



# **Sharon Butler March**

**Sarah Moody Gallery of Art  
Department of Art and Art History  
The University of Alabama**

## Farley Moody Galbraith Exhibition Endowment

THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**ALABAMA**<sup>®</sup> | *College of*  
Arts & Sciences  
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Alabama System.**

*May December, 2024*

Oil on canvas

62 x 78¼ inches

Courtesy of the artist



*San Miguel*, 2021  
Oil on canvas  
52 x 45 inches  
Courtesy of the artist



## Introduction

*Sharon Butler: March* follows her 2022 exhibit featured at Jennifer Baahng Gallery entitled *Next Moves*, a title that suggests a search for new frontiers. ‘Next’ is the keyword not only for Butler but for us all as we wrestle with profound events and changes such as the COVID pandemic, an accelerated global warming, and warring nations around the globe. Butler’s 18 paintings and drawings span the years 2019 to 2024 and many of the painting titles reference time. It is not a redundant effect despite the reality of how painting itself attests to time through its surfaces, content, and process along with the time audiences devote to their viewing. The measurement of time is more than familiar to us. It is significant to consider time as part of the in-person experience of Butler’s pieces. The manner in which her approach to painted infrastructure illustrates pixelized imagery that aligns with the time element: capture and release into the digital soup. It is put before us, extracted and rendered into a seductive painted environment that sits opposite in scale to its miniscule digital reality.

Sharon Butler’s paintings and drawings explore the tension between exacting, mechanical processes -- often digital and screen-based -- and the humanism inherent in images and objects made by hand. She likes the slippage between the two. In 2007, fascinated by art, writing, and the possibility of new digital platforms, she founded *Two Coats of Paint*, a NYC blogazine that focuses primarily on painting. The project has expanded to include a small residency program, podcast, small press, and other initiatives. From 2016-20, she became obsessed with drawing on her phone, posting one digital drawing each day on Instagram. The visual language developed in these tiny digital images -- the “Good Morning Drawings” -- eventually became the basis for the paintings she continues to make today.

Her solo exhibitions in New York at Jennifer Baahng Gallery, Theodore Art, and Pocket Utopia have been written about in *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Hyperallergic*, *artcritical*, *The New Criterion*, *The James Kalm Report*, *Time Out New York*, *Tussle*, and *New York Magazine*. Her work has been featured in numerous group and solo exhibitions coast-to-coast. She has received awards and residencies from Creative Capital and the Warhol Foundation, Connecticut Commission on the Arts, Connecticut State University, Pollock Krasner Foundation, Yaddo, Blue Mountain Center, Pocket Utopia, and Counterproof Press at the University of Connecticut.

Butler lives in Queens, NY, works in Brooklyn, and is currently affiliated with the MFA Program at the University of Connecticut in Storrs. *Sharon Butler Notebooks*, a monthly newsletter related to her studio practice, is her most recent undertaking.



