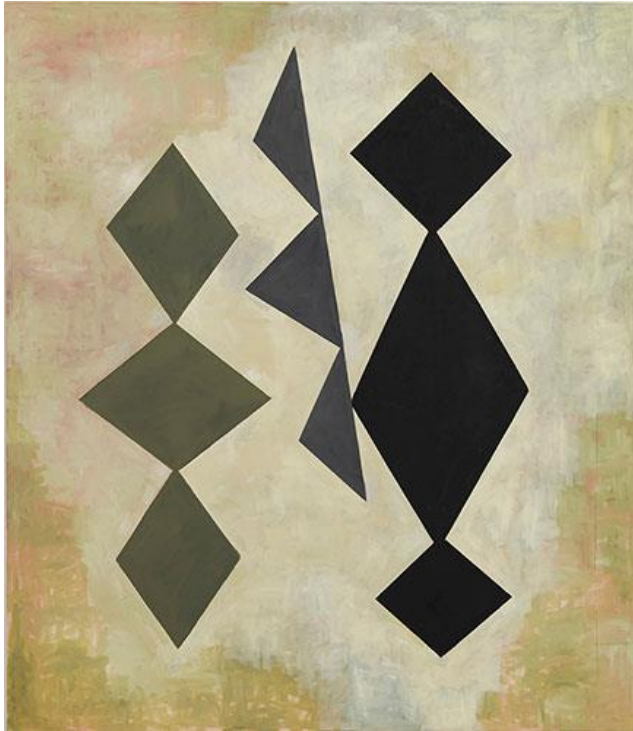
January 15 to March 7, 2021

56 Bogart Street, between Harrison Place and Grattan Street
Brooklyn, theodoreart.com



Installation shot of Sharon Butler *Morning in America* at TheodoreArt, 2021

Because I've known Sharon Butler, her work and her blog, "Two Coats of Paint" (to which I occasionally contribute) for a very long time, I am not the person to write about her new paintings disinterestedly. What I can do, however, is offer some thoughts about her work informed by many conversations with her about painting in general and her paintings in particular, and by an understanding of her approach to making art enriched by reading many of her essays and reviews.



Sharon Butler, *Mueller Report* (January 11, 2017), 2019. Oil on canvas, 52 x 45 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Theodore:Art

In her widely read article, "Abstract Painting: The New Casualists," in [The Brooklyn Rail](#), 2011, Butler expanded on Raphael Rubenstein's ideas, laid out in "Provisional Painting" in [Art in America](#), 2009. Butler described "casualism" as an open-ended, aleatory process that many painters were now using. Their aim was to steer clear of abstract painting's tired tropes (like using wide gestural brush strokes as a sign of emotion) by adopting a "calculated tentativeness" and accepting "awkwardness." She argued that this casualist approach led to paintings that were almost beside the point, or that manifested a "passive-aggressive incompleteness." While Butler didn't out-and-out proselytize for casualism, her enthusiasm for "enervated casualism"—for an engagement with accident, uncertainty, imperfection and incompleteness—was palpable.

Butler's current exhibition of fifteen paintings from 2017-2020, however, suggests that casualism's grip on her work has loosened. True, the foundation for each of her new paintings still seems like the stuff of that 2011 essay—in her case, a starting point for her paintings of quick, improvisational digital drawings made on her phone that are, in her own words, "toss-offs"—but the realized paintings that grow out of these drawings are decidedly not beside the point. They're well-planned, well-executed, peculiarly—and purposefully—beautiful pictures.



Sharon Butler, *Most Popular* (November 23, 2018), 2019. Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Theodore:Art

Butler's phone drawings, loosely based on imprecise geometric forms that she immediately posts on Instagram, are part of an ongoing series she calls, "The Good Morning Drawings." Butler's social media savvy makes her keenly alert to the way an offhand drawing posted on a social media platform instantaneously changes from something private and confined to the studio into a public "work of art" to which an audience responds with clicks. Given the plethora of drawings she's made, searching out the "best" or "worst" drawings is a futile enterprise. The point is, once posted, they all take on an air of importance—almost as if made by an alleged art influencer such as Benny Or or Banksy.

Two paintings from 2019, each only two feet square—*Most Popular* (October 2, 2018) and *Most Popular* (November 23, 2018)—and which include colored circles and half-circles sitting atop scumbled surfaces, were based on Instagram drawings that had received the most "likes"—an absurd if intriguing starting point for a painting. (Dates within titles refer to Butler's original Instagram posts.) At other times, Butler selects a drawing to turn into a painting simply because she has a hunch it will make a good painting. Consider *Mueller Report* (January 11, 2017), a stunning larger painting (52 x 45 inches, finished in 2019) in which three parallel, vertical forms lie on a lovely pastel ground; each is made up of three attached triangles or diamonds suggesting harlequin patterns, with colors hinting at something military. Their dark values play back and forth effectively with the brushy pastel negative spaces.

Although Butler's iPhone drawings have the benefit of both immediacy and quirkiness, they're missing what's missing in all electronic screen art: Materiality, a sense of scale, and touch—factors that, if not the be-all and end-all of painting, at least most often give it life. Paintings-in-the-flesh solve this problem. This isn't to say that every painter who approaches painting this way lands on something beautiful. Only because of Butler's sophisticated and sensitive brushwork and individualized color (something that continues to come out of her casualist approach) do her compositions end up strong rather than flaccid. The paintings feel slightly off-balance, but

not so much that they're ugly. They're actually just right: off-balance only enough to avoid cliché.



Sharon Butler, *Most Popular* (October 2, 2018), 2019. Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Theodore:Art

The problem for abstract painters like Butler (and me) is that if paintings as beautiful and grittily compelling as Butler's can grow out of toss-off phone doodles, why should any of us fret over our compositions? Isn't it enough to just develop our touch and a sense of color? For me, the scariest thought of all is that composition might just be an anachronism of the 20th Century, and the future of abstraction will be owned by those who accept a post-compositional approach to their paintings. Right now, Sharon Butler has the best of both worlds.