

BOMB

Repetition and Rhythm: Molly Zuckerman-Hartung
Interviewed by Jared Quinton

Paintings that explore expression and constraint.



Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, *Bird & Bird (Broad advisory, transactional and contentious capability)*, 2011, oil, spray paint, and painted leather connecting two paintings, left: 15 x 13 inches, right: 15 x 12 inches. Courtesy of the artist, Corbett vs. Dempsey, and Rachel Uffner Gallery.

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung had already left Chicago when I moved there in 2017, but her presence was still felt. Chicago is the city where I learned to love painting, and Zuckerman-Hartung's work was a frequent point of reference in my conversations with artists, many of whom studied with her at the Art Institute or knew her through the very good artist-run space she co-founded, Julius Caesar. Iconoclastic and polemical, heartbreaking and hilarious, her works and writings are a beloved shorthand in certain circles. When I found myself living an hour north of her in New England, I was excited to meet this artist in person and honored when she agreed to do this interview with me to coincide with her mid-career survey at the Blaffer Museum, *Comic Relief*, curated by Tyler Blackwell.

—Jared Quinton

Jared Quinton

There are so many ways to start a conversation about your work. When I visited your studio this summer, I was taken by the many things made from folded paper, and I'm wondering if it might be easier to start somewhere concrete, with these peculiar, elusive objects. Can you tell me why you make them? Is it something to do with the act of folding itself?

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung

I appreciate this as a starting point. I think it is about the action and the meaning of the fold. I first folded canvas in 2004, but didn't pick it up consistently until 2020. A fold is a way of moving. It feels rhythmic, the accordion folding; it's a way of moving my hands over and around the paper. It's a spring or coil tightened and retaining energy. For Gilles Deleuze, the universe is a process of folding and unfolding, which creates an interior or private space and shadows. A material act of self-educating or maturing.

When I was a child reading alphabet books, I felt that "Z is for Zebra" spoke directly to me because of the Z in my last name. The Z is an image version of a fold. A back and forth, a to and fro-ing like the way a sailboat moves, tacking into the wind. I have always had difficulty repeating myself consciously. The folding is a material structure of repetition that can function as a ground or beat to work with or against in a drawing or painting.

I think it's also about the paper, which is the material of books. I worked in used bookstores for ten years before I dedicated myself to painting, and I'm finding ways for books-as-objects to enter my practice.



Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, *Lurch*, 2009–14, acrylic, oil, enamel, spray paint on sewn T-shirts, coat liner, wool, canvas, and drop cloth, 112 x 69 inches. Courtesy of the artist, Corbett vs. Dempsey, and Rachel Uffner Gallery.

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, *Lurch*, 2009–14, acrylic, oil, enamel, spray paint on sewn T-shirts, coat liner, wool, canvas, and drop cloth, 112 × 69 inches. Courtesy of the artist, Corbett vs. Dempsey, and Rachel Uffner Gallery.

JQ

I'm interested in how your work connects to text. It seems like a relationship that's in constant negotiation. Sometimes you're working with material metaphors; sometimes titles invoke references to literature or poetry; sometimes text is your medium or the material itself. How would you describe the connection between painting and the written word?

MZH

I think your word, negotiation, is a slight euphemism and most apt. Words and painting are uncomfortable bedfellows but mutually reliant. I studied painting for the first time at age thirty. Before then I was studying French language and literature, including deconstruction and anticolonial thought; I don't know if I understood Jacques Derrida or Frantz Fanon exactly, but this is what I had read. Suddenly, because of painting, reading became more difficult. The words literally slipped around on the page, and something more like a field-consciousness began to emerge. The linearity of reading and writing started troubling me. I remember a funny experience reading *King Lear*, and the words Kent and gent, on subsequent lines, began bouncing in my vision. I was reading up and down rather than left to right!

On the other hand, my partner, Fox Hysen, always says she thinks my work is inherently about reading. I know that the hesitations or arguments or discontinuities in the work feel textual somehow. A teacher of mine, Gaylen Gerber, said that art is always "Yes," and I have come to see what he means; but I think the written word can be much more contrarian, split, negative, internally conflicted. I need that.

