

## Failure Is an Option

By Sharon L. Butler

Young New York City painters, often barely able to pay the bills and stuck working in makeshift, tarp-covered studio spaces surrounded by plastic bowls of liquid paint and cans of soaking brushes, bristle at the presumptuous suggestion that painting is dead. Their exuberant aesthetic incorporates generous, lively color and animated brushstrokes, and invariably features casual manipulation of visual references gleaned from the myriad sources that have emerged in our unbounded world of digital media, from homemade YouTube videos and flickering Tumblr GIFs to classic movies, stand-up comedy, and old art history textbooks. Their surfaces are washy and thin, the brushwork ranging from confident and self-assured to haltingly hesitant — their articulation of sketchy images is just within our reach but evades any total grasp.

Ignoring the “painting is hard” and “it’s all been done before” mentality that often plagues artists of an older generation, these young painters look beyond traditional Bauhaus principles of good design to explore the awkward, the offhand, and the not-quite-right. They cast aside rigid fundamentals learned in art school and exploit anything that could lead to visual intrigue – including imperfection and failure itself. Self-amused but not unserious, they have abandoned the rigorously structured propositions and serial strategies of previous eras in favor of playful, unpredictable encounters. Despite high rents, low-paying jobs, crushing student loans, government gridlock, unprecedented budget deficits, and endless war, emerging painters like those five featured in this show, Tatiana Berg, Kristina Lee, Ariel Dill, Clare Grill, and Sarah Faux, manage to locate and harness a perverse sense of optimism. In the face of such dire circumstances, perhaps painting is the *only* thing that seems easy.

Because these new abstract painters employ old tropes and incorporate disparate influences with a certain insouciant abandon, I call them “Casualists,” which I first explored in an essay for *The Brooklyn Rail*. Painters are using earlier forms of abstraction the way Rauschenberg used found objects, forming a unique, ever-shifting aesthetic idiom in the process. There is no room for handwringing about originality; it is simply assumed that something compelling will arise from synthesis and recombination. And if it doesn’t, well, that might be just as interesting.

In the past, painters would typically focus on developing a style and then spend twenty years refining it. Now artists are restless, their explorations less intensive and more expansive. Artists including Chris Martin, Franklin Evans, and Molly Zuckerman-Hartung combine non-art materials, work at different scales, use different color combinations, and experiment with unusual ways of applying paint. Unexpected outcomes now trump the handsome, predictable results of a decade ago. Dashing our expectations, seasoned painters like Charlene Von Heyl, Patricia Trieb, Matt Connors, Joe Bradley, Rebecca Morris, and Keltie Ferris have all questioned traditional notions of

good painting and moved in directions that require a different way of looking. If a painting seems lousy, perhaps with a poorly constructed support and amateurish paint handling, a presumed result of ignorance or negligence, look again. A contemporary painting's ostensibly shabby materials and slipshod process often embed very purposeful messages about the life, world, and sensibility of the artist who produced it.

The Casualists approach their work intuitively, unfazed by ambiguity, ill-defined parameters, or truncated lines of thought. The complex and often disorderly experience of everyday life is the aesthetic filter through which they entertain multiple, sometimes dissonant, ideas at once. What distinguishes the Casualists is their acquiescence to – indeed, their embrace of – inconsistency and their decision not to impose harmony on elements that may not be naturally susceptible to it. Like the philosopher-mathematicians who devised fuzzy logic, the acceptance of truth in degrees, these painters are flexible, accommodating a world in which there is rarely an absolute true or false. On balance, they are more intrigued by the questions that art can pose and the contradictions that emerge than by any definitive answers it might provide.

“Dying on Stage” presents five artists whose particular strain of Casualism is about hopefulness and forward momentum. The artists here don't wring their hands or worry about what it means to be a painter in the 21st century. In their minds, painting is a rollicking party – a big messy potluck with plenty of wine, spirited conversation, bawdy jokes, and dancing until dawn. There's no need to keep asking why.

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