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# ARTIST-TO-ARTIST INTERVIEW SERIES: MOLLY ZUCKERMAN- HARTUNG

February 01, 2017 in Interview

*Rohan DaCosta and I recently had the pleasure of speaking with fine artist Molly Zuckerman-Hartung over Skype. Molly took us on a virtual tour of the Yale Norfolk grounds in upstate Connecticut, where she was a visiting artist on their Yale-affiliated summer school, and showed us some of the works-in-progress in her studio. Our conversation spanned two days. Zuckerman-Hartung talks about her perspectives on painting, philosophy, and politics in addition to shedding light on her experiences teaching and traveling. She discusses the intentions behind her early performance work Disaster Kitchen as well as two recent exhibitions: QUEEN at Lyles & King, NY, 2016, and TIME SHARE at Fiendish Plots, Lincoln, NE, 2016.*

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung was born in [Los Gatos, California](#) in 1975. She earned a BA from [Evergreen State College](#) in 1998 and an MFA from the [Art Institute of Chicago](#) in 2007.

Zuckerman-Hartung lives and works in New York and is represented by [Corbett vs. Dempsey](#) of Chicago. As of 2016, she is a critic on the [Painting/Printmaking faculty at Yale School of Art](#). Zuckerman-Hartung's work is in collections at the [Walker Art Centre](#), the [Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago](#), and the [Booth School of Business at the University of Chicago](#). Her work has been featured in the 2014 [Whitney Biennial](#) and shows at the [Walker Art Centre](#), [ReMap4](#), [MOCA Cleveland](#), [Corbett vs. Dempsey](#), [Diana Lowenstein](#), and [Lyles and King](#).

Zuckerman-Hartung's style is characterized by experimentation and attention to materials and techniques. In a review of *QUEEN*, a show with Dana DeGiulio at Manhattan's [Lyles and King](#) gallery, the [New York Times](#) called Zuckerman-Hartung's work "a firestorm of techniques and effects: bleaching, dyeing, staining and sewing linen, silk and humble dropcloths." [Hyperallergic](#) remarked that "her abstract paintings often extend above the surface and outside the frame" and reflect "a deep engagement with process, material, and with painting's long history."

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## ON PAINTING

I was initially doing philosophy for my undergrad and it was only later that painting became a good practice for me. Philosophy as a writing activity is very methodical and very linear. So I did this detour into painting and over the years I returned to these questions that came up in philosophy, but I have the tools to address them more holistically.

Painting has a great connection with power, in many different ways. The monetary way is just one way within that, but I get a little frustrated when that is the only aspect of painting that people focus on.

On the walls of my studio at Yale I've got these bather-and-tree drawings. I made a three-dimensional grid outside. It didn't fit in my studio, so I did drawings of how it looked, and here is a bunch of nude drawings. Here is a big drawing that I made and the underlying drawing on it is this graphic body print where I got naked and covered myself in graphite and printed my body on the paper. I sort of danced with it for a long time, so I got this super close imprint, and here is this tissue paper stuck on the wall. There is this funny spot where two walls connect and there is this recession, so I put tissue paper over it.

Also in my studio is this work called "Such Wet Eyes." I gave this three-and-a-half-hour lecture on painting called "Such Wet Eyes" that contains 400 images. I printed the whole thing out. It's eight across and 50 down. There are some of my own paintings, but mostly historical work with mainly an emphasis on women and people of color, so it is trying to remake the canon and is an ongoing project. I keep changing and reshaping it. "Such Wet Eyes" is a Robert Smithson quote and it is sort of a derisive comment towards people who like watching paint pool, so mocking painters. So all of that is about how I have tried to be here, think here, teach here, and understand this actual room that I am in.

**"Some people are more comfortable with emptiness than I am, and that is a long learning process for me of letting things be empty."**

When I first started making paintings in 1995, I had a backlog. I was twenty years old and had twenty years of shit that needed a place to be stored. Now I have been making paintings for all these years and feel there is less that needs to

be stored. One thing I have been thinking about is if the painting is

## THE FEED



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storage then the studio is a brain/body; it's an external thinking structure of some kind. One of the things I have wanted to do, and have had to do for many practical reasons, is move constantly. So setting up a studio and getting really involved in it for maybe three weeks or three months, then packing everything up and moving again, has really helped me leave space and it taught me that the space is doing as much work. I definitely fill space faster than other people. Some people are more comfortable with emptiness than I am, and that is a long learning process for me of letting things be empty. I have never really committed to the flatness, but that's a whole other topic!



