

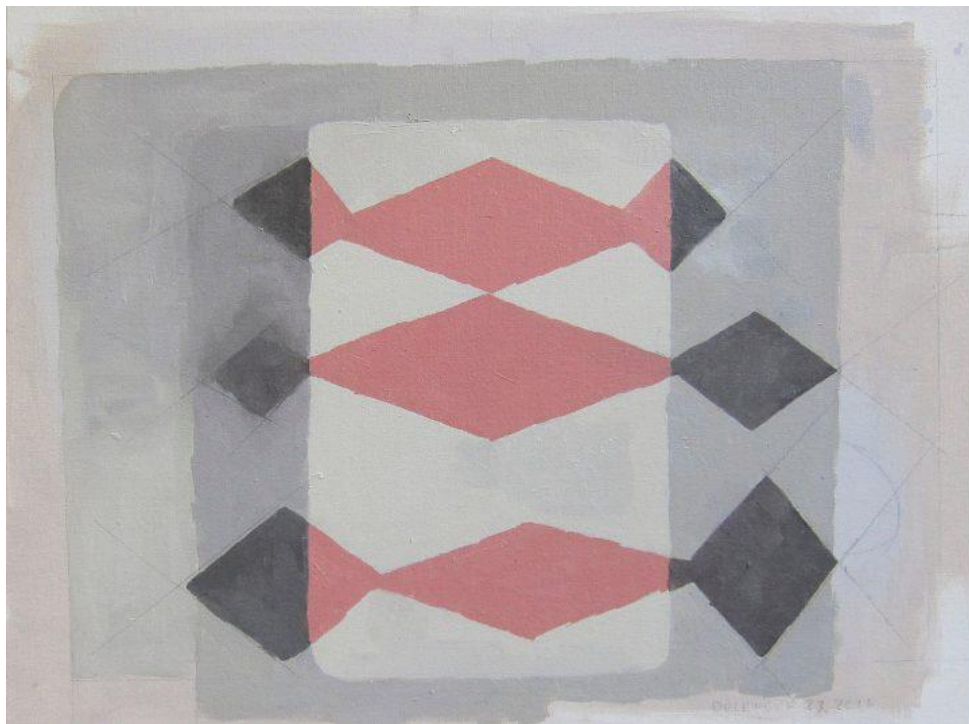
HYPERALLERGIC

Instagram Cats

Sharon Butler's new paintings based on iPad drawings are telling you, quite frankly, that surfaces matter.

[Paul D'Agostino](#)

September 22, 2018



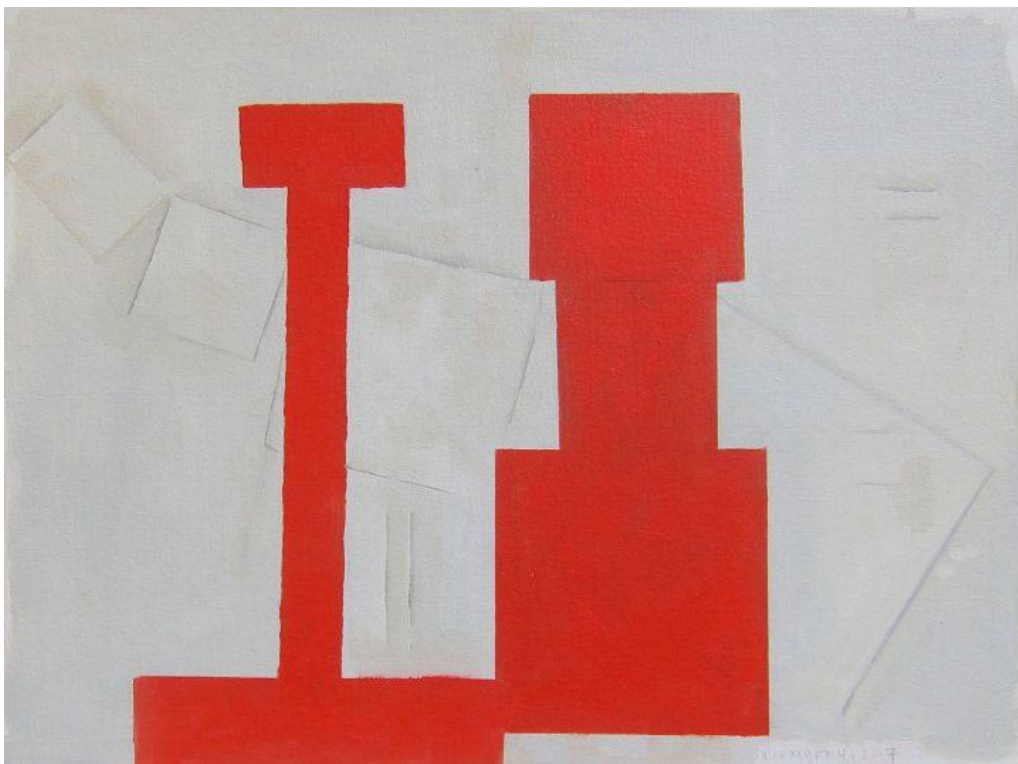
Sharon Butler, "December 24, 2016" (2018), oil on canvas board, 18 x 24 inches (all images via theodoreart.com unless otherwise noted)