*December 20, 2018, 2021*

Oil on canvas

52 x 45 inches

Courtesy of the artist





## *The Life of the Artist*

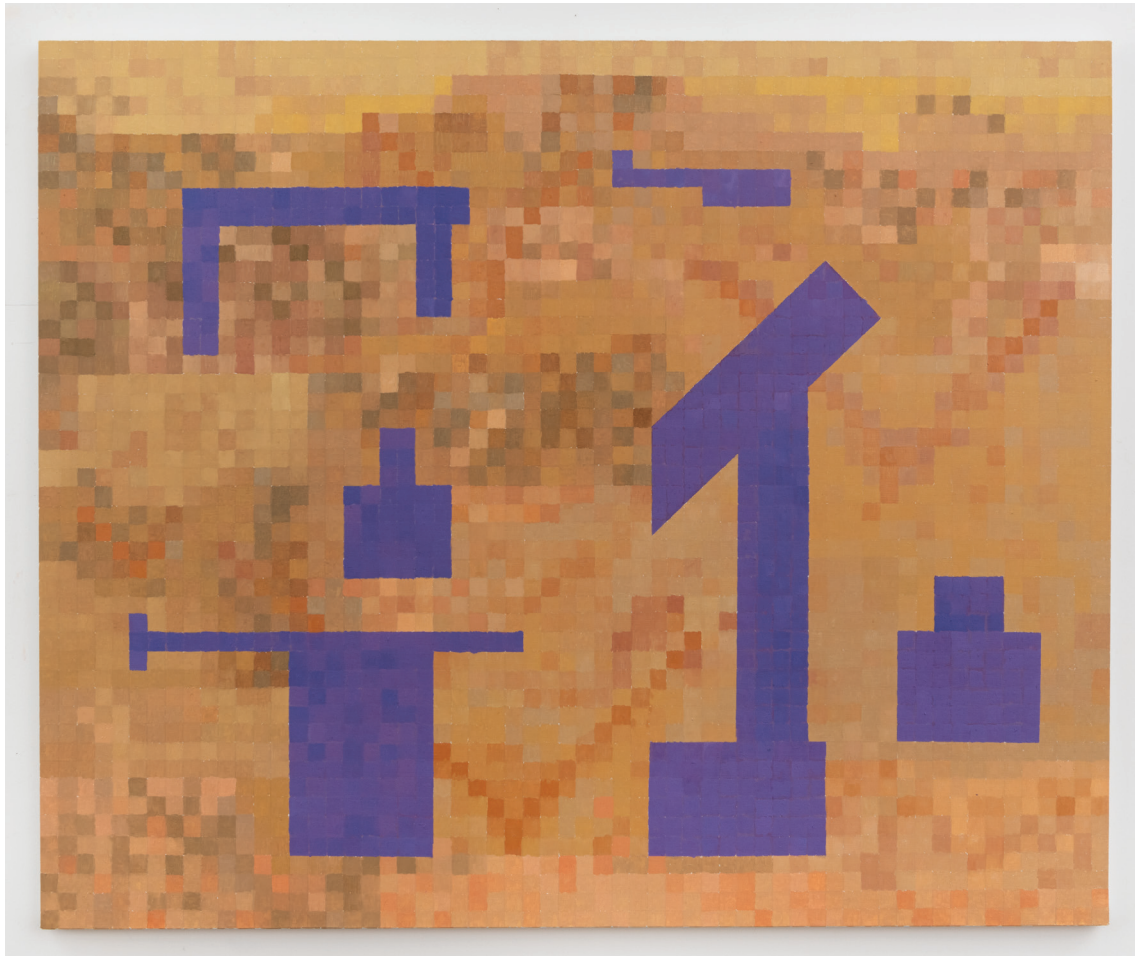
The grid is an apt metaphor for the life of an artist: it embodies tiny encapsulations of activity that gather meaning and power over time. A distinctly human creation, the grid consists of small, connected squares whose spatial scope is potentially infinite. It tangibly imparts a kind of restless continuity. In a body of work that spans roughly the past six years (2019 days), Sharon Butler has expanded her paintings into diptychs and multi-panel sets that extend the grid beyond the ordinary boundaries of a painting. Insofar as the paintings are based on tiny digital drawings that she initially posted side-by-side, grid-like, on Instagram each day, they also signify the grid's formal and indeed existential versatility.

Art history, of course, honors the grid, reaching from quite recent mosaics in the New York City subway that she passes often – Elizabeth Murray's work at the Court Square subway stop in Queens is a particular pleasure – back to those of ancient Rome. Piet Mondrian's valedictory *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, Sol Lewitt's searching wall drawings, On Kawara's contemplative date paintings, and Jennifer Bartlett's expressive grids have all loomed prominently in her thoughts about painting and the process of deliberate accumulation.

