

Conjunctions, Addenda, Commutations
A Conversation with Raphael Rubinstein and Sharon Butler
Saturday, October 8, at 2 pm at Jennifer Baahng Gallery

Noted poet and art critic Raphael Rubinstein sat down with artist Sharon Butler to discuss “Next Moves,” Butler’s 2022 solo exhibition at Jennifer Baahng Gallery in New York. They explored conjunctions, addenda, commutations, and the many ways artists navigate the passages from one body of work to the next.

Raphael Rubinstein is a professor of Critical Studies at the University of Houston School of Art. He was working on a forthcoming book, *Negative Work: The Turn to Provisionality in Contemporary Art* (Bloomsbury Academic).

Raphael Rubinstein: When I saw these paintings first in photographs, some of them looked very different. On a computer screen they looked very pixelated with lots of little squares, but the moment I saw one in real life, this one for instance, it didn't seem that way at all. You can see the relationship to pixelation, but it doesn't have that effect. To me, that's the thing about painting. You've got to experience it in person, and you also must be able to move. We are not cameras, we are bodies within the space looking at paintings and that's something that's great to have back in our lives again.

SB: Right. This series of paintings is based on digital drawings I made on my phone. When I was enlarging them, one of the little drawings had a fake canvas background and, when I blew it up, this canvas pattern became a big grid. I thought it was sort of amusing painting the fake canvas onto a real canvas. That's where the grid started; from this translation of the digital into the handmade. Then, of course, as I worked with the grid structure, it became more resonant and picked up meaning. I should also add that the reason I started making those drawings on my phone and posting them on Instagram was because people would always show me their pictures online, and I got the idea to make something that was meant to be seen on the phone. They weren't printed out, there was no place to see them except on Instagram, and so it's kind of ironic that the paintings, based on the drawings that were created to be seen on the phone, are meant to be seen in person, but end up for many people, just being seen on Instagram -- and not translating very well. (chuckles)

Rubinstein: It's part of the long history of painting, being confronted with and challenged with other means of representation, with photography, with film, with digital media and often

there's the prophecy that painting will be superseded, it will be obsolete, but one of the remarkable things about the medium of painting is that it's able to assimilate and absorb whatever new technology is thrown at it. I think you, like a lot of artists, increasingly erase the lines between digital and manual - they're not really relevant. Another thing that really struck me about these paintings is that they're multi-panel paintings. Is that something that came as a result of the imagery you were using?

SB: Yes, I think that the idea of the multi-panels began once I started considering the grid. I realized that the grid is infinitely expandable, and, after many years of working reductively on unstretched canvas with very little paint and a bit of pencil, until finally it was just a little scrap of tarp with nothing on it, I wanted to make the work more complex somehow. I didn't really know what that meant. The minute I started thinking about the grid, it seemed like an incredible opportunity to expand the work in really interesting ways. It became a portal. This was the first multi-panel piece (points to *Brighter Than Grass*) and it felt like the panel at the bottom could be placed anywhere else at the gallery -- it doesn't have to be attached to the painting to read as related. Placement and installation could contribute different meanings. So, I really love that idea of if the grid expands the imagery in the painting, but it can also be used as a way of physically expanding the work itself. Once I became attached to that idea, I started adding panels onto all of the paintings.

Rubinstein: Well, I think that working with these incomplete structures makes me think of some of the work that the French painter, Martin Barré did in the 1970s where a geometric painting, you might take it as a whole painting, but in fact there's a whole other painting that goes with it. The implication here is that it's not a question of being finished or unfinished. It's an arbitrary cut off, the edges of the canvas, the support. It's not as if this was given by God, it's contingent and these paintings could go on. I think that's one of the effects of these. Even this four-paneled painting (pointing to *Four Days*) where there are a lot of different styles at play -- geometric abstraction, there's something more painterly and biomorphic, there's almost like a floorplan, and then there are things that may be suggestive of a body. Are you pursuing some kind of freedom where you've come to a fork in the road and you can take both forks and turn back and go in another direction?

SB: After my last show, I wanted to make the work somehow more complex, but I wasn't sure what that meant. So, these paintings were all made in that period as separate paintings. When I was moving my studio, they were lined up against the wall, that seemed to make sense, given their history, their beginning as daily drawings on Instagram -- the great grid-maker of all imagery, the great consolidator, or joiner of all imagery. Separately, each panel is named after the day that it was made and posted on Instagram, so as a multi-panel piece I called it *Four*

Days. I love the idea of putting all the days together. The size of the panel could become important in terms of ideas of time.

Rubinstein: In the last space in the gallery, there's a selection of smaller paintings, works on paper, text pieces, collages, and I guess it's a range. Some of them look like they were going back to the 2000's and there's a lot of different styles. There's a lot of different kinds of painting. Earlier we were talking about the idea that they were "transitional" and I think you said someone had come into your studio and said, about the work, that they were "transitional" and you weren't happy with hearing that, and not surprisingly because to label something "transitional", about a body of work, is to say that well, hopefully it will be, that it's leading somewhere, but I think, "transitional," well, isn't that what every artist is aiming for? Your work should always be on the way or coming from somewhere, going somewhere else rather than being fixed and predictable. It's almost like you're owning the "transitional" nature...