Many artists resist allowing external or circumstantial factors to determine materials, scale, processes or other facets of their works. Many artists who might allow such determinants to factor into their practices are wont to remain mum about it.

But some artists don't mind at all when external factors drive certain decisions. Some, in fact, seem to thrive on it. And when they do, they often don't mind talking about it.

Sharon Butler is that kind of artist. Though I doubt she actively seeks out the types of circumstances that could delimit or shape her work in some manner, she seems to regard such situations as neither unfortunate nor inopportune, but rather as opportunities to be exploited. And she seems to enjoy letting her viewers know.

And so, what viewers are all but invited to come to know when visiting [New Paintings](#) — the artist's current solo show at Theodore:Art, on view through October 7th — is that Butler, in the wake of her 2016 show at the same gallery, turned to a couple of interrelatable technological conveniences, iPad drawings and Instagram, to work through ideas in a new way, and in a way that would allow her to more readily reflect on, depict, abstract, refashion, and share around some of the structures, objects, visions, and energies she encountered during her frequent, and frequently long, work-related commutes crossing several state lines.

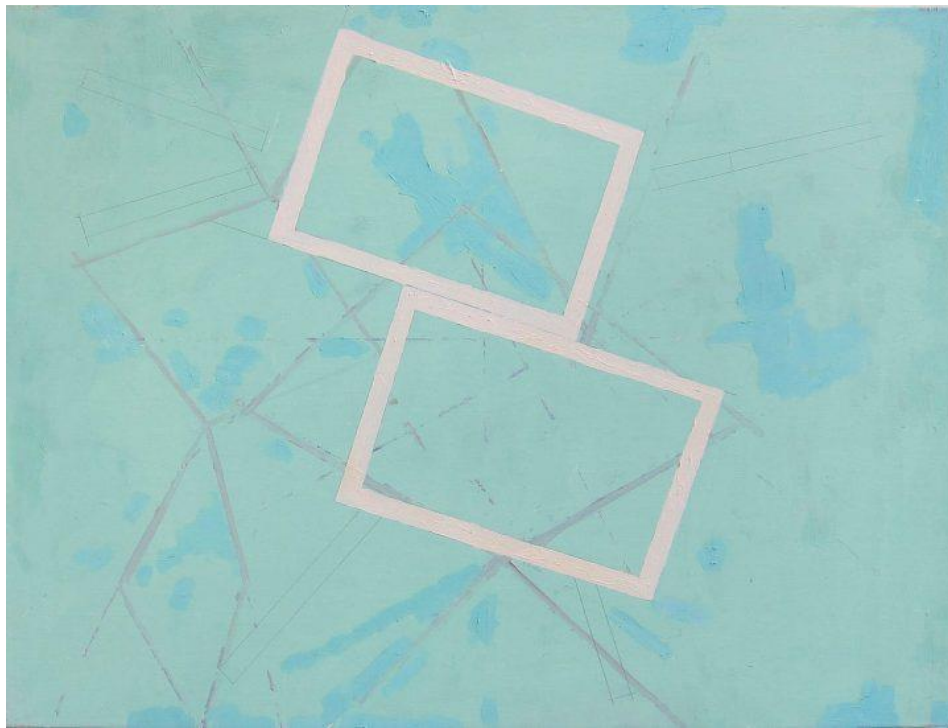


Sharon Butler, "December 4, 2017" (2018), oil on canvas board, 18 x 24 inches

Butler started these with no specific intentions, it seems, but they became abundant very quickly, and before long they became a daily routine: Good Morning Drawings. She did hundreds of them and received plentiful feedback through social media, and they readily became not merely an ersatz sketchbook, but also a journal. What's more, given the textureless surface and inverted, in a sense, light source of this new 'medium,' Butler's circumstantial workaround also provided her with a new platform on and through which to think about the rudiments of painting. Because back in the studio, some of these digital sketches became paintings.