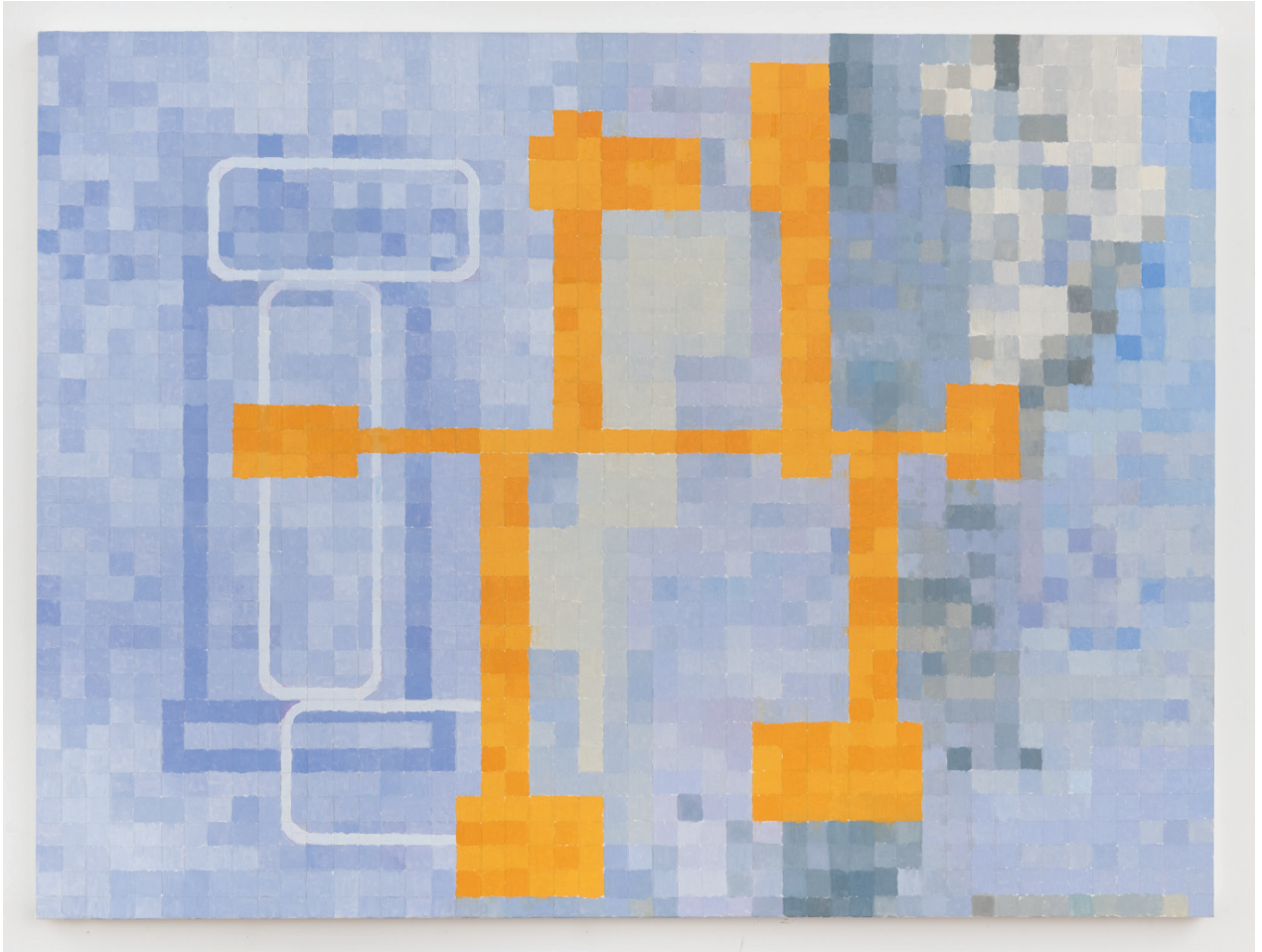
In several of these new pieces, Butler has combined canvases of varying sizes, giving the paintings irregular shapes that maintain the grid but break free of the rectangle. Others simply refer to the expanding collection of images made each day, combined through idiosyncratic conjunctions and addenda. The joins from one canvas to another reflect dynamic and sometimes pivotal transitions. They mark creative advance – the artist's persistent march to make sense of the world through painting. Butler frequently asks herself, "What if?" That's how she gets from Point A to Point B, and beyond.

— *Jonathan Stevenson*

*Jonathan Stevenson* is a New York-based writer and editor, contributing to the *New York Times*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *Politico*, among other publications. He is the editor of and a regular contributor to *Two Coats of Paint*.