The artist Tom Burr is a neighbor and friend. I have been thinking about what makes his work sculpture. What I enjoy in his work is the space it makes for narrative and critique in language. The objects, whether they are railings, jackets, or shrubs, are historical and specific. They are taken "from the world" and placed into the art context, but their original context remains important. I have also been thinking about David Robbins's idea about concrete comedy: Objects that function as comedic props but are pulled out of the quotidian and placed in the context of

art. Having spent almost two decades in painting departments, I'm steeped in a very different set of discourses that feel vague unless understood as "within painting." My idea about Painting is that it is a set of historical languages that are in conversation with one another. That Painting itself is a country in which the inhabitants speak Painting.



Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, *Comic Relief*, 2016, gloved appendages, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 65 x 4 inches. Courtesy of the artist, Corbett vs. Dempsey, and Rachel Uffner Gallery.

JQ

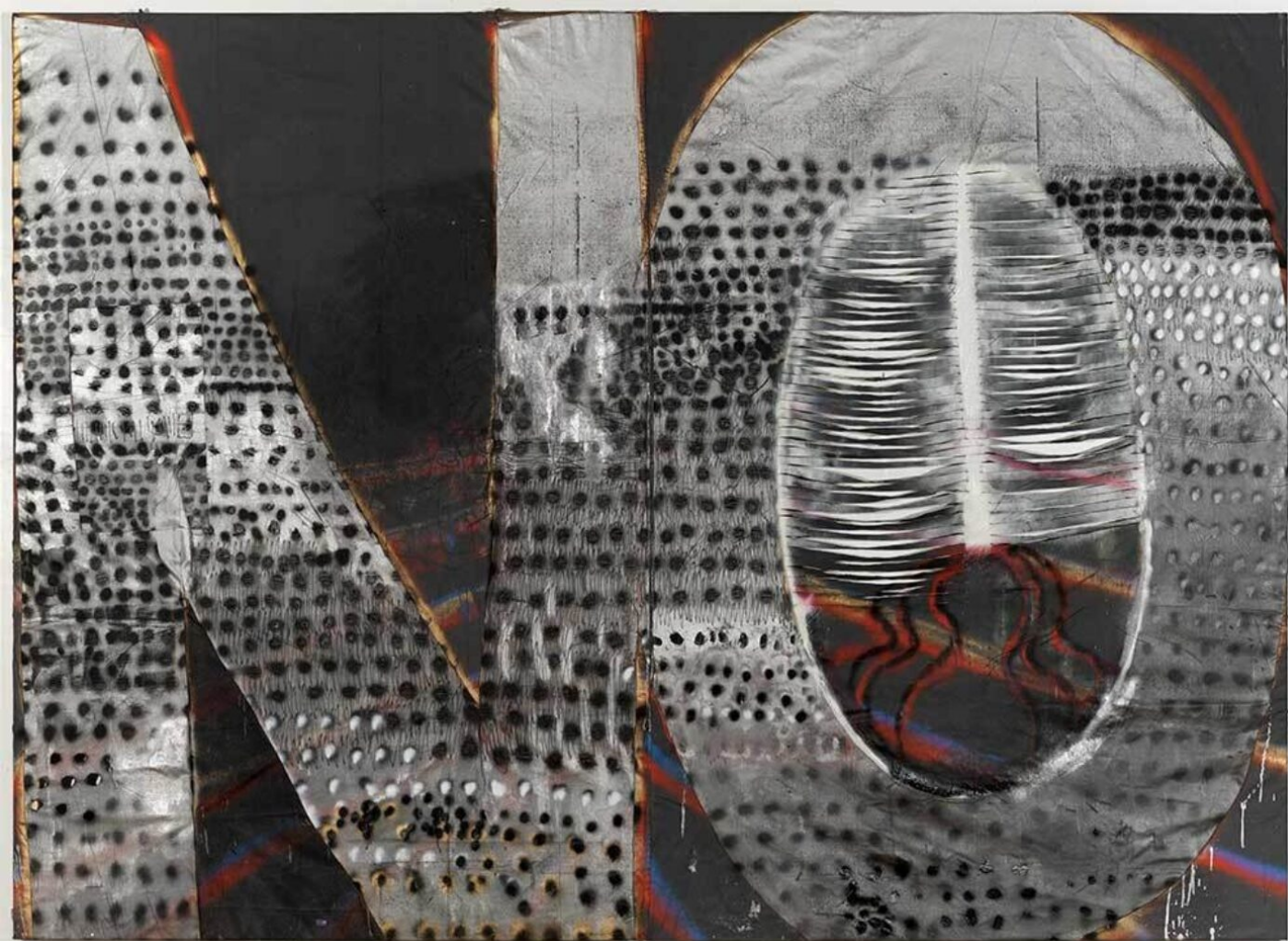
If I may: Why does painting matter? At least outside of the world of painting, as you allude to. I also come from a critical background, and I've had to consciously learn how to look at, think about, and talk about painting. That's part of why I am so drawn to your practice and how relentlessly concerned with medium and history you are. There's no preciousness, but there's no cynicism or nihilism either.

