

HYPERALLERGIC

Philosophical Paintings that Bare Their Process

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Sharon Butler, "Collinwood" (2015), oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches (all images courtesy Theodore:Art)

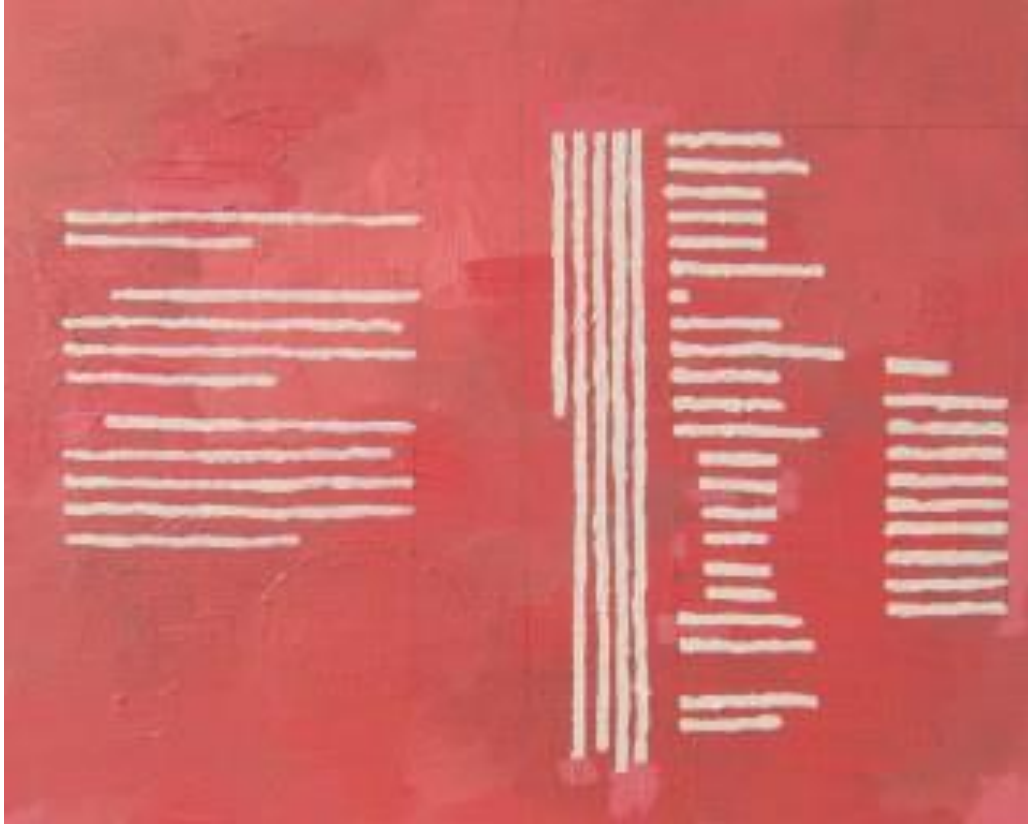
Most artists I know are aware of the painter [Sharon Butler](#), not because she's an overhyped art star, but because of her reputation as a serious, feet-on-the-ground, working artist. Recognized for her

blog [Two Coats of Paint](#), Butler ruminates on issues of contemporary painting and the day-to-day realities of life for artists in the early 21st century. Butler has also been a practitioner and proponent of a style of painting she dubbed “[The New Casualism](#),” which she characterizes as “the rising inclination of artists to explore the metaphorical implications of failure, imperfection and imbalance—the artistic significance of the off-kilter and the not quite right.”



Installation view of Sharon Butler's new paintings at Theodore:Art (click to enlarge)

Butler's new body of work, [on view at Theodore:Art](#) in Bushwick, might then surprise visitors, who enter the gallery and find it filled with mostly compact, sturdy, and resolved paintings. Taking in the richly evocative color and touch of the individual works, a viewer can scan the room, noting and cross-referencing how marks and visual elements are reimagined in different compositions. The impression of rigorous painting is supported by the show's press release, which reveals that Butler has settled on firmer ground on which to work, landing a new studio space in Dumbo and conjuring up paintings that reflect this stability and concentration. Her varied paint handling is tethered to a variety of subjects, both physical and cerebral, that reappear and rub off on one another.



