

## Molly Zuckerman-Hartung: *Menopause Recalls Puberty (M.R.P.)*

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Installation view: *Molly Zuckerman-Hartung: Menopause Recalls Puberty (M.R.P.)*, Below Grand, 2024. Courtesy the artist and Below Grand.

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung’s *Menopause Recalls Puberty* operates as an outline left to be filled in. In a 2022 interview for the Blaffer Art Museum, Zuckerman-Hartung said she “can’t speak for anyone else” regarding their experience of her art, but the titles of her work act as anchors. For me, the work spoke to the complexity of womanhood.

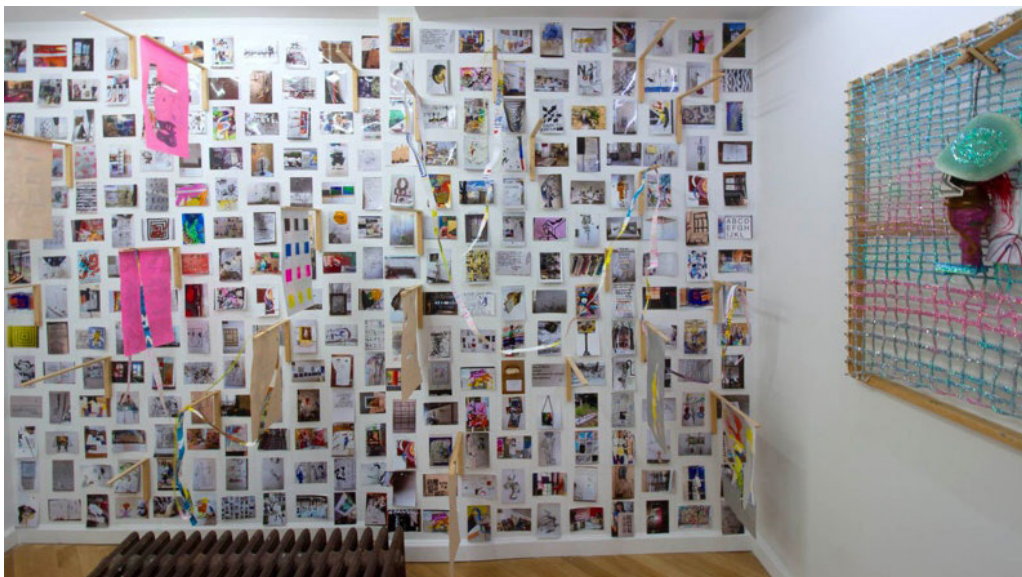
Zuckerman-Hartung told me that the idea of shame informs the show. Puberty—while a moment of growing up—can also be one of embarrassment. One’s body uncomfortably transforms into an object of society’s gaze. At the same time, the exhibition pays homage to the intimacy of the relationship between a woman and her body. The beauty of each piece loudly and poetically invites the viewer to admire what may otherwise be a source of discomfort.

Tucked away in the Lower East Side, the Below Grand window, curated by Andrew Woolbright, displays two paintings. The top painting, *Rip it Up and Start Again* (2023), is primarily a deep purple with geometric line work, while below *Brass in Pocket* (2023) features a beige canvas with loose squiggles and a square of different colors. Each painting’s title references a song—“Rip It Up” performed by Orange Juice (1982), and “Brass in Pocket” by The Pretenders (1979). Orange Juice sings about regret and wishing to go back in time. The title of this work in conjunction with the exhibition title suggests an impossible and complicated desire to return to a physical innocence. In

contrast, *Brass in Pocket* brings a lighter meaning through its title and colors. The song is about acting self-assured, a definition of having “brass,” implying the confidence of womanhood. Together, these works give a glimpse into the contradictions within Zuckerman-Hartung’s work.

