

Conversation Project NYC

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Sharon Butler: "Social media has changed the experience of what it means to be alone with your work."

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Brett Wallace

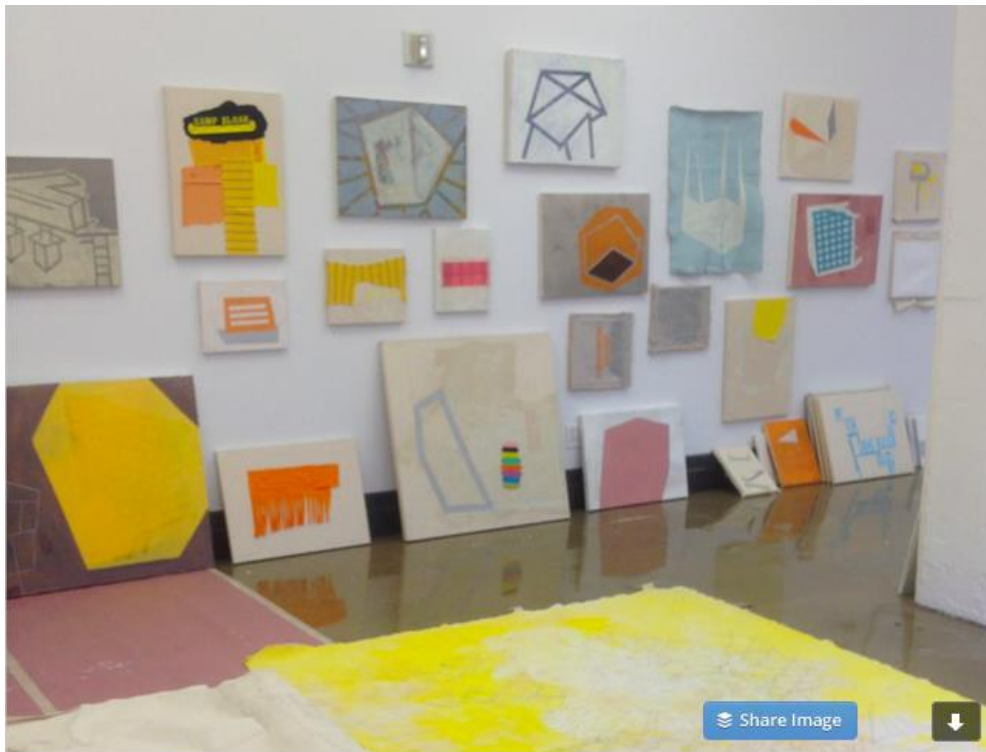


Sharon Butler in her DUMBO studio.
Source: Two Coats of Paints. Image copy.

The following post is part of "[The Conversation Project](#)" - a series of interviews with influencers in the contemporary art world.

Based in New York City, [Sharon Butler](#) is a painter and arts writer, widely known for her blog, [Two Coats of Paint](#). The blog has been sponsored by numerous arts organizations, including the Brooklyn Museum, the Guggenheim Museum, the Whitney Museum, the New York Studio School, the School of Visual Arts, and Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation.

Sharon and I caught up one afternoon in her DUMBO studio to discuss her career as an artist and arts writer.



Sharon's studio in Dumbo. Source: Two Coats of Paint.
Image copyright Sharon Butler, 2015

BW: What inspired you to become an artist and an art professional?

SB: I wasn't much of a drawer when I was a kid but I liked to put things together, looking at pictures, and things like that. I made a lot of failed craft projects! I didn't start painting until I was in my late twenties. I had studied art history at Tufts, taken a bunch of studio art classes, and liked making art, but I didn't know anyone who was an artist, so it never occurred to me that I could be one. After college, I worked as a magazine designer but realized it wasn't for me.

So I went back to school and studied painting at MassArt and that was it. I just decided that's what I wanted to do. I continued to work as a graphic designer to support myself, but, when I graduated from MassArt, moved to New York.

BW: That's one thing we have in common – I was born in Cambridge and raised in the Boston suburbs.