Fast-forwarding a bit to now, a dozen or so of the most recent real-object yields of Butler's new process — most of them completed, perhaps fittingly enough, during a residency at Yaddo, away from commuting and much else besides — are what flesh out *New Paintings*.

Making sketches on a very different surface and departing therefrom for new oil paintings did not, it turns out, change Butler's ultimate works very dramatically. Her palette in most of the paintings runs a limited range of somewhat softened hues. The shapes that her variably layered, structure-inspired abstractions eventually assume are more rectilinear, by and large, than circular. Drawn lines here and there are left visible. Selective, sparsely exploited areas of chunkiness complicate the surfaces. Linear scoring creates visual pathways to underpaintings. And large areas of same-ish colors attain quirky patchiness and depths via variably shaped or delineated chromatic same-ishness.



Sharon Butler, "Two White Squares" (2017), oil on canvas, 18 x 22 inches

All such things, for viewers who have known Butler's paintings for quite a while, are not new at all. And that's certainly fine, because these new works are very good. And although the ultimate aspect, as it were, of these pieces doesn't candidly evidence digital origins, Butler very cleverly leaves her viewers certain clues: dates.

A painting titled "December 24, 2016" (2018), for example, isn't necessarily a painting of a digital sketch Butler made that day, but that sketch was its point of departure. And that date is inserted right into this somehow festive composition featuring a joyous-seeming centerpiece of pink and grey diamantine, loosely argyle, ultimately self-exhausting forms atop — or within, or evasively betwixt? — a shape that might not be

unlike an iPad. But it's not enough like an iPad to manifest immediately as that. You might get there, however, with an awareness of Butler's Good Morning Drawings. And you might make that connection in the first place by doing a bit of sleuthing regarding the date.

Of course, that extra bit of sleuthing is something you might not do. But that wouldn't matter, because it's a very nice painting. If you do, however, you might wonder if certain iPad-ish shapes in other works are other nods to their digital genesis, or if many of the pieces are on canvas board because that's about as close as a canvas can get to something like a tablet's rigid surface. All the same, none of that is really overt or compositionally assertive enough to be of great significance.



Sharon Butler, "January 6, 2018" (2018), oil on canvas board, 18 x 24 inches

Possibly quite significant, though, is a very subtle, contextually very interesting new thing that Butler has done to the surfaces of the two larger works in the show, both of which are on stretched canvases, and are evidently the most recently completed pieces in the exhibit: she wrinkled the canvas before stretching it, and left it very visibly wrinkled afterwards.

Flattened out to some extent, you can still see these omnipresent wrinkles, pleats, and ripples ramifying around these paintings even from a distance. Texture, sure. Relief, sure. Another way to soften the already softened rigidity of a line or rectangle, sure. But also, you can't wrinkle an iPad — at least not yet.

The additional grit and visual tangibility of the surfaces of these works is patent, expressive, assertive. The surfaces are telling you, quite frankly, that surfaces matter. And they're the two best pieces in the show. They also, given their scale and more

complicated surfaces, serve to quicken the overall evenness of the rather standard hanging.

On that note, I looked at one of these two pieces, “May 11, 2018” (2018), for quite a while. Its placement made me realize that in Butler’s last show in the same space, there was a similar set of two works on the same wall — a large piece to the left, a small piece to the right. I recall liking those pieces quite a lot too, both individually and with respect to one another.



Sharon Butler: *New Paintings* at Theodore:Art, Installation view: left, “May 11, 2018” (2018), oil on canvas, 48 x 55 inches; right, “Pink” (2017), oil on canvas board, 18 x 22 inches (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

So I looked a bit longer at these works together. “May 11, 2018” to the left, and “Pink” (2017), to the right. The latter doesn’t feature a cat, but to me it seemed to be a cat. The former doesn’t feature a bag, but to me its somewhat right-opening forms became a bag.

Putting these thoughts together and looking at the works in tandem, I thought, “They’re letting the cat out of the bag.” Which they might actively do, like a number of other works in the show, if you were to inquire about the dates. At least now, anyway, you know why this review is called “Instagram Cats.”

[Sharon Butler: *New Paintings*](#) continues at Theodore:Art (56 Bogart Street, Bushwick, Brooklyn) through October 7.