*Next Moves, 2022*  
Oil on linen  
52 x 60 inches  
Courtesy of the artist



*The Day Before*, 2022  
Oil on linen  
38 x 48 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

## *Foci, Forms, Flux: Following Sharon Butler's Painting Pathways*

Among the greatest points of intrigue in tracing the trajectory of Sharon Butler's art over the years has related to matters of migratory foci. This is most germane to the past decade or so of her oeuvre. During that time, Butler's paintings and drawings, and her personal thoughts and more broadly cast discourses regarding her practice, have led into and fed off of one another in several distinguishable stages. These works have ranged from a body of mixed-media oil paintings on the earlier end of this timeline; to a prolific series of digital drawings; to a new, freshly refocused, more formally candid series of paintings that gradually excise key features of the earlier work, while deriving from and reconstructing themselves out of the drawings. The yields in more recent years have constituted Butler's most assured, subtly playful, and times chromatically dazzling work to date.

As for matters of variable foci, and to how these matters make Butler's earlier paintings so readily differentiable from her comparatively streamlined works of recent years, consider notions of trappings, on the one hand, and formalities, on the other. Well over a decade ago, Butler contributed, in very large part, to the conceptualization and critical transmission of Casualism, a term she coined a number of other artists, critics – and, increasingly, artist-critics – began adopting to discuss their own work and that of their peers or critical subjects. To an extent, the works dubbed Casualist are about objects and spaces, things and openings, structures and limits, beginnings and endings, processes and lacunae – the real stuff of painting discourse compounded by the real stuff of paintings. Casualist works reveal stretchers and staples; are blatantly subtractive or markedly deconstructive; expose bare canvases and other surfaces; feature severed, wrinkled, aged, and abraded implements; embed swatches of textiles and other media, leaving loose threads loosely adangle, breaching their own borders; and are exhibited unstretched, perhaps pinned, maybe with grommets or rivets.

Deploying Casualist approaches, Butler forged a broad pictorial pathway that enabled her to hint at various Modernist and other art historical antecedents while commenting on contemporary concerns of financial precariousness, studio sustainability, storage and real estate, painting materialities and “requisite” features, and fine art versus Fine Art. Proceeding in this vein for several years, Butler produced and exhibited abundantly, and received a great deal of encouraging feedback and critical attention. Nevertheless, without decisively abandoning such tendencies all at once,

the artist began to realize they were losing their grip on her thoughts about and approaches to painting. This was in large part due to a series of confluent transitions in life, work, geography, and studio spaces, much of it entailing short-term stays and extensive commuting. It was during this period that Butler began churning out daily drawings on her smartphone.

Butler's foci in these visually immediate, immediately manifold renderings shifted swiftly and dramatically. Setting aside most concerns with the facets and features of physical paintings, the artist now sought pictorial refuge in ranges of color, formal fluidity, linear variance, and compositional malleability – to the point of questioning if “good” composition itself might, in fact, be beside the point. Consumed by these new curiosities, and positively energized by her own productivity, Butler's natural inclination was to not only make these drawings on a daily basis, but also to cycle them through social media at the same tick. Her posts garnered much attention and circulated widely as she shared them on the apps, and she produced hundreds of them, then hundreds more, eventually exceeding a thousand. The daily drawings allowed her to work out all manner of aesthetic approaches and formal relationships with agility if not abandon. What's more, the drawings refreshed and emboldened the artist's enthusiasm for painting, rekindling an appreciation for intrigue and urgency in the medium's possibilities. From these convergent experiences, Butler determined that if the structures, settings, and assurances of life could be so easily cast into flux, then perhaps the same could be reflected in the presumed structures and strictures of painting.

Before long, Butler shifted her focus yet again in accordance with her new sources of inspiration and creative realignments. Her concerns pivoted from exploiting the facilities and dynamism of digital drawing practices, to transposing their pixelated, glass-embedded products using processes involving oils, pigments, brushes, canvases, and linens. These new foci didn't lead the artist too far afield, but the paintings that resulted would prove markedly different from her works on the earlier end of this timeline. As longtime viewers of Butler's work have observed, the ever-evolving artist is now working in bolder palettes, slackened geometries, playfully architectural abstractions, and notions of compositional precariousness, uncertainty, and insouciance. Her current works are more consistently vibrant, sometimes layered in vibrancies. Her colors are more richly saturated, vivid, and textured even if thinly built up, ultimately matte. Her compositions are differently structured, and less likely to denote identifiable structures.