SB: I lived in the Somerville, Medford and Cambridge area. MassArt was great because at the time it was \$700 a semester and that included studio space. And I studied with terrific faculty. Rob Moore was one of my mentors, and being part of a community with the other students was fantastic. During the recession in the early 90s, I went to graduate school at the University of Connecticut where I studied with Bill Parker, Walter McConnell and other talented artists who still teach there. They give tuition waivers and teaching stipends to all the MFA students, so I came out with relatively little debt.

BW: Are there things or people (or artists) who have inspired you?

SB: When I started painting it was the late 80s so I was really in love with painterly painters, like Terry Winters, Bill Jensen, Moira Dryer, and Elizabeth Murray, and it wasn't until later that I was looking at conceptual painters like Sol Lewitt, Robert Ryman, Claude Viallat, Richard Tuttle— people who put ideas ahead of the paint.

BW: Do you identify as an entrepreneur?

SB: This is sort of a new term that everybody has been using— the artist as entrepreneur – and to me that word implies that I have started a business and that I'm supporting myself through it, but I'm not really. I support myself through teaching, though I do make some money with the blog. I have undertaken projects that interest me and help build the community, and they have created opportunities for showing and selling my paintings. So indirectly, I suppose I'm entrepreneurial – I don't wait for people to give me permission to do the things that interest me. I'm much more proactive than that in terms of creating opportunities. This year instead of applying for grant funding, I decided to apply for fiscal sponsorship and do a fundraising campaign (<http://www.twocoatsofpaint.com/2015/11/out-first-year-end-fundraising-drive.html>) for Two Coats of Paint. Seeing that readers are willing to chip in to support the blog has been gratifying.

BW: What inspired you to start a blog?

SB: In 2006, I was living in eastern Connecticut and teaching at a small state university, and my New York gallery had closed after 9/11. It had been a couple of years, and I felt I needed a gallery. But all my networks had shut down. There is nobody less powerful than an unrepresented artist who lives outside of New York. I was reading blogs and just decided to start one. My goal was to find a gallery. After starting the blog, I realized that while I wanted to show my work, what I really was to be part of the dialogue. I missed the community in New York. I moved back to the city in 2010.

BW: How would you describe the content of your blog?

SB: The blog is about painting and like to cover under-recognized artists. Lately I haven't been covering as many smaller independent galleries as I would like to. I got a Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation grant last year and in putting together my final report compiled a list of my posts over the course of the grant period. It turned out there were 175 posts in the grant period, but many of them concerned the larger galleries. So I've tried to renew my interest in smaller places this year – Bushwick galleries and places like Minus Space in Dumbo. Matthew Deleget, who runs Minus Space, does a fantastic job and somebody was telling me he has been reviewed only twice in the *New York Times* in eight years. That is a travesty. So I realize that although I am compelled to cover shows that align with my own art-making interests, and that some will involve big players, I also need to take care not to neglect artist-run spaces. I have a show coming up early next year at Theodore:Art on 56 Bogart Street, and there are 65 galleries in Bushwick alone.

BW: I found your post, "The Casualist Tendency" thought provoking. What is casualism?

Casualism is tendency rather than a style. Although I was writing about abstraction at the time, it's not limited to abstraction. The approach is essentially anti-Bauhaus, a turning away from classic design and classic composition. Valuing the handmade over the manufactured. The work will perhaps look a little off-kilter, the materials will be used haphazardly, and there might be a self-conscious tilt towards amateurism. Good examples would be Tracy Emin's bronze sculptures coated to look like plaster – they looked handmade, and they were diminutive. I wrote the casualism piece around 2011. A number of New York painters and blog-readers were talking about this kind of work both face to face and on the blog, and a need seemed to arise for a clear articulation – a crystallization – of exactly what we were talking about. In writing about it, I thought it made sense to give it a name, to establish a kind of shorthand, so that I wouldn't have to keep describing it from the ground up. Raphael Rubinstein had already used the term "provisional painting" in a 2009 *Art in America* piece, and I chose "casualism." I thought it captured a certain dispiritedness that took hold during the depths of the economic crisis, but there was a backlash: artists and critics objected—they thought it implied that artists weren't carefully thinking about what they were doing and felt it diminished their work. But it still got traction. Just as people who claim they hate socialism also say they believe in universal health care, those initially uncomfortable with the term "casualism" began to consider the art it referenced interesting and the label stuck.

