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## The New Casualists Strike Again

by Thomas Micchelli on June 29, 2013 22

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Sarah Faux, "Crawling Man" (2012). Oil and spray paint on canvas, 42 x 38 inches (all images courtesy of Garis & Hahn)

Two years ago, Sharon Butler came out with "Abstract Painting: The New Casualists," an essay addressing the "studied, passive-aggressive incompleteness to much of the most interesting abstract work that painters are making today."

Since then, the New Casualists, as a text and a term, has shown considerable staying power, and on June 20th, *Dying on Stage: New Painting in New York*, which is described in its press release as "the first large gallery show in New York that brings together a group of artists specifically engaging with this new mode of abstraction," opened at Garis & Hahn on the Lower East Side.

The show features not only "this new mode of abstraction," but also a couple of modes of representation. The fluidity between the purely abstract and the somewhat recognizable is evident in Butler's essay, which mentions several artists (Lauren Luloff, Joe Bradley, Rebecca Morris, Patrick Brennan) whose work contains figurative, botanical or architectural components.

About a third of the works chosen by Kyle Chayka, the curator of *Dying on Stage* and a former senior editor at Hyperallergic, are overtly representational in ways that recall the distortions of Art Brut and the elegance of late Cubism. Their presence is a reminder that the New Casualists, as defined by Butler, "take a meta approach that refers not just to earlier art historical styles, but back to the process of painting itself."

In this regard, the New Casualists are very Old School, not that there's anything wrong with that:

By reassessing basic elements like color, composition, and balance, based on 1920s-vintage Bauhaus principles taught in every 2-D foundations course, the new painters are exploring uncharted territory. They are looking for unexpected outcomes rather than handsome results.



Ariel Dill, "Glyph" (2013). Oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches. Courtesy Southfirst Gallery, Brooklyn.

In the case of *Dying on Stage*, the artists' uncomplicated approach to their media makes for a very strong show. While there are no digital manipulations or inkjet printouts in the house, the unexpected makes an appearance in the form of Tatiana Berg's geometric hybrids — painted canvas-and-wood constructions she calls "tents."

The five-sided "Wide Sargasso Tent" (2013), covered with swirls and slashes of pale yellow, pink and ochre paint, is mounted on the wall, while the Pop-inflected "Stripe Tent" and "Megan Draper Tent" (both 2013) sit on the floor. These scrupulously fitted-together works, along with Berg's shaped canvas, "Little Boat" (2013), differ markedly from most of the other pieces in the show, which place a premium on spontaneity from start to finish.

The exhibition spreads twenty-eight works by five artists over two floors, which affords a generous serving from each participant as well as a broad and nuanced context for their interrelationships. Overall, the art of this crop of New Casualists is a mite less casual than the ones cited by Butler, who are characterized by "their abrupt shifts, their crosscurrents, and their purposeful lack of formal cohesion."

While the formal cohesion of some of the works is wobbly, none of them fly apart and most evince a striking degree of rigor. Discipline is not superimposed, as in the grid-based abstractions of yesteryear; instead it proceeds from an intuitive sense of stability that lands the best work at a checkpoint between doing too little and going too far.

The paintings of Clare Grill, especially the ring-like "Game" and the triangular "Pearl" (both 2012), exemplify this most clearly, with meandering spots and strokes that seem to be caught, as if in a spider's web, at their peak level of tension.



Clare Grill, "Static" (2012). Oil on linen, 33 x 40 inches.

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Deepening the Conversation



Grill's "Static" (2012) is particularly free-form, but its dark blots on a light ground, resembling stars on an inverted sky map, are anchored by the cruciform impression of the canvas's crossbars. It is impossible to tell from looking at it whether this hint of geometric structure is intentional or the result of repeatedly working the surface.

But it called to mind the experimental paintings from the 1960s and '70s by [Carla Accardi](#), whose transparent sicofoil surfaces allow a clear view of the stretcher bars beneath. The work in this show, however, veers away from commenting on the art object and focuses on the elemental experience of pigment interacting with pigment.

Interestingly enough, a different artist in *Dying on Stage*, Ariel Dill, seems to be channeling another of Accardi's techniques, which is to apply paint to a clear surface wrapped over an opaque one, creating an extremely shallow but impactful sensation of depth.

Two of Dill's paintings, "Walk" and "Walk 2" (both 2012) use acrylic, Mylar and yarn on canvas. The calligraphic strokes of paint on the Mylar act as a counterpoint to the pigment and texture of the canvas, while the yarn wraps around the paintings' edges like a minimalist frame. The yarn looks as if it's there as a preventative measure, lest the wriggling worms of paint slide off the surface and slither down the wall.

Another, larger painting by Dill, "Glyph" (2013), manages to present the same kind of layered effect found in the two "Walk" paintings but without the benefit of Mylar. Instead, she contrasts hard-edged biomorphic shapes, whose colors lie on the orange side of the spectrum, with blurry swirls from the blue end. The crowded-together forms and grating colors are harsh and jangly, but they are also kinetic and mesmerizing.

Kristina Lee and Sarah Faux make the deepest forays into representation, with mixed results, and it's tempting to ask whether such attempts strain the limits of the Casualist aesthetic. In other words, is it possible to direct one's imagery toward recognizable content while remaining, as Butler writes, "more intrigued by the questions and contradictions in art than by any definitive answers"?