Molly Zuckerman-Hartun  
*Second City*  
2014  
Acrylic on sewn fabric and spray paint  
72 x 84 Inches



Molly Zuckerman-Hartun  
*Tropism*  
2016  
Latex, bleach, enamel and collage on sewn burlap, cotton, and linen  
65 x 80 Inches



Molly Zuckerman-Hartun

*Chris Rock Star*

2016

Latex, bleach, enamel, collage, and dye on sewn cotton and linen

62 x 77 Inches



Molly Zuckerman-Hartun

*What are Years*

2015

Oil, ink, acrylic, and bleach on sewn silk, linen, and drop cloth

72 x 59 1/2 Inches



Molly Zuckerman-Hartung

*Light Studies*

2015

Enamel, acrylic, photographs, tissue paper, and corrugated cardboard  
on canvas

22 x 18 Inches

### **ON EARLY PERFORMANCE WORK: *DISASTER KITCHEN***

Back in Chicago several years ago, I did a four-and-a-half-hour performance where I painted this small room, no bigger than the average bathroom, this very specific blue from this 1970 interior decorating book with a lot of tacky reproductions of those French Revolution paintings with tacky gilt gold frames. I then hung all these funky paintings I had made on the walls and I dressed in this costume that was a mixture of Lucille Ball and Marie Antoinette. I wanted that stupid but effective simplicity you find with Marilyn Manson. The whole thing was called *Disaster Kitchen*, but, unfortunately, I have lost the documentation film of it. Dana Degiulio was there really just to help me. She dressed in this furry bear costume that she has and the idea was to set up this situation and keep it going. We brought in books and magazines. We had children and adults coming in and doing workshops. The context of this was within a design exhibition I was asked to be a part of, but because I don't make highly crafted beautiful objects—I make ideas—I decided to take over this small room in the back of the space. It had a window so people could just look in like I was a monkey in a cage or choose to come in.

For my undergrad, I studied the French, Haitian, Algerian, and American Revolutions, and so I was thinking about this: how revolutions are and how we are living through a revolution. With Marie Antoinette, what I feel is particularly significant is her beheading, and in this I am always interested in getting headless. Lucille Ball's

character Lucy in the show *I Love Lucy* is so amazing in showing the speeding up of the Fordist mechanism and capitalism. Often Lucy can't keep up anymore with the machine. The machine overwhelms her and it becomes comedic through this speeding up. And I was developing this idea at a time recently after the BP oil spill, where they kept pouring things on top of the oil that were just making things worse, demonstrating this completely slapstick incompetence that is not often exposed in capitalism's streamline modernist visage. And it really is this glitch or imperfection that interested me in Lucille Ball herself. When reading her biography, I learned that in her early career she was always the beautiful leading lady. However, at around 36 she stopped getting all these leading-lady roles, as she was considered too old. Because of this, she developed a stutter, but it was this circumstance that opened her eyes to comedy and that's when she became comedic, writing and producing the show *I Love Lucy*.

#### ON PLEASURE AND POLITICS

I've started working on a lecture series, inviting other people to come and give lectures at Yale that center around pleasure. When I am making in the studio, I would not say I take the path of least resistance when I am painting, but if it is not pleasurable I will stop. I don't really think much about spontaneity because it is so built into my practice. I think more about habits and trying to get them, because I am extremely distractible. I'm working on this and then I am working on something else. So I think of this as a negative thing until it stops working and I get overly focused and too obsessive again, and then I work hard to try and distract myself. So, it is actually true that I am very committed to that spontaneity, open fluid movement, especially in the studio. If I can have that in my whole life, then I am ecstatic, but it is a balance and rhythm that is so important.