BW: The content is still there in the work; it is more like the approach to it is more casual.

SB: The approach is how we put things together and how we put things on the canvas. It's about the process as well as the image. And I should say I did get a lot of mail from people who felt that this absolutely nailed the things they were thinking about in the studio. They were grateful for the article-- once you name something you can start to think more deeply about it.

BW: How do you put your own work in that context? What are the motivations or things that you are trying to work through in your own work?

SB: My father, who didn't consider himself an artist, made art. He was a master with duct tape! He put duct tape on everything. In the car, I remember the headrest had a crack in it, so he put some foam padding on it and covered the whole thing with duct-tape. He loved Alexander Calder and so he started making aluminum sculptures for the yard. In retrospect, I think the way he made things, the way he put them together, had a lot to do with who he was. When I was young and in art school, I wished I could make things the way older, better artists made them rather than going with how I actually made things. My approach has always been less considered and less elegant, and I think that says something about who I am. Casualism has definitely been about embracing my own idiosyncrasies.

BW: What is the narrative in your work?

SB: Well, my work is very much oriented towards things that I am thinking about on a daily basis. This series of oil paintings are all inspired by particular circumstances, both physical and online. I'm really interested in how I apprehend the world around me.

BW: The tension of the physical and the digital is relevant today. Does that impact your work?

SB: The internet and social networking media have changed our consciousness and changed the way we make art. Is it still possible to make a series of paintings that explore one idea or one approach over a thirty year career? I don't think so. I look at the internet or the street, and I try to remember what I see, and then I try to paint what I've seen, but I never remember things accurately! My paintings may look very different from one another, but I think the way I use materials unifies them and identifies me as the painter.

BW: What is your process?

SB: I don't come up with one idea and then make 20 paintings exploring it. I'm not that kind of painter – I'm not putting together work for multiple international art fairs! So I work slowly. Maybe I buy eight pre-stretched canvases. I think the object itself is important --whether I stretch the canvas myself or I buy them pre-stretched or un-stretched is meaningful. Recently I made a few paintings based on the temporary building erected for the Frieze Fair. When I was there I didn't look at the outside, but when I was in it, I had the feeling that I was in a wedding tent. So I came home and made some sketches of what I thought the structure looked like and it looks nothing like that! And this discrepancy runs through my work – this idea we don't apprehend things accurately or completely, that we are in the world and yet so much of it goes right past us. Our attention is selective. So even though these paintings may not look anything like the tent at Frieze, they were about my visit to Frieze.

BW: Do you have a drawing practice as well?

SB: I do. My paintings have a lot of drawing in them. I start with drawing on the canvas, and usually all the false starts are still visible in the final painting. I also make sketchbooks from folded sheets of Rives BFK. They usually start with a specific topic, and I tease out ways to visualize it. This one is about the Ebola virus. I made it last year when we weren't sure if it was going to be the end of the human race. But sometimes I start with no direction in mind and let the ideas evolve as I go.

BW: Are these prototypes i.e. ways to quickly work out ideas?

SB: They are. I might be on the subway wondering about what I'm going to work on in the studio, and I get this feeling that I've run out of ideas. But all I have to do is start one of these books and ideas come flooding back. When the ideas go underground, drawing is a way of bringing them back to the surface.

BW: These experimental books are really interesting.

SB: I visited Melissa Meyer's studio last year and she was working on a book project. I always loved making books, but didn't make many because you can't frame them or hang them on the wall. Seeing all the books Melissa has made over the years made me realize that book making can be an end in itself. They create an amazing record over time.

BW: What advice do you have for emerging art professionals?

SB: Spend time with your work. Social media has changed the experience of what it means to be alone in the studio. I'm not anti-social media; I think it's fascinating. How will it change art? Access to all that art history at your fingertips is just the tip of the iceberg – social media has changed how we think, how we apprehend the world.

Two Coats of Paint is in the middle of a fundraising drive. [Click here to learn more.](#)

[Brett Wallace](#) is an artist in residence at LinkedIn Corporation. You can view more of his influencer interviews from the [The Conversation Project](#) here.

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