MZH

Oh, wow. Big question. Painting matters because it is a deeply private, personal activity that's also public, banal, and ubiquitous; and it has an avant-garde history that even many contemporary artists purport not to understand. Isabelle Graw has written about painting as a "success medium," and, as I understand it, this is about the way that an individual "subject" or "expression" occurs in painting. Even or especially during the era of the erasure of the hand or the Death of the Author, the subject rears its ugly individualistic hand/head in painting. There was a time after the death when there was constant talk about the zombie in painting. It lives!

Painting is the medium that foundations programs in art schools try to train you out of, yet it continues to be the most desirable department in many schools. Painting signifies market success, even though most painters are not succeeding in the market. There are too many of us.

The other side of painting's promise of expression is the constraint: the rectangle, the flat surface, the limits. I'm not good with limits, but that is what keeps me trying. Those limits also produce a feeling of history. The longer one paints the more one feels the memory and history, both of what one has done before and what others have done in that rectangle. Repetition is inevitable. I have railed against repetition, and of course I repeat myself. And repetition creates rhythm. Repetition and rhythm are in short supply under late late capitalism. The stream of Instagram keeps us always in the present. The internet registers its age only through font or design, but never because it's fading, cracking, or dusty. Those material signs of aging might ease us into the melancholy mood that is necessary for growth, but we shy away from them. I have been appreciating how paper wilts in the humidity.



Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, *Notley*, 2013, latex housepaint, enamel, and spray paint on drop cloth, 96 × 132 inches. Courtesy of the artist, Corbett vs. Dempsey, and Rachel Uffner Gallery.

JQ

I wonder if we might end by talking about the idea of a “mid-career survey,” which our interview is timed to coincide with. I feel like there’s something about your practice that might be resistant to the impulse to neatly historicize it. Are you interested in subverting this context?

MZH

The mid-career retrospective. Sigh. Subversion feels like the wrong term. I appreciate the word, and it is important to me, but I wouldn’t presume to understand the mid-career enough to subvert it. I have been lucky to work with curator Tyler Blackwell. When he proposed the show to me, over three years ago, he said the project would be to “historicize me” and that it would most likely be a disconcerting process. He was right, but it’s also been very meaningful.

I find the work I made between 2004–14 both seductive and elusive; I wouldn't know how to repeat those paintings. It is as though someone else made them. This makes me want to repeat them, and this must be what it means to be in mid-career. The past is really past. Certain objects I stuffed in boxes are now being pulled out, and I am readying them for packing and shipping. Do I clean them up? Repair them? Their material funk was always the point for me, but now I am baffled. Maybe it is uninteresting to admit these feelings. What interests me is not the personal feelings only, but the way in which they indicate or reflect a larger feeling in the culture. We are not living in a moment of heroic gestures. The racist history of America is being explored more publicly than ever, but the art market keeps trying to find new things to celebrate. That just doesn't make sense, with the forest fires, droughts, and hurricanes of climate change; the rise of right-wing sentiment; the shame and despair of our time.

I'm moving away from the question. I hope that my work will tell its story.

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung: *Comic Relief* is on view at the Blaffer Museum in Houston until March 13.

Jared Quinton is a writer and curator based in New England.