When I was younger I was almost too rigid or too fixed, very argumentative and hard about things, as a punk, as a feminist. But as I have gotten older, I do think I hold positions better and I also think I am much more flexible and open. I

**"It is pleasurable to be seen and to be understood, but it is also pleasurable to play, and it is important that the projection doesn't line up too close to reality."**

understand there are more sides to this thing, but I also feel safer to be that way because I am very clear about where I stand on something. Tolerance has become so important to me that I am willing to allow other aspects of politics to move more slowly. So I have been thinking a lot in terms of trees, and the network of branches, and this is the case with the ecosystem; being really attentive and available to something. You don't even know where it is and what it is. How do you open up your awareness? Without tolerance, you're starting to block your radio. Without a generalized openness, one starts to block and argue. And as someone who has argued for years, I am really aware of how it dulled my senses. It is pleasurable to be seen and to be understood, but it is also pleasurable to play, and it is important that the projection doesn't line up too close to reality. It is the same way with the fundamentals of figure drawings and how you make lots of little light lines and you can't see it all at first. You're not supposed to pin the figure down. These fundamentals of art are lost a lot of the time in today's art education, which puts value on the commodity.

#### ON TEACHING AND FEMINISM

I started teaching at Yale full-time in Fall of 2016, but in the summer of 2016 I was the painting teacher/artist-in-residence. They gave me a studio as well as allowed me to teach in their low-residency program at [SAIC, School of the Art Institute of Chicago](#). I have been having lots of debates with myself. Do I want to teach? Do I want to be a full-time artist? I've been going round and round and I think, in the end, I like teaching more than not teaching because I think, in the end, it just makes the whole thing less silly.

One of the things we have been talking about here at Norfolk is male/female relations. The women hear about rape in the news and also experience their own relationships with their bodies and sexual orientation. It can feel like the 1950s—so conservative. So we did a body-drawing workshop here and held a conversation one night for all those who identified as female focusing on the idea of "how do you explore your own pleasure?" I talked about [Valerie Export's work \*Tap and Touch Cinema\*](#) where she basically put a cardboard box over her breasts and put little holes in the front and curtains over the holes. Anybody could reach in and feel her breasts. I had looked at this piece for many years and had always had this response that was like, *well, that's fucked up*, but I looked at it recently and thought, *I bet that feels really good*. It's a way of having an experience of pleasure on the street in public, but you're really safe and in control. I had just never thought that before because I think it is a cultural taboo to think of a feminist experience with pleasure. Once I realized that, I thought, *well that's totally fucked up!* After presenting those thoughts to the group, many students came to me and said they had never thought about it before and they are now all having really exciting conversations about their own pleasure. I was thinking a lot about that and this culture that is re-victimizing young women, and it being so successful perhaps because such taboo conversations about female masturbation and orgasm generally don't exist.

**"This idea of "liking" is so absurd to me because I have never worked as an artist in terms of things I like, but more it's the feeling of not understanding that drives me towards exploration. "**

I am thinking about teaching a class that would be centered around copying. It would be a beginning painting class that the students would only be allowed to copy. There would be no room for originality! Because I am a very open teacher, of course it would open up in all kinds of interesting

ways. I've begun thinking a lot about how everything is about us being language users. If you use language "badly" or "wrongly" with mistakes and mishearing, this is how new words are formed or new shapes. It is sort of out of attempts to be a language user, and I feel like that takes care of a lot of the pressure to be original. A friend said in response to this idea of the class about copying, that students would end up only copying things they liked. At first, I was like *I don't even know what that means*, but then it made me think of a student who was copying a Renoir painting, and I told him Renoir is the only person that you are not allowed to copy! This idea of "liking" is so absurd to me because I have never worked as an artist in terms of things I like, but more it's the feeling of not understanding that drives me towards exploration. Like when I moved to Chicago, I didn't understand the grid and minimalism. It made me mad, so I read everything I could possibly find about minimalism and wanted to find out why other people valued this

thing which before I hadn't valued. For me, that's a good place to dig in.

