(The 95 Theses on Painting)

1. I am a painter.
2. I decided to become a painter. No one asked me to do this.
3. Becoming a painter is my way of deciphering the codes of visual information and experience that structure capitalism in our time.
4. Deciphering the codes also means rethinking the implied values of those codes.
5. I was never a doodler. (I never drew idly, playfully, without self-judgment and insecurity, for fun. Even as a small child I broke crayons from pressing too hard and learned quickly that my artistic efforts would be judged harshly.)
6. I was not told I had artistic potential.
7. I am a 37-year-old woman with no children and no intention of having children. The significance of this decision is simply that my investment in the future is necessarily different, less personal. I do not have children, but I do have students. I worry for them. I wonder what kind of a world they are growing up into, what they understand of the world, and what they will make of their understanding.
8. Painting is an activity that takes place within quotidian time and has the ability to expand and transform clock time beyond the everyday, toward the eternal.
9. This movement toward the eternal has been critiqued as Romantic but is as realist and banal as keeping one's hands in warm dishwater on a sunny afternoon. The decision to space out—to get lost in a moment—is an *always available* decision.
10. My paintings do not have value because they are in the museum. They have value because they are in dialogue with and a continuation of other paintings.
11. This dialogue involves careful looking at and questioning of paintings in museums, in studios, in galleries, in homes, and responding in my own work—sometimes pictured as thrashing, flailing argument, sometimes illustrative, sometimes critically dialectical, and sometimes dreamily intuitive.
12. I believe in painting as a meaningful act.
13. I believe in painting as a desperate, stupid, time-wasting act involving huge, crippling ambition and necessary and near-constant failure. This too is meaningful.
14. To fail interestingly one must understand the stakes of one's endeavor and try to achieve something against certain odds.
15. The stakes of painting are both universal and personal.
16. The history of painting is parallel to, and provides a bodily, always-contemporary narrative of, the history of civilization.
17. To make paintings one must take seriously the triumph and tragedy of civilization.
18. The continuation of civilization belongs to anyone who has the courage to imagine herself a participant.
19. To make an important painting one must posit oneself as a person of consequence.
20. A person of consequence tries to understand the possible effects of her actions.
21. I know what I do, but I do not know what what I do does.
22. One of the tragedies of civilization is that we have believed and continue to believe that one is *born into* the position of being a person of consequence.
23. Understanding the unruly effects of one's actions as an individual enmeshed in a complex global situation is impossible, and thus one must constantly reconcile oneself to the ruinous effects of most human endeavor.
24. I am aware that most of my action is harmful. (Richard Rorty's definition of a liberal is someone who tries to do the least harm.)
25. Most human endeavors are enacted with the arrogance of a false person of consequence who believes that she does right.
26. A painter knows that to do no harm is impossible. (This knowledge is arrived at through the persistent repeated activity of preparing a pure, white surface and muddying it, messing it up, adding and subtracting in a process of working out the drives to destroy and create, and the shame of these drives.)
27. A painter knows that civilization is untenable.
28. To stand up and assert oneself as a person of consequence is to assert a distrust in universal human values (in ambivalent favor of the individual perspective) and the simultaneous necessity of continuing to teach and perform universal values as well as their critique in the hope of future generations finding better resolutions to impossible questions.
29. I often don't know if I am whispering but should be yelling or vice versa. This is a painting problem.
30. Painting reminds me of my actual size.
31. For all of the above reasons, painting can be an avant-garde act.
32. In the past the avant-garde has tried to keep up with technological "progress" in an effort to critique it.
33. Today, the avant-garde has trouble locating itself or its purpose.
34. I believe the painter, contending with gravity, materiality, action, and history, is best equipped to articulate the goals of the avant-garde.
35. The problem of attention is addressed by painting.
36. The problem of containment is located within painting.
37. The problem of time is felt in painting.
38. When I stand before a painting and am able to bring my whole self to the experience, I feel the arrested time, felt as my own death.
39. This is different from the experience of photography, which is also arrested time, but stopped by a mechanical or digital device.
40. The effort of the painter to stop time with her own hands, in the face of history, hurts more, but the pain is empowering, not debilitating.
41. Feeling one's own death is the beginning of developing a sense of the consequences of one's actions.
42. Painting at its best is utterly demanding, cruel, and hopeful.
43. A painting asserts its own criteria for success or failure. The painting itself tells you how it wishes to be judged.
44. Paintings ask for judgment. This is their gift. How do they do this?
45. They sit completely still.
46. Even when they attempt to ingratiate themselves, by trendy color or shiny surfaces, they carry the awareness of how short-lived their charms will be.
