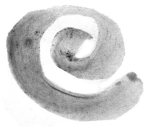
On working with what's around you



Visual artist Molly Zuckerman-Hartung discusses sinking into a feeling, doing it yourself, and the value of teaching others.

September 28, 2026 -

As told to Claudia Ross, 2047 words.

Tags: Art, Education, Process, Success, Focus, Multi-tasking, Day jobs.

I know that you're from Olympia and went to Evergreen. How did riot grrl and that scene filter into your practice?

Oh my god, that's such a huge question because it's all I knew growing up. I also didn't move to Olympia to go to Evergreen. I grew up there and went to Evergreen last minute because my friends were going and they have 100 percent acceptance rate and I was like, "That sounds like a plan."

I went to one or two riot grrrl meetings and at the first one I went to on the Evergreen campus, I was still in high school. I had a friend who worked at the state theater downtown. All the hipsters worked there and they all wore these polyester black pants and heavy eyeliner. They knew about riot grrrl.

It just was that scene for me for the next 12 years or something. There were big festivals every summer. And then in 2000 I helped coordinate and plan and I made the program for LadyFest. All of that was formative for me.

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, *Marilyn*, 2026, oil and spray paint on nylon, 82 1/2 × 57 1/2 in. Photo: Josh Schaedel, courtesy of IZZY LEE.

But during that time I was also working in youth bookstores and coffee shops and bars. And I was teaching myself

how to paint and trying to figure out how to get people to look at my paintings. And the visual language of that scene was heavily influenced by Barbara Krueger and Andy Warhol. I was not into that level of clean, declarative, ironic Pop artwork at the time. I was interested in something messier and more emotional and not so cool. Now I feel like that coolness from that scene is important as a part of how I think about what art is.

But I was always making these paintings of musicians. I made paintings of Iggy Pop and Tracy + the Plastics—Wynne Greenwood was a person in that scene. Nina Simone, Michael Jackson, I don't know, all these…. Dolly Parton… I would put text next to them and try to get people to think about pop culture with me in ways that were critical. All of that did have a foundational effect on me.

You use such a diverse array of materials. I wondered what it would be impossible for you to work without.

Let's say scissors. I think scissors are the most important tool.

I used to draw my scissors all the time, draw pictures of scissors because I was trying to figure out, I don't know, just how to take things apart and how to think about being analytical and trying to take things apart in a more philosophical way also.

Scissors make it possible for you to use other people's images. it's interesting that you brought up Krueger and Warhol because that makes sense as a counterpoint to your work. When I was reading about your work, I also saw that there's a lot of comparisons to modernism and the grid.

I think at this point, it's super dialectical. I love Warhol and I think about Pop Art and I have whole bodies of work that are full of screen prints and appropriation, although for a long time I was really anti-photography.

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, *Fencing*, 2025, scrap of trim from Laurel Way Extension, CNC cut wood from Kingsland in Norfolk, oil and enamel paint, toothpicks, screws, paper, 6 x 9 x 14 in. Photo: Josh Schaedel, courtesy of IZZY LEE.

Why were you against photography?

Probably just because I was a reactionary young person. There were artists in Olympia who made this postcard series. They would take images of ’50s housewives and then appropriate them and put language next to them in this kind of Situationist way. “If you can bake a cake, you can build a bomb,” that kind of thing.

That was a big image influence because I didn’t like the kind of cutesiness of it. There was this whole culture of, let’s have a picnic. Let’s go pick blueberries. I was way more in this other part of the scene where people were doing drugs in the basement and being bad kids.

Now I love to pick blueberries and have picnics. It’s not like I actually stuck to my guns about this, but I think, at the time, I just took the side of the drug users in the basement.

I understand what you’re saying. That kind of art has become very mainstream. It’s like Rosie the Riveter on potholders. It seems like you were correct in your assessment because it was so easily integrated as a consumer product.

It felt too easy to turn into capitalism and I was definitely against capitalism on every level. I didn’t like the easy cuteness of it.

And then when I learned about the German painters, that felt like an incredibly complex take on Pop Art that I actually gravitated towards. So, Martin Kippenberger and Sigmar Polke, because I thought, okay, I get why you would take that Pop influence and make it messy.

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, *The whole thing is spinning so fast, right? Like you said* , 2026, enamel and acrylic paint on sewn dropcloth with masking tape, 31 ½ x 20 in. Photo: Josh Schaedel.

How did modernism enter the equation for you?

I went to Chicago for grad school and a teacher of mine said, "Why don't you try the grid?" And now I understand that I needed some organizing structure to think about the flatness of my paintings. I never really thought about painting in terms of making images in a pictorial way. I think she saw that and was like, "Okay, you need a grid. You need something to structure flatness."