*96 Hours*, 2019-2022  
Oil on linen  
48 x 38 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

Butler's abstract forms are somewhat less delineated, definitely less rectilinear, now often registering as sympathetically geometric characters. Arresting works such as *Bedfrence*, *Addenda*, and *Brighter Than Grass*, as well as so many other paintings and works on paper the artist has produced over the past few years, showcase such characteristics in full. In even more recent works, such as *96 Hours*, *The Last Two Days*, and *3 Years*, Butler amps up angularities and brings saturated and subdued palettes into confluence, while also proliferating her use of "pixels" and tile-like grids, and employing multiple surfaces as irregularly concatenated composite polyptychs. It's clearer than ever that the artist's preferred mode of consistency is to be consistently in flux.

Sharon Butler's migratory focal points reflect and redirect the throughways of personal challenges, societal concerns, and painterly curiosities the artist has charted over the years. Her paintings on view in "March" display a creative persona that revels in structure and restlessness alike. They invite viewers to undertake intimately close, interactive looking, luring them to following the artist's trademark forms and compositional choices as cartographic guideposts along an relentlessly curious painter's ever-shifting path.

— Paul D'Agostino

*Paul D'Agostino, Ph.D. is an artist, writer, educator, translator, and curator. He is a writing and thesis advisor for the MFA program at The New York Studio School, and a regular visiting critic and instructor for several other institutions and residency programs. D'Agostino teaches writing workshops, is a translator and editor working in various languages, and writes about art, books, and film on a freelance basis.*



*Addenda (February 10, 2019), 2022*  
Oil on linen  
68 x 40 inches  
Courtesy of the artist





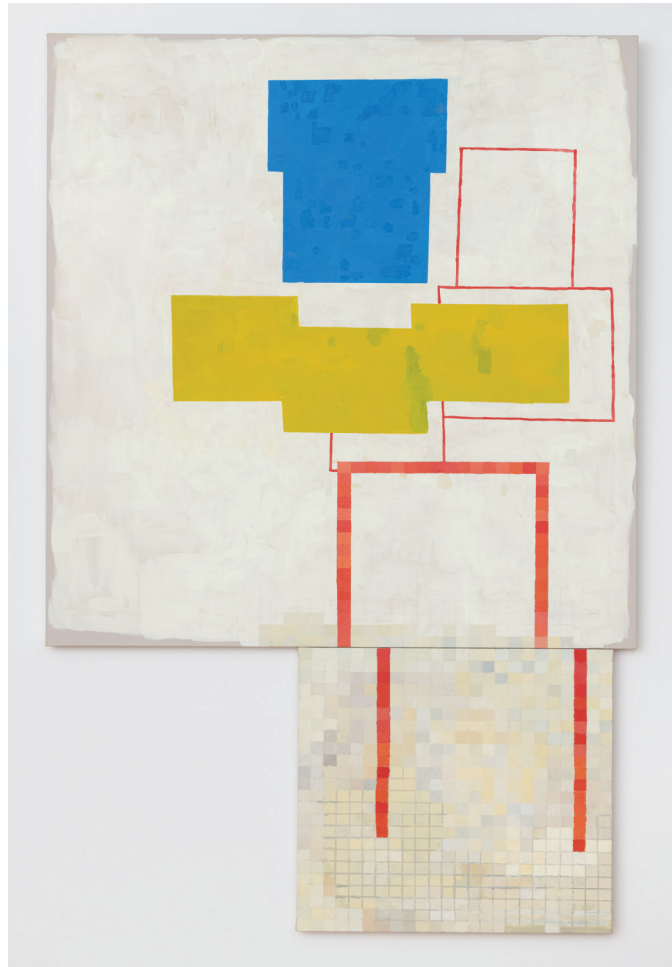
Detail:

*Addenda (February 10, 2019), 2022*

Oil on linen

68 x 40 inches

Courtesy of the artist



*Bedfrence (July 6, 2019), 2022*  
Oil on canvas  
77 x 49 inches  
Courtesy of the artist



*The Last Two Days*, 2023  
Oil on canvas, diptych  
64 x 104 inches  
Courtesy of the artist



*October 15 (3 Years), 2023*  
Oil on canvas, triptych  
Each panel 24 x 30 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

**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 and author of *Negative Work: The Turn to Provisionality in Contemporary Art* (Bloomsbury Academic).