47. Janus-faced, paintings look backward and forward in perplexed, stony silence.
48. At times painting is passionately committed to its history, and sometimes nostalgically resigned to its pastness, but always painting looks backward.
49. Often painting is anticipatory, excitable, and enthusiastically bad, while being as present and happy to be here as a preteen at a slumber party, but always painting looks forward.
50. Though strongly held positions may appear arrogant, dogmatic, and single-minded, to adopt and substantiate a critical attitude is in fact the most humble of gestures, since such positions *presuppose their own negation*.
51. Painting is a strongly held position.
52. The purpose of holding a strong position is to offer open invitation to dissenting critical thought.
53. The painter's goal with respect to the future is to stay relevant without becoming absorbed.
54. This means keeping pace with (dirtying oneself on) the organizing forces of capitalism (social, economic) without giving in to them. I.e., not just being a symptom, but exercising discipline, moderation, restrained investment *sometimes*, and decadence, porosity, and the wild flail other times.
55. In painting, one has a conversation with oneself that is in some ways the same as the conversation with the world. The difference is similar to the distinction between speech and writing.
56. In speech, one cannot take something back.
57. In writing, one changes one's mind privately and presents a reasoned argument publicly.
58. In painting, the difference is that the accumulated evidence of changing one's mind is allowed to remain as build-up, as density, or as sedimentation.
59. This sedimentation is what I am calling *human*.
60. In relationships with others, this sedimentation is often heavy, angry, resentful. Things said and taken back reside in memory and are not easily discharged.
61. In a painting practice, this long conversation with the self (which is a conversation with all the others encountered in one's life, and internalized) is manifest, present in time and space as a whole, as an alternate body: the body of work.
62. The body of work is evidence of the work of living.
63. The work of living is different from making a living, which is obligatory, and a strange euphemism for the giving up of part of one's life to the activity of paying for that life.
64. Painting is a paradoxically elite activity precisely because when fully engaged as a critical, lifelong practice, the painter gives up *all of her life* to this practice.
65. All work, including washing dishes, sewing clothing, devising advertising campaigns, and building iPhones, can be meaningful, but capitalism has chosen to segregate these practices into a hierarchy of value.
66. Work typically done by women, with the hands, is not valued.
67. Work done in factories, with machines and hands, now mainly in China, is not valued.
68. Work done in the home, such as washing dishes or raising children, is not valued.
69. Work done on the farm, with machines and hands, is not valued.
70. We do not value work because we do not value ourselves. And we regard the objects made and lived with as depressed, depleted mirrors of our sorry self-hatred.
71. We then make up new/old categories such as artisanal and make cocktails, handbags, and nouveau cuisine for the wealthy as a compensatory gesture.
72. This does not compensate. Some people have lifestyle and many exist in poverty to support that lifestyle.
73. The dream of abstract painting in the 20th century was a dream of whole people whose senses weren't fragmented, whose vision was complete, who made paintings with their hearts and minds and bodies in harmony.
74. This dream is still a dream, not yet a reality, and ever-receding.
75. This dream is foolish and necessary, and the wholeness of its vision is what makes it foolish, and the wholeness of its vision is what makes it necessary.
76. Keeping a foolish dream alive makes one a fool.
77. Society has always needed fools: the fool is both self-electing and made from without, by the society.
78. The fool bears the shame of society's fears. The fool is a scapegoat.
79. The painter today is a fool.
80. The painter today becomes familiar with shame. The hot flush of shame, the constriction of muscles, the desperate need to hide. The painter accepts these feelings and holds them, and smiles warmly.
81. The painter gives a gift that is unwanted and even hated.
82. The gift the painter gives is the very human meaning of engaging in a useless and unjustifiable activity.
83. It is simply this. There is no justification for what I do.
84. I'll say it again. I do nothing useful to justify my existence, and yet I believe I deserve to exist. All life deserves this unjustified blessing.
85. Painting is an utterly useless activity.
86. And yet, painting gives my life meaning.
87. Painting is the language of form and space that reminds me that I am made of the same stuff as the world.
88. I am hard and soft, gentle and dense and dispersed, bright and sharp, contrasting and undulating, acidic and toxic and soothing. As is the world.
89. I paint to step away from myself and realize that I am one with myself.
90. I paint to step away from the world and realize that I am one with the world.
91. I paint to forget everything I know.
92. I paint to remember again everything I dismembered and to become a member of something new and there all along.
93. I choose, each time as though for the first time, to think and teach and write and love as a painter.
94. The movement through the 95 theses is an agonistic, difficult process I go through again and again, mostly forgetting that there is relief and containment at the end.
95. Painters make better lovers.