An untitled collage of drugstore-printed photos on the gallery’s inner wall confronts the viewer with continued questions about the passage of time. The space is so intimate that it feels as though the artist is sharing her photographs just with you. Taken between 2019 and 2024 in the artist’s studio, the images “[blur] the genre boundary between work and archive.” Zuckerman-Hartung combines frozen moments into one art piece. There is no way to determine the date on which any particular photo was taken, merging past and present into one. Sticking out from the wall are large pieces of paper hanging from wooden rods. On the back of each page is imagery of a woman’s body with faded writing, such as “the question posed by desire is not ‘what does it mean?’ But rather ‘how does it work?’” The work freezes versions of women and their thoughts over the course of five years into one moment on a wall. The photos capture how a woman’s body can only exist at one stage—she cannot rip it up and start again—but emotionally she holds every past version of herself.

Nearby, in Zuckerman-Hartung’s *Grace* (2024), a puppet is stuck to the center of a grid composed of thick glittery yarn whose colors little girls might associate with mermaids. The initial nostalgic joy promised by the shimmering colors of girlhood fades through the rough texture of the yarn. By definition, a puppet is controlled by an outside influence. This puppet is attached by a black string to the background, so it is the yarn that operates the puppet, defining the figure through stereotypically joyful constructs of girlhood. Behind the figure is a sign with the repeated word “shame.” Girls transform from playing with puppets to, in a sense, being puppets through a loss of control, as society views their bodies not as autonomous but as the object of play.

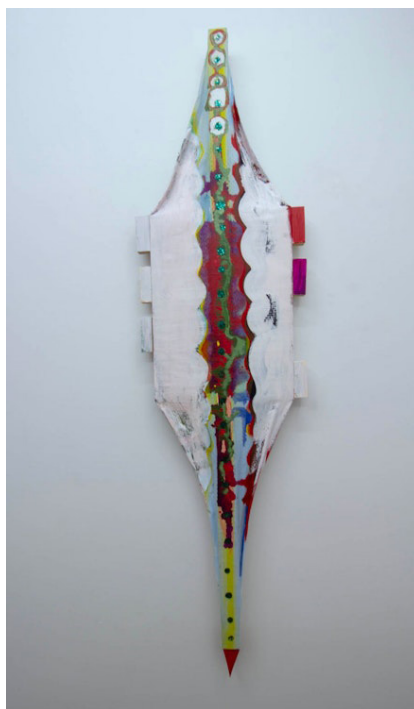


Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, (2019-2024), 2024. Photos, sticks, risograph collages. Courtesy the artist and Below Grand.

The puppet's body is bound by purple and brown yarn; her head and face, apart from a sliver of red hair, are masked and hooded. When a woman's face is covered, there is an emphasis on her body and thus a loss of identity. However, the puppet could be—like the spider crab featured on the photo wall—disguising itself through its environment as protection. The puppet is protected from society's gaze—or the viewer's. Ironically, it is an object, a chair, that is the puppet's shield and protects her from being objectified.

Stepping back from the figure, I see an elephant's ear and trunk as the covering. Female elephants go through puberty around the same time as girls, but unlike human women they never go through menopause, aptly fitting *Grace's* reminiscent nature. Elephants, like women, have the capacity to form closely bonded matriarchal societies and to gain support and power from intergenerational structures. The anonymity caused by this mask suggests a protection gained through community, while still acknowledging a loss of individuality that comes after puberty, when society begins to treat a woman as if her body is central to her identity.

*Paintings are Timelines* (2023) features the words "THE END." The final piece, the only one with no date, is a sparkly vagina labeled *Guitar*—the glitter of mermaids from *Grace* turns into a reality within. Is "THE END" a joke? There is no definite end within this square room. The rest of the words are hidden and illegible, which begs the question: What else is there? In a time when women's rights are being questioned, Zuckerman-Hartung creates work that acknowledges the importance and intimacy of a woman's physical existence.



Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, *Guitar*, 2024. Oil, acrylic, glitter on artist made stretcher. Courtesy the artist and Below Grand.