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**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. To me, that’s the thing about painting. You’ve got to experience it in person, and you also must be able to move around the space. We are not cameras, we are bodies within a space looking at paintings and after the pandemic lockdown, 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 amusing to paint 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 squares, they 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 on their phones, and I got the idea to make something that was meant to be seen on the phone. The drawings 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. (laughs)

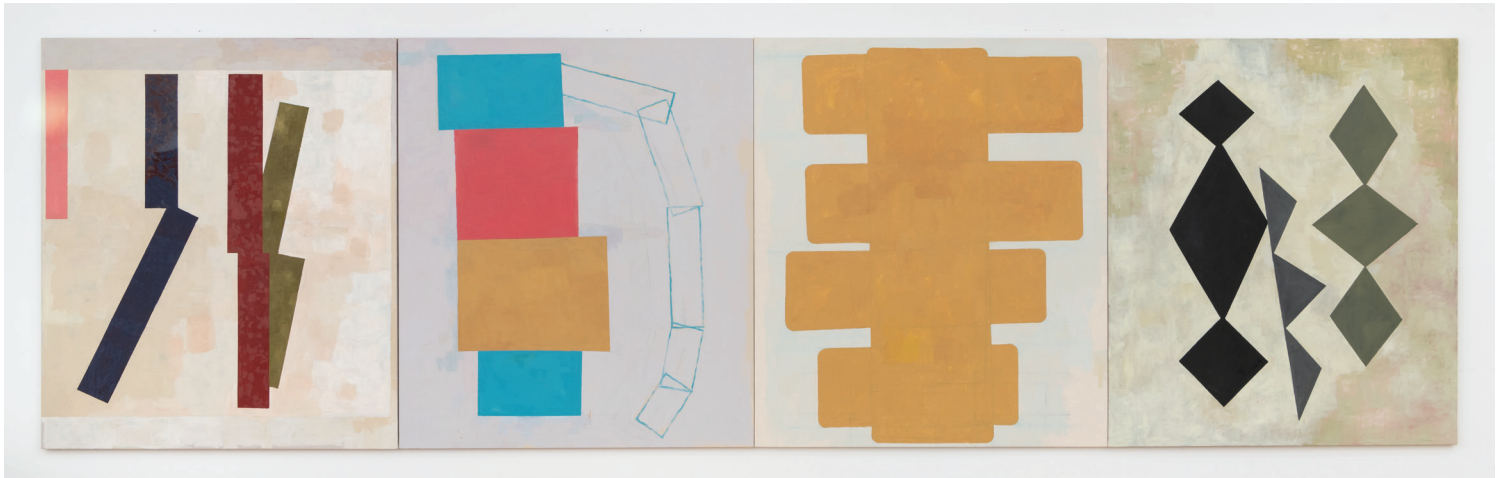
**RR:** What you describe is part of the long history of painting, as it has been confronted with and challenged by other means of representation, with photography, with film, with digital media. Often people have worried that painting will be superseded, it will become obsolete, but one of the remarkable things about this medium 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 analog – this distinction is not really relevant. Another thing I noticed is that these are 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 interesting ways –it was a portal. Brighter Than Grass was the first multi-panel piece 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, 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.

**RR:** 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: single-panel geometric abstractions that you want to read as complete, but in fact there's another similar canvas that extends the composition. 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 endlessly. I think that's one of the effects of your new work. Even the four-paneled painting 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?



*Brighter than Grass*, 2022  
Oil on linen, diptych  
74 x 60 inches  
Courtesy of the artist



*Dark Days*, 2020-2023  
Oil on canvas, four panels  
52 x 180 inches  
Courtesy of the artist



**SB:** After my last show, I was looking to make the work more visually complex, and these paintings were all made in that period as separate paintings. When I was moving my studio, I had them lined up against the wall, and 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 pictures. Separately, each panel is named after the day that the drawing was made and posted on Instagram. I love the idea of putting all the days together – like a calendar.