SB: Well, going back, putting old panels together with new pieces, thinking about previous work and, of course, moving to my new studio, I saw a thread running through a lot of those older pieces. Transitional periods are anxiety provoking, but they're also the most exciting. I'm not the type of artist who can paint the same thing year after year. To me, the most exciting points are the spaces between.

Rubinstein: Being inclusive is a lot more positive than labeling certain pieces "transitional," which implies somehow the artist became dissatisfied, as if what they were doing before was problematic or unsuccessful. That implies a kind of judgment, and also suggests that the artist should somehow be able to stand back and see their own work objectively, which any artist knows, is not only impossible, it's usually not a good thing to do. But we can't help it, we're always trying to think, how would X, Y, or Z see this work and in the end, you have to just let that go. The connotations that terms like "transitional" carry with them can be really damaging and not good for the artistic process.

SB: I agree. When I go to galleries, it's always more exciting to see work by artists who are in the process of changing somehow than to see ten more pieces like the ten they had in their show last year. It's exciting to see where their mind went, and where the making and the process took them.

Rubinstein: Some artists change their work abruptly like Picabia. With Picabia he has four different ways of painting throughout his career and there's no gradual shift. It's as if, one day, he says, I'm going to stop making this, and start making this other kind of painting, and he does

that for ten years. And then, eventually he stops that, and he does something else for ten years. When MoMa did a Picabia show, they didn't show anything after 1920 because there was a sense that everything beyond that point was sort of decadent. Of course they don't think that anymore.

SB: Some artists who take baby steps, making very small incremental changes, and those artists are the ones who move forward primarily through process. And then you've got artists like Picabia who are more cerebral and not necessarily directed by the process. I'm a little bit of both, and when I was younger had a hard time reconciling the two. Sometimes my head would get in front of the process.

Rubinstein: Sometimes artists are responding to things happening in their lives or something in the world. A war or a death or something - an illness. There are also artists who respond to changing fashions, changing discoveries. The classic example of an artist who embraces transition is Philip Guston. In some ways, the most interesting period of Guston is the late '60s when shapes in his abstract paintings began to congeal into something like a heads. But we only know that by reading backward. He becomes a figurative painter, and then we can read these shapes as heads. He didn't know that at the time, but he was willing to venture into the unknown, and take that risk of failure -- not knowing where the paintings were going to go. In his later work, he painted so quickly as if he couldn't keep up with his imagination. In the last ten years of his life he painted like a madman. A case was made that he killed himself for his work because he wouldn't follow the advice of his doctors. Like many artists, he wasn't interested in his past. They've already done that, they've already made that body of work, but one thing that I find interesting is when artists want to buy back some of their work that's been work. Then there are artists who are only interested in what they are doing right now. Do you ever feel like there are paintings that you need almost like a talisman?

SB: Artists tend to work and live in the present. I don't really think about the past, but I don't really think about the future, either, especially now with the climate crisis. When I give artist talks, I tell my story, reducing it to certain benchmark points. I always eliminate certain sections (work that I thought wasn't part of the thread), and in going back for this show and looking at some of the older work -- even in the work from grad school -- still had the elements that I'm still very much interested in. I've begun reclaiming the digital work I made from the 1990s and early 2000s that I put aside when I came back to painting. I never talk much about the early digital work. At the time, the output options were so disappointing that I moved back to painting. Painting is the best output method (chuckles). I remember doing a piece using text from Moby Dick, called *Dickathon*. I animated a bunch of passages from the book, and I wanted to project it onto a building for a festival in New Haven, but I couldn't get a projector that was

powerful enough. Of course now artists project at that scale all the time. If only I'd had that equipment back then! So, story changes as I move forward. It's all still there, it's just a matter of what I choose to include.

Rubinstein: But painting presupposes some kind of future that will outlast the artist, it will have some kind of afterlife. There are some artists who make their work as ephemeral as possible, who don't want that, who would take what you're saying, the idea of it being in the moment as that should be the common goal, that trying to hold onto something is investing too much in the physical object, in the value of the thing, that people will buy and sell, and preserve, and conserve.

SB: It's no longer, really, about longevity for the work, or the work outliving the artist. Maybe there will be a solution to the destruction of the planet, or maybe not. Should we all start carving in stone? I guess I'm drawn to the absurdity of painting, compelled somehow to keep doing it, and finding stability in the process, completing one small square at a time. I think these new paintings, with their focus on accumulation and transition strategies, speak to the current political climate. Everything seems in flux right now. But it's not as though I'm trying to illustrate specific ideas about politics. They're just reflected in the work.