



KATIE BUTLER

Age 26 • Lives and creates Akron

Learned MFA in painting from Kent State University; BFA in painting from The University of Akron

By Amanda Koehn

Step into Katie Butler’s Akron studio and you hear NPR playing, see a palette covered with paints and feel drawn into the large still life paintings on the walls that hint at something more dangerous.

The artwork, mostly of fish gutted and partially eaten on dinner tables, are part of a series addressing current sociopolitical issues.

She points to one painting, “A Seat at the Table,” which remarks on the phrase she noticed being thrown around when President Joe Biden was nominating cabinet members earlier this year.

“I kept hearing on the radio, ‘you get a seat at the table,’” Butler says. “And that’s great, but the table is still flawed. So, I wanted to just make a painting about the phrase. ... And so, what if the tablespace is really kind of disorganized and impractical, and maybe a little bit dangerous?”

And what if the table itself is disoriented – historically a vessel of a patriarchal and unequal system trying to weave in very slow changes?

Put simply, Butler makes what she calls “still life political paintings.” Noting they typically begin with wanting to depict a phrase she’s heard in the news, they are crafted into contemporary allegories.

“I look a lot at Dutch still life paintings and pool from that compositionally and subject wise,” Butler says. “I am trying to kind of lift that and subvert it technically to talk about contemporary issues. So (works in the studio) are allegories that reference current events in American politics and



“The After Party” (2021). Oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 72 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist.

commentary on power dynamics.”

She notes another painting called “Three Martini Lunch,” commenting on wealth inequality, abuse of power and specifically the tax break for corporate meals (and drinks) former President Donald Trump successfully urged lawmakers to include in one of the COVID-19 relief packages. Another references a New Yorker article called “The After Party,” which is about the GOP post-Trump. The painting shows two half-eaten fish – heads intact – a knife, the article and lemon slices on a gingham tablecloth. The tablecloth is nostalgic and perhaps innocent, but everything else is ominous.



Above: “Three Martini Lunch” (2021). Oil and acrylic on canvas, 62 x 42 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist. **Opposite page:** Katie Butler in her Akron studio, with “A Seat at the Table” to her left. | Canvas photo / Amanda Koehn

“I thought about this dinner party and when the dinner party is over, you’re left with this big mess you have to clean up,” she says. “And it feels like we have a big mess to clean up right now.”

Her shift toward addressing politics (her second top interest) in her paintings (her very top interest) came just last year during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and amid the chaotic 2020 election cycle. She was in graduate school at Kent State University at the time.

Butler grew up in Canton and graduated from The University of Akron with a bachelor’s degree in painting a couple years before deciding to pursue graduate school. Though she’d been interested in still life painting as early as high school, during undergrad she moved more toward abstract work, “which I think seems to be something that most people go through at some point,” she says.

Prior to attending Akron, she had never seen art as a

ON VIEW

“New Narratives,” featuring work by Katie Butler, Herman Aguirre, Max Markwald, Erykah Townsend, Omar Velázquez and Antwoine Washington, is on view through **Dec. 30** at Abattoir, 3619 Walton Ave., Cleveland.

career she could have, and which she got more serious about during her master’s program at Kent. A first-generation college student, she says her family was always supportive of whatever she wanted to pursue in college, and it was there she started to find mentors that opened the door to creative work.

“More toward the end of undergrad, that’s when I started to realize, ‘oh, I can maybe get a job that’s painting-adjacent,’ and then I can keep making paintings on the side,” she says, adding she later became a graduate teaching assistant at Kent, which opened her eyes to a joint teaching and art-making career. “And then in grad school, I realized, ‘well maybe I can make paintings most of my time.’”

At Kent, she was encouraged to explore her continued interest in still life, but was hesitant.

“I thought, who makes still life paintings anymore?” she says, laughing. “But ... it can be a good vessel to talk about things that I care about, so I came to embrace it again.”

In September, several of her works were shown in her first out-of-state exhibit, Spring/Break Art Show in New York City. Her friend and fellow Kent MFA graduate Catherine Lentini had suggested to Butler that her work would fit well in the medieval-themed show, seeking works that lifted traditional aspects of mediums and turned them contemporary, Butler says. She and Lentini, who curated Butler’s works for the show, applied via a blind application.

The last few months have been busy for Butler locally too. She had work shown in the “Fish Fly” show at YARDS Projects in Cleveland, which was on view through Nov. 20 and featured work depicting animals in various forms. This month, another exhibition, “New Narratives,” opened at Abattoir gallery in Cleveland, featuring her work and that of several other young artists. It highlights painters with representational styles, each addressing different social issues.

Butler also works as an adjunct instructor at Kent in painting and drawing. And right now, she’s making a lot of work, which she says she hopes continues to evolve.

“I just feel like every painting I make now, I just want it to be better than the last,” she says. “How can I keep this going?” 



Photo /
Anda Manteufel

“Knowing Katie for the past few years has been very rewarding, first as her professor in Kent State University’s painting MFA program and now working alongside her in her role as an adjunct instructor. Her ambitious work ethic in the studio is unparalleled and she approaches her practice with an equal dose of research and intuition. Katie’s paintings are well versed in art history and contemporary approaches to painting. Her recent work deconstructs the still life taking on scenes that both formally and symbolically investigate subjects of unease, instability and sociopolitical turmoil in the everyday household. Life seems more and more surreal these days and Katie’s paintings refreshingly represent that precariousness. Her artistic vision and natural ability as a teacher are major contributions to Northeast Ohio’s thriving art community.”

**Shawn Powell, assistant professor in painting,
Kent State University**