**RR:** In the last space in the gallery, there's a selection of smaller paintings, works on paper, text pieces, collages. Some of them look like they were going back to the 2000s and there are a lot of different styles. Earlier when we were talking you told me how someone had come into your studio and said that these paintings were “transitional.” You said weren't happy with hearing that, and not surprisingly because to label something as “transitional” is seen as negative. But isn't all art transitional? Hopefully it's leading somewhere. Isn't the “transitional” what every artist is aiming for? Work should always be coming from somewhere, and going somewhere rather than being fixed and predictable. I like that you seem to be owning the “transitional” nature of art.

**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.

**RR:** 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, I think 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 minds went, and where the making and the process took them.

**RR:** Some artists change their work abruptly like Picabia, who had 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. In the 1960s, curators like Bill Rubin at MoMA ignored everything Picabia painted after 1920 because there was a sense that everything beyond that point was decadent. Of course, MoMA doesn't think that anymore. The museum's 2016 retrospective gloried in Picabia's diversity.

**SB:** Some artists take small steps, making 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.

**RR:** 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 heads. But we only know that by reading backward. He soon becomes an explicitly 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 has been 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



*Birthday*, 2023  
Oil on canvas  
36 x 48 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

sold. 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 to have around you, almost like talismans?

**SB:** I think 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 was the best output method (laughs). I remember doing a piece using text from *Moby-Dick*, called "Dickathon". I animated passages from the book, and I wanted to project the piece 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, the narrative changes as I move forward. It's all still there, it's just a matter of what I choose to include.



*Twin*, 2023  
Oil on canvas  
36 x 48 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

## Checklist

2019

*Most Popular (October 13, 2018)*, 2019, oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches

2021

*December 20, 2018, 2021*, oil on canvas, 52 x 45 inches

*San Miguel*, 2021, oil on canvas, 52 x 45 inches

2022

*Addenda (February 10, 2019)*, 2022, oil on linen, 68 x 40 inches

*Bedfrence (July 6, 2019)*, 2022, oil on canvas, 77 x 49 inches

*Next Moves*, 2022, oil on linen, 52 x 60 inches

*Brighter than Grass*, 2022, oil on linen, 74 x 60 inches

*The Day Before*, 2022, oil on linen, 36 x 48 inches

*96 hours*, 2019-2022, oil on canvas, 48 x 144 inches (4 panels)

2023

*October 15 (3 Years)*, 2023, oil on canvas, each panel 24 x 30 inches (triptych)

*Among Friends*, 2020-2023, oil on canvas, 52 x 135 inches (3 panels)

*Birthday*, 2023, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches

*Last Two Days*, 2023, oil on canvas, 62 x 104 inches (diptych)

*Dark Days*, 2020-2023, oil on canvas, 52 x 180 inches (4 panels)

*Twin*, 2023, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches

*6 Drawings*, 8½ x 11 inches each

2024

*May December*, 2024, oil on canvas, 62 x 78¼ inches

*Blue Boxes*, 2024, oil on canvas, 24 x 80 inches (5 panels)



## Acknowledgements

Deep gratitude to gallery director William Dooley for inviting me down to Alabama, helping shape the exhibition, and producing a beautiful catalogue. Thanks to writers Jonathan Stevenson, Paul D'Agostino, and Raphael Rubinstein for contributing text and conversation; Kenneth Heyne and Mary Shah for crucial help preparing work and essays; and Jennifer Baahng and Stephanie Theodore, the gallerists who originally showed many of these paintings in solo shows in their New York galleries. Finally, enduring appreciation to the Two Trees Cultural Space Subsidy Program for providing affordable studio space.

— Sharon Butler

We are indebted to Sharon Butler for dedicating her time and energy toward this exhibition project. Support for this exhibition and catalogue is provided by the Farley Moody Galbraith Endowed Exhibition Fund.



Sharon Butler in her studio, 2024  
Courtesy of the artist