Unlike the above-cited Joe Bradley, whose messier, more gestural pictures spawn figurative allusions almost as byproducts of the creative process, the paintings of Lee and Faux seem to insert a definitive figurative idea at a specific point in the proceedings.

This isn't a criticism but a question about intent. An allegiance to representational cogency separates the work of these artists from the more wide-ranging ventures of their counterparts, including Berg's trimly built three-dimensional supports. The stringencies of resemblance, even in the most loosely brushed paintings, short-circuit the optical call-and-response that the Casualists count on for their unexpected outcomes.

But like everything else, this work exists on a continuum, and within each of the artist's contributions there are degrees of informality and improvisation. Lee's landscapes exhibit a lush, Matisse-like languor that seems to grow organically across the canvas until it is finished off by a scaffolding of graphically outlined leaves.

In contrast, her three Picasso-ish heads, which, like her landscapes, were completed this year, have a locked-down, Synthetic Cubist simplicity; paradoxically, they also feel more spontaneous than the landscapes, as if they were all painted in one wet-on-wet session.

Faux's pictures look like younger, more liquid cousins of Jean Dubuffet and Jean-Michel Basquiat, fluctuating with greater vicissitude between abstraction and representation than Lee's work.

The hirsute "Crawling Man" (2012) encroaches on the viewer with a clammy tactility, while the ethereal "Torso" (also 2012), which lists its materials as dye, bleach and oil on canvas, is a veined, truncated, purple-pink trunk sprouting a pair of stylized, blue-nippled breasts. The image brings to mind a sewing pattern as well as — in its color, flatness and texture — Sharon Butler's own [recent work](#).

In these paintings we can presume that the artists are taking "a meta approach, that refers not just to earlier art historical styles, but back to the process of painting itself." (It should be noted that Tatiana Berg's "Face" (1913), a figurative painting that breaks character with her other works, also seems to be referencing Picasso.)

As such, what does the process of reinvestigation say about the notion of freedom that Casualism is supposed to embody?

To what extent does intuition come into play, and where do convention and conditioning intrude? Does reality need to be forced through a cultural filter in order to be understood? Should past frameworks be scavenged for tools to compartmentalize and analyze direct experience?

Is it possible for "studied, passive-aggressive incompleteness" to address complex structures and extra-visual ideas?

Is Casualism's state of incompleteness, which is the flip side of unfettered freedom (if there is no limit to choice, all choices are necessarily limited), a conclusive metaphor or something we need to get beyond?

In his curatorial statement, Chayka writes:

[The New Casualists] are content to wander freely between abstraction and figuration, pure aesthetics and the real world, discipline and play. [...] Their visual vocabulary is nondiscriminatory — taking stock of the endless, sprawling deluge of imagery presented by the Internet, today's painters churn up their disparate references and influences into a fresh visual argot.

But how much weight will this fresh visual argot be able to carry? What structures will it rely upon in order to avoid dissipation and arbitrariness?

I am reminded, perhaps perversely, of T.S. Eliot's essay "[Reflections on Vers Libre](#)" (1917), which was written two years before the establishment of the Bauhaus and its "1920s-vintage" principles of "color, composition, and balance."

Eliot enjoins us that:

[...] freedom is only truly freedom when it appears against the background of an artificial limitation. Not to have perceived the simple truth that *some* artificial limitation is necessary except in moments of the first intensity is, I believe, a capital error [...]

Which of these two visions — the unchecked or the purposely restricted — makes more sense for our time? Which is more honest, and which is self-deceiving?

In "The New Casualists," Butler asks, "If the new casualism resists evaluation on traditional criteria, how should it be judged?"

She provides an answer by way of an Ellsworth Kelly quote:

"I have never been interested in painterliness...putting marks on a canvas. My work is a different way of seeing and making something which has a different use." A new casualist might well make the same general claim. But while Kelly wants to take the personal out of the equation, the casualist believes that exploring even mundanely subjective perceptions can yield extraordinary insights.

*Dying on Stage* (which comes from a Bill Murray [quote](#) about improv: "You've gotta go out there and improvise and you've gotta be completely unafraid to die") is predicated on the belief that "mundanely subjective perceptions can yield extraordinary insights," and it succeeds within its own boundaries.

While those boundaries are rather narrow, in a broader context Casualism, with its humble anti-heroics, acts as a necessary corrective to the overblown production values that have carried away most of the market's high end as well as the lion's share of media attention. Casualism's importance lies as much in the immediate, restorative transaction between artist and artwork as it does in its philosophical open-endedness.

In that way it resembles the "[Vow of Chastity](#)" taken by the Dogme 95 group of mostly Danish directors who resolved to strip filmmaking down to its essentials. Dogme 95 was too limiting to last, ultimately interfering with the creative process it was meant to nurture. Casualism will also run its course, but, like Dogme, its call for directness, spontaneity and self-effacement will leave its mark.

[Dying on Stage: New Painting in New York continues at Garis & Hahn \(263 Bowery, Lower East Side, Manhattan\) through July 20.](#)

Tagged as: [Ariel Dill](#), [Clare Grill](#), [Garis & Hahn](#), [Kristina Lee](#), [Kyle Chayka](#), [Sarah Faux](#), [Tatiana Berg](#)

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