### ON DRAWING THE BODY

The New Museum held a contemporary painting symposium during their "Albert Oehlen: Home and Garden" exhibition in 2015. I was a member of the [Contemporary Abstraction Panel](#). The drawings I showed during [my talk](#) at the New Museum are related to the body awareness workshop I mentioned earlier. I had this drawing practice for a while where I would draw my body from what it felt like, not what it looked like, just to see what does my body look like in my head right now. We move around the world so fast with technology. There is so much vertigo, the sense of spinning and dizziness. There is something important about getting a mental picture of my body even if it is disorganized. Another thing is, I have been teaching life drawing for a long time and the main thing I try to teach is empathy, so you're not just looking at but you're also empathizing with the life model. Feeling the pose in your own body changes the way you understand yourself to be drawing it, so by doing the pose yourself quickly you know which is the load-bearing foot in the pose. Once you understand how you're distributing your own body weight, everything else follows. Really classical ideas of balance and contrapposto.

### ON SHAME, THE NEURO BODY, AND TRAUMA

A teacher once said to me that I was touchy-feely in a critique and I think he meant it as a tease, but the other students took it as an opportunity to mock me in a particular way from the way that he meant it, that was richer than that, but it was a coming to self-

**"When I was younger, I was such an exhibitionist and I wanted attention. I can't even imagine if I had done that in a world that would remember it socially, publicly."**

consciousness, like, *how am I going to shape this?* I was making a few self-portraits at the time anyway, and had made many in the past, but at that time, because of that comment, I made a self-portrait on which I painted *Touch Me Feel Me*. It was a painting of a horrible twisted face and then a clearer, calmer, maybe more beautiful version of myself painted on my forehead. At the time I thought of Frida Kahlo's painting *Diego On My Mind*, but now I relate it to again this idea of the Neuro Body; that we do have a version of our body in our mind, explored in phantom limb research and re-coaxing prosthetic limbs. There is something about this Neuro Body. I think Frida Kahlo was really on to something, combining a notion of vision, being a visionary, and using the other as a vessel for your vision. There are a number of ideas wrapped up in that, but I was also at the time really trying to exercise getting rid of trauma by bringing it on, like the turning around of language like in popular culture. If dyke is an insult, you turn it around to be positive. All of that to me is about forgetting and remembering. It's like forgetting the pain of it and remembering the power of it. It really is about trying to transform something because every wound can be turned into a strength. [My whole website](#) was designed to be about getting lost and forgetting where things are. Not to get really cheesy, but forgetting and remembering with the Internet is next-level shame. When I was younger, I was such an exhibitionist and I wanted attention. I can't even imagine if I had done that in a world that would remember it socially, publicly. Maybe we all need



shame-training workshops because Internet shame can be so powerful.

**ON QUEEN AT LYLES & KING, 2016**

**"With relationships, you start with this simple, cheap way of 'you're like this' and 'I'm like this,' but that breaks down and love does something crazier than that."**

When someone over-essentializes my work, I get a little funny. I strive towards androgyny and I think that any good artist strives towards androgyny. In terms of explaining the conversation [Dana DeGiulio](#) and I wanted to have during our exhibition