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung. *Hedda Gabler*, 2011. Spray-paint, oil, fabric, and thumb tacks on canvas. 70 × 48 in. (177.8 × 121.9 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey.

How Is Painting?

Julie Rodrigues Widholm

With an exploratory verve for juxtaposing painterly gestures, found objects, and a range of materials, Molly Zuckerman-Hartung is taking the temperature of painting today. Rather than asking the tired old question "*what* is a painting?" we might instead ask, "*how* is painting?" Is it hot and bothered? Serene and soothing? Agitated and aggressive? If painting continues to matter, how does it make itself relevant in contemporary life? Is painting like a religion for some artists?

In *BMO Harris Bank Chicago Works: Molly Zuckerman-Hartung*, the artist's first solo museum exhibition, she addresses these questions through each of her paintings as well as a personal manifesto, *(The 95 Theses on Painting)*, in which she challenges painting's dogma and stakes her own territory. The title of her manifesto refers to a text by Martin Luther, leader of the Protestant Reformation, who in 1517 nailed his "Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences" (commonly known as the "95 Theses") to the door of a Roman Catholic church in Wittenberg, Germany, to protest the selling of indulgences—the exchange of money for a promise of freedom from God's punishment for sin. This allusion to Luther, who instigated seismic social and religious shifts and for whom the Lutheran religion is named, is related to Zuckerman-Hartung's interest in humanism as it engenders a cautious questioning of the power and agency of the individual person or artwork.

As Zuckerman-Hartung says, her compositions "hold it together because everything else is falling apart,"[1] as they compress lines, drips, sprays, smears, strokes; 35 mm slides, Polaroids, and CDs (relics of obsolete technologies); and other collage elements until they are about to burst out of the frame, as they do in *Fold* (2011), or reach out to connect with another painting, as in *What's in the front, whose in the back* (2011). Her intimately scaled paintings and more recent larger-scaled canvases embody various states of being—each with its own idiosyncratic personality and mood that advances the merits of the singular. Some are thick and hot with impastoed pinks and reds. Others feature muted grays and greens with thin applications of paint barely concealing each layer underneath. Some paintings refer to distinct personalities, such as *Hedda Gabler* (2011), titled after the lead character of Henrik Ibsen's nineteenth-century play, one of the first fully developed neurotic female protagonists of literature.

Each work in Zuckerman-Hartung's oeuvre is sharply distinct—these are not part of the ubiquitous convention of making work in series. If her paintings were children, they would all have the same mother (Molly Zuckerman-Hartung) but different fathers (William Baziotes, Arthur Dove,