And the city of Chicago is a grid. So, when somebody tells you an address, if you know the city and you understand the grid and the math of the grid, you can figure out where they live right away. And that took me a few years to just comprehend how the grid worked as an organizing principal for the whole city. But that was one sort of huge aspect of thinking through modernism.

I was also really trying to puzzle through a couple of basic questions. One, What is the connection between thinking and feeling? Why does everybody seem to separate them in art? To this question I thought, "What does it look like when a woman is thinking? What does female thinking look like?"

I was really into Susan Sontag. I started reading everything that she wrote and I made a lot of portraits of Susan Sontag. I was really trying to just think about how she looked and how beautiful she was and what it meant that she was a thinker and how do we understand her as a thinker. How do we visualize thinking?

And then I started drifting towards Paul Klee in particular. There's a really amazing collection of Paul Klee

paintings at the Art Institute in Chicago. Those paintings started to make more sense to me as I experienced the insanity of living in a big city in the 21st century.

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, *Porous*, 2026, oil and acrylic paint on sewn nylon, 15 x 18 3/4 in. Photo: Josh Schaedel, courtesy of IZZY LEE.

I love this investigation of what female thinking looks like and what the relationship is between thinking and feeling. Do you still think about those questions now?

The thinking and feeling one is such an integral part of how I work. I think it’s hard to even explain, but yes, I definitely still think about that. Just pouring pigment onto a raw canvas can open up an emotional experience. My relationship to a line feels more analytical, more critical.

Does your work start from a process-based place or do you start with a plan in mind or a concept?

It’s much more process-based. It’s process-based and then there’s an emotional question. What’s actually going on in my life? What’s my relationship to home right now? What kind of losses am I suffering? Just trying to sink into an actual mood, I think.

We live in a world where there’s an endless amount of bureaucracy that you could just be doing on the computer all the time. Trying to figure out how to sink into a feeling is the point of making something for me.

So, then the question is, What is that feeling? Can I go for a long walk and stay in some kind of mood? Or can I notice the weather? It's feeling cool and dry right now. How does that enter the painting? Or how does the mood of my studio right now enter the painting? All of that is this big atmospheric tumult that I'm trying to gather.

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, *Broken Black Diamond*, 2018-2025, oil, acrylic, enamel, glitter on canvas, 28 ½ x 23 ¼ in., Photo: Josh Schaedel, courtesy of IZZY LEE.

I’m so curious about how that translates visually. Is it additive at first and then editing?

Yeah. I mean, I’m kind of crazy additive. Long ago, Michelle Grabner wrote an essay about my work for *Artforum*—15 years ago or something—and she described it as the Deleuzian. I like to gather and gather and gather and then start cutting things out and making selections for whatever it is.

At first you want to get crazy, crazy open and just take off and see what kind of floats to the bottom or something.

Has your relationship to this process changed over time?

I used to be a lot more open and impulsive, but also a lot more aggressive towards what I made. I used to hate it and really struggle with it and overwork it. I was known as an overworker.

I think that has definitely cooled as I’ve gotten older. I’ve gotten cooler, more restrictive, less impulsive. And then that’s its own problem because it’s harder to bring the kind of energy and chaos that I used to access really easily.

One of the goals lately has been to figure out how to make the work lighter, more precarious, more fragile. I keep reminding myself that I could stand on something really fragile and it would hold me.

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, *Ex-Tensions*, 2026, L brackets, dried paintbrushes, cloth, aluminum tape, copper wire, 41 x 38 x 8 in., Photo: Josh Schaedel, courtesy of IZZY LEE.

I love that painting that you did for the IZZY LEE show. It's so beautiful. It's really arresting to look at. Did you just move to LA to start teaching at UCLA? How has the transition been?

I've always taught. I was at Yale for a long time as a full-time professor, but not on tenure track. But I've always taught at the same time as making. And I don't know what it's like not to do that, to just be a full-time artist. Maybe it would be lovely. But I really value teaching. I mean, there is no way at this point in the market to just live on painting, but I wouldn't want to anyway.

To me, the kind of energy of the work has something to do with being a teacher and with caring about the stakes of painting and being part of a larger discourse.

Do you have any dream projects that you would like to work on?

I don't know, I just work with what's here. I don't think that way. I don't aspire to something that I'm not just already working with or had already something. I'm pretty fundamentally DIY that way.

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung recommends:

Kishio Suga

The sound of my dog breathing while she sleeps.

The Badlands

The doors in Robert Bresson's *L'Argent*

Lisa Robertson’s *Nilling*

Name
Molly Zuckerman-Hartung

Vocation
visual artist