Sharon Butler, “Animated Reader” (2015), oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches (click to enlarge)

At 16 by 20 inches, the majority of Butler’s new paintings are small scaled and have a recurring motif of dots and dashes. Small dots may line up or drift away, grow to the size of balls or group into cloud-like formations. Dashes appear tight or brushy and can resemble nautical flags, computer code, or paragraphs (I was reminded of [Philip Guston’s open books](#)). The paintings have titles like “Animated Reader” or “Interstate,” which might offer keys to the source material. Sometimes compositions are resolved with a strong figurative element like a green mushroom or, in the case of “July,” what looks like a distorted lectern. Others are dense and grounded with choppy hatched marks that suggest language, highways, or architecture. A few are more tentative and ephemeral, appearing as diagrams or schemes with a stark frontality.



Sharon Butler, "Marti Pello" (2015), oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches

Butler layers colored strokes on top of one another, sometimes in a discordant manner, sometimes with subtle hues from the same family. The grooved pentimenti of amassed marks assert themselves from beneath, having undergone processes of revision, editing, or erosion. "Marti Pello" is a densely packed mass of cadmium, lemon, and Hansa shades that puts an end to the argument that it's impossible to make a yellow painting. Other works, like "After DH 2" and "Goethe Color Triangle," culminate in scattered rainbows resting on pearly grounds.



Sharon Butler, "Goethe Color Triangle" (2015), oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches (click to enlarge)

