



Painterly Conversation About Abstraction in “Vernacular”

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by Janet Goleas

The four artists included in “Vernacular”—Eric Brown, Sharon Butler, Andrew Seto and Joyce Robins—at Bushwick’s Theodore:Art, approach abstraction with a shared sense of humility, materiality and ambiguity. Speaking in distinct but related painterly tongues, the works on view connect familiar idioms—minimalism, cubism, precisionism—with a wabi-sabi aesthetic. The conversation among these accomplished artists is smart and refreshing.

Eric Brown’s mostly small canvasses reflect a new reductivism in a pictorial vocabulary that has often focused on allegorical form, ecstatic color sequences and cartoony arabesques, knobs and nodules. In many of the paintings here, Brown’s recent imagery is structural, coaxing allusions to architecture and a sense of cool, interior space.



“Green Center” by Eric Brown, 2014-15. Oil on canvas, 10 x 8 inches.

The Spartan geometry of *Diverge* establishes a spatial dialogue that is crisp, casual and planar, its flatness yielding to the sides of the canvas, where the painting continues around the edges. Similarly, in *Meetup*, Brown’s paint application is fleet-footed, almost perfunctory, with a clarity that is as astute as it is ingenuous.



“Meetup” by Eric Brown, 2015. Oil on linen, 16 x 13 inches.

In his other life, Brown is a gallerist and co-owner of Tibor de Nagy Gallery, one of New York’s most admired and long-lived galleries. He has organized dozens of shows, garnering high praise for the 2011 Painters & Poets exhibition, which was acclaimed for its scholarship and intellectual breadth. In a life devoted both to his studio practice and his knowledge and appreciation of fine art, Brown’s

first one-person show was featured in 2013 at Ille Arts in Amagansett.

At the other end of the spectrum, Joyce Robins's ceramic paintings are effusive and idiosyncratic. In *Pink Grey Disk and Ball*, a circle of clay with the diameter of a record album sports a crackled ceramic ball that sits at its bull's eye among a field of brushy pigment. Defying everything we know, or think we know, about ceramics, the diaphanous face of this painterly relief is poetic and blithely spare.



"Shield" by Joyce Robins, 1998. Clay, glaze, paint, 13 1/2 x 10 1/2 inches.

The recipient of numerous awards and critical acclaim, Robins has been exhibiting since the early 1970s, carving out her own métier in an oeuvre that has defied fashion, art world conventions and the status quo. Her forms bounce between circles, grids and looser, unknowable shapes that merge the chemistry of the ceramic arts with the improvisation and joie de vivre of expressionism.



"Three Black Circles with a Grey Ball" by Joyce Robins, 1998. Clay, glaze, paint, 12 x 12 inches.

In *Five Circles*, six clay discs are arranged flatly like a pressed flower, creating a shield with popped out circular interiors. Related works reiterate the circular motif, each circle converging with its neighbor to kaleidoscopic effect.



"Six Circles" by Joyce Robins, 1998. Clay, glaze, paint, 16 x 14.5 inches.

Sharon Butler's discreet paintings evoke rudimentary systems constructed from the everyday world, be it industrial, urban, retail, refuse or textual. Widely known for her influential and award-winning blog, *Two Coats of Paint*, Butler's studio practice is one that has driven much of the critical thinking for which she's known.

In a 2011 essay in the Brooklyn Rail called *Abstract Painting: The New Casualists*, she coined that term, identifying a generation of artists whose works deviated from the Bauhaus dictums that have driven art education for nearly a century. Her own work has fitted neatly into this broad concept, but the paintings here present a tighter and less provisional practice.

In *Vague Recollection*, the surface's sheer physicality lends urgency to Butler's system of dash marks and schematic lines converging in a somewhat perspectival grid that moves across the face of the painting. The contours are tentative, as if they mark a territory for which a treaty has not yet been signed. This sense of apprehension figures into much of Butler's body of work, as if the finite would be a form of captivity.



"Vague Recollection" by Sharon Butler, 2015. Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches.

But she moves closer to the definitive in *Triennial*, in which the composition seems partially redacted by a network of parallel blue-gray strokes, as if the artist is hiding a private treatise. It's a rather simple procedural event yet the effect is jarring, evoking the analytical, the ironic and the text-based.



"Triennial" by Sharon Butler, 2015. Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches.

Likewise, in *Untitled*, an awkward foreground shape conjures the memory of paper glasses distributed for first generation 3-D movies. The image lays atop a light grid of pencil lines in three-quarter view. The background grid might reference window blinds in an empty room or a sheet of notebook paper, or both. Illusion here is in the eye of the beholder.



"Untitled (eyes)" by Sharon Butler, 2015. Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches.

London based artist Andrew Seto brings the corporeal front and center with a group of small paintings that stretch the language of mark making. Theodore:Art mounted Seto's first one-person

show in the U.S. in 2013, and since then the artist has honed his craft with dense grounds and impasto patterns and lines that activate the picture plane in a way that is breathtaking.



“Snatch” by Andrew Seto, 2015. Oil on canvas, 9 3/4 x 8 inches.

In *Doormat*, the artist’s strokes fall like pickup sticks across a tarry surface of jet-black paint. Deceptively simple, the imagery coalesces into a composition so carefully constructed that, just like the game, moving a single stick might just collapse the whole structure.

Similarly, in *Remote* the artist’s sense of balance is crafted with an invisible precision in which a framework of thick lines coheres in the shape of a painterly jungle gym. Imbued as these works are with a rich sense of history, one can’t completely appreciate Seto’s painting without acknowledging his antecedents. Notable among these is another Brit, Frank Auerbach, whose impasto paintings also merge gesture with relief, color and texture. But Seto’s imagery is all his own, drawing on personal allegory and themes of the sublime, the banal, the melancholy and a resplendent sense of intimacy.



“Remote” by Andrew Seto, 2015. Oil on canvas, 10 x 12 inches.

BASIC FACTS: “Vernacular—Eric Brown, Sharon Butler, Joyce Robins, Andrew Seto” continues through July 12, 2015. Theodore:Art is located at 56 Bogart Street, Brooklyn, NY 11206. www.theodoreart.com.

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