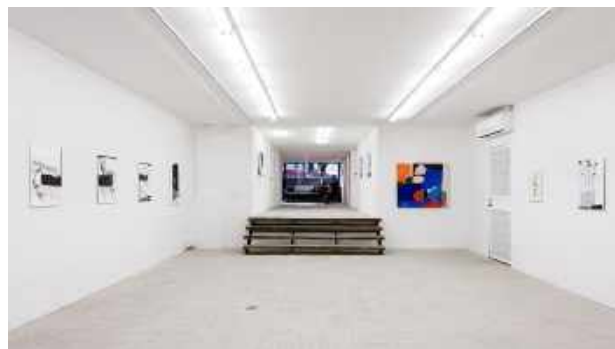
[QUEEN at Lyles & King](#) and the gender implications it contained, perhaps talking about travel and place is a really beautiful way to talk about it. I grew up in Olympia, I moved to San Francisco for a year and Seattle for a year. When I was 29, I moved to Chicago and lived there for a decade, and in the last couple of years I've been in Tennessee and Miami. I did a lot of driving around and really exploring the South. I also went to France, Japan, and Australia and all over Europe in my 20s. But when I moved to Chicago, the first thing I noticed was the grid. It just wasn't available to me on the West Coast. The geometry of modernity is not available on the West Coast. Spatially it is very different. I was dating Dana DeGiulio for five years and I was constantly telling her about the grid. She grew up on the South Side of Chicago and for a long time, she was saying, I don't know what you're talking about! It was so fundamental that she couldn't see it. This really ties into the ideas that we were trying to talk about in our joint show [QUEEN](#) and for those ideas not to be narrow readings of gender and female essentializing ideas. It really is a figure/ground issue, which leads me to say how I perceive abstraction. For me, abstraction is not the opposite of figuration because it is not pictures. It is a figure/ground issue. In abstraction, the figure and ground begin to flip. That's what's potent about it, getting your head around that and getting to understand the power of negative space or negativity in general. These flips begin to make the world so much stranger. When people seem as if they know or understand, it is that turn back to curiosity and enjoying the fact that the world is stranger than that we could imagine. With our exhibition, [QUEEN](#), the gallery is called Lyles & King, so we wanted to flip the hierarchy and use the space, ground, and text to think about how the gallery sets up meaning. Dana and I have known each other for a long time. We have worked together for a long time, dated, taught together in at least five MA seminars, and have so many people in common, so there was something about how our work sits together, both in opposition and in congruence. With relationships, you start with this simple, cheap way of "you're like this" and "I'm like this," but that breaks down and love does something crazier than that.



Molly Zuckerman-Hartung and Dana DeGiulio  
*QUEEN*  
Installation View at Lyles & King



Molly Zuckerman-Hartung and Dana DeGiulio  
*QUEEN*  
Installation View at Lyles & King



Molly Zuckerman-Hartung and Dana DeGiulio  
*QUEEN*  
Installation View at Lyles & King

**ON *TIMESHARE* AT FIENDISH PLOTS,  
2016**

Before my solo exhibition, *TIMESHARE* at Fiendish Plots, I was thinking about calendars. It was a stronger step towards the question of how to

structure time in painting. I had been asking myself that for a long time and I really wanted to get more adamant about it. I wanted it to be really straightforward and clear. So I was like, *it is going to be a grid and a calendar!* But it really helped in thinking about the objects and the space. There was this limitation of shipping, as Fiendish Plots would ship the paintings one way but not the other, so that solved the problem of working off the stretchers, which I had also been thinking about for a long time but not able to commit to. I think it is because I get so caught up in *What will it mean? Will it still be experienced as painting?* So we laid all these pieces of cloth out on the floor and for about 6 hours I tried every possible configuration out around the space, but it wasn't until Nancy Friedemann and her husband, Charley Friedeman, who run the space, showed up, and I showed them all the possible hangs and Nancy was suddenly like, "Oh, this one should go up here," and it was just this perfect moment. That one piece almost floating brought the whole thing a lot of air. I am always trying for so much weight and gravity that I sometimes forget that I can achieve a lot of height and lift without losing the gravity. It got more playful. The white space started to become more important. Up until this point, there had been this real worry for me for so long, a worry about this idea that "proper painting" is aiming for autonomy vs. contingency and the ways in which I was pushing it into this political context of autonomy vs contingency, flexibility vs rigidity, Fordism vs. Post-Fordist economy. I had all these very binary things going on inside my head and I was trying to maintain a really strong critical position where I could remain firm in my beliefs. However, with this show, I realized I was ready to be contingent upon how I change when my context changes. That's a fact and I can trust some part of me will stay the same, so I can change. So that show just flipped it for me and made it true.



Molly Zuckerman-Hartung  
*TIMESHARE*  
2016  
Installation View at Fiendish Plots

Harriet Poznansky  
Nomadic Press  
Poznansky is a British artist currently based between Oakland and London. She studied at the Slade School of Fine Art London and School of the Art Institute Chicago. She currently works from her studio in Oakland's Fruitvale district, making paintings, music, and writing short stories. [www.harrietpoznansky.com](http://www.harrietpoznansky.com)

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Tags: art, painting, trauma, collage, politics, feminism, chicago

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