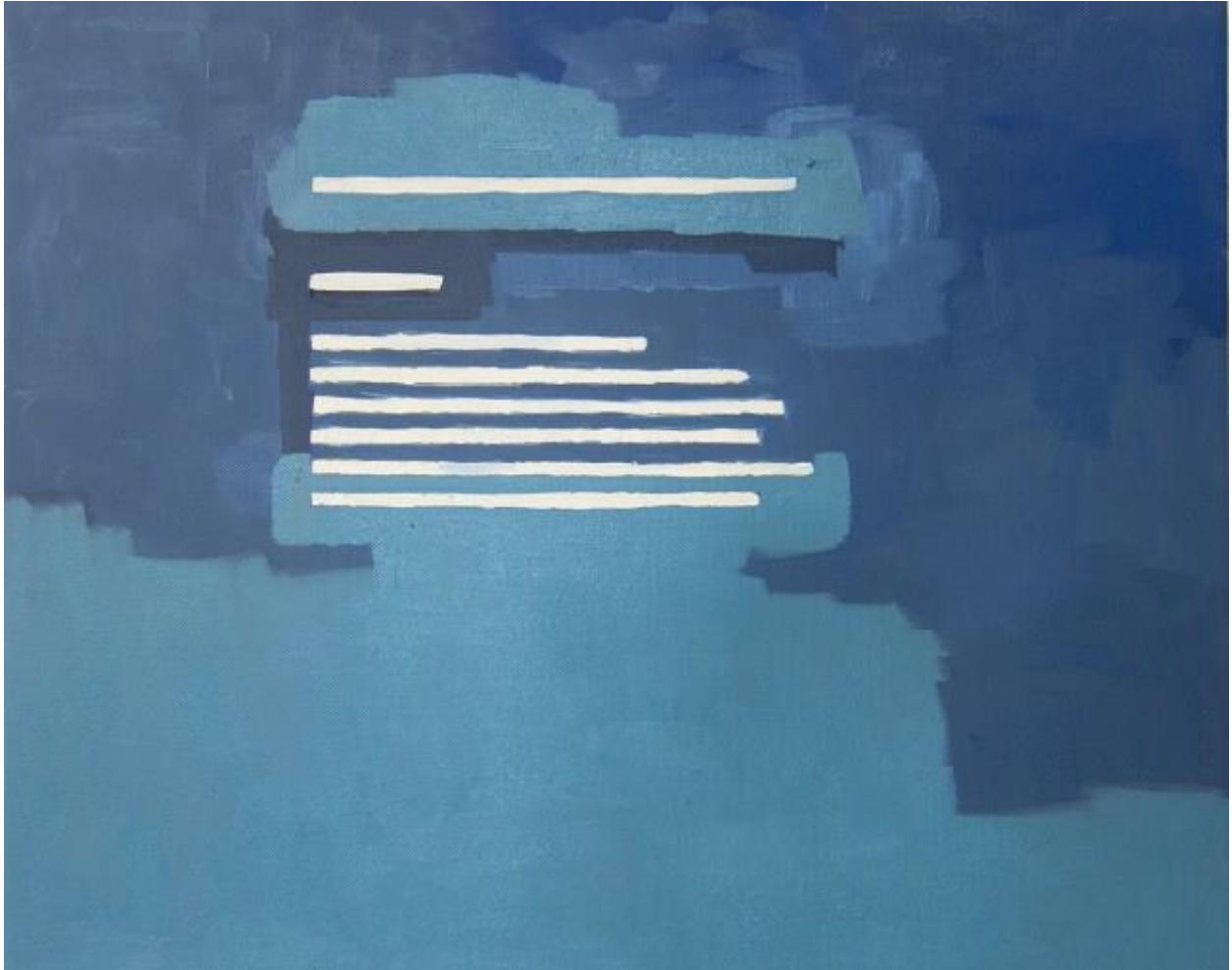
The process of making a painting is accentuated as Butler brings forth a catalogue of mark-making strategies. She stains, brushes, overlays, etches, graphs, and adumbrates with light pencil stencils. The colors and spaces she depicts come across as on-the-spot observations of places or things, or memories and inventions that appear to evolve, the paintings recording change. One gets the sense that Butler works on many pieces at once, revisiting a work when the time is right, when she has found the correct moves and counter-moves. The paint and process laid bare serve as both metaphor and physical record of the artist's mental wanderings and actual travels, whether she has just put down a book, visited a gallery, or been on a road trip as a teacher or lecturer. Judging from the many words and pictures on display that evoke driving and highways, I imagined the artist steering a car at night, crossing from one state line to the next, the radio on with a voice forecasting the weather and road conditions.



Sharon Butler, “Tornado Warning” (2015), oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches

With their multilayered entry points, Butler’s paintings have an inquisitive quality — a sort of painter-as-philosopher sensibility that considers every aspect of the creative process. They are scaled just right, like visual equivalents to poems or diary entries, and surprise with their fast-flowing array of designs. Her abstract painterly techniques and figurative glyphs are well married and suggest a personal dialogue with other artists and art history; I happened to think of such different painters as [Lois Lane](#), [Gael Stack](#), [Charles Marburg](#), and [Clint Jukkala](#). A painting like “After Frank Stella” manages, with an economy of means, to be an homage timed to [Stella’s Whitney retrospective](#), while also tracing a lineage from Minimalism to the New Casualist ethic.

For any painter, the key to what makes a good picture might be painterly facility tied to idea — in other words, an artist’s expressive mastery of her medium coupled with a compelling statement will yield a project worth doing. Some painters today take advantage of the creative tension inherent in a need to paint, while facing down antagonizing forces that suggest otherwise. They work in the space between an analysis of their methods and the context of their labor. Sharon Butler strikes me as this sort of intellectually curious painter: not having made up her mind, not falling into any one camp, but enjoying the restless frisson of not knowing where she’s going, while being pulled in contradictory directions.



Sharon Butler, "American Still Life 2" (2015), oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches

[Sharon Butler](#) continues at *Theodore:Art* (56 Bogart Street, Bushwick, Brooklyn) through February 21.