1 Conversation with the author, March 17, 2012.

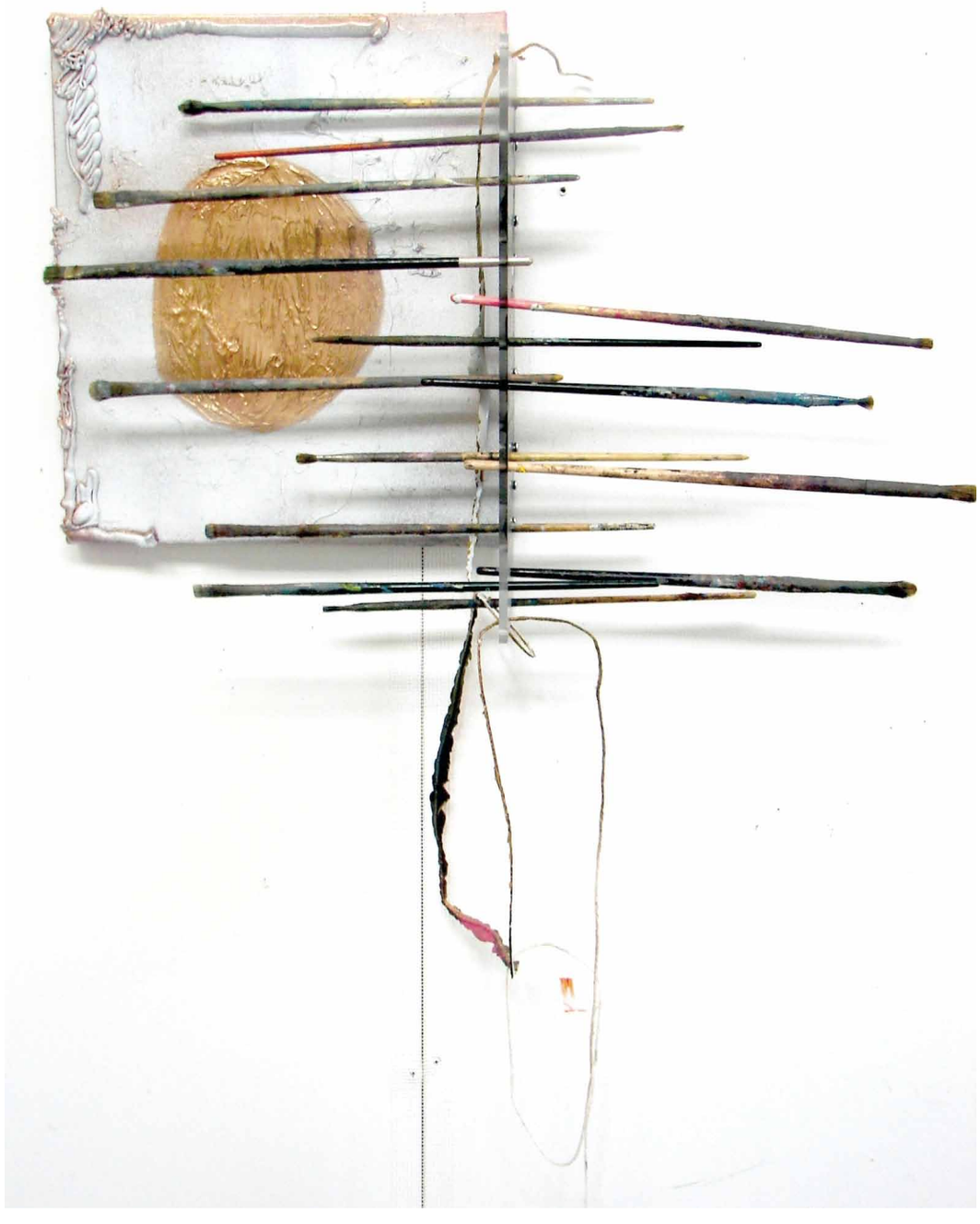
Robert Rauschenberg, Martin Kippenberger, Per Kirkeby, Josh Smith), or perhaps two mothers (Isa Genzken, Charline von Heyl, Amy Sillman). While each work is unique, they share a spirit of paradoxical binary conflations and multiplicity: seduction and repulsion, surface and depth, action and thought, the arbitrary and the considered, the desires of the mind and the desires of the body.

In a 1959 essay on Willem de Kooning, Thomas Hess, who championed abstract expressionism and believed in considering how artists' lives and beliefs inform their work, in contrast to Clement Greenberg's purely formalist approach to art criticism, wrote: "Painting is an intellectual action (viz. all great painters have been good writers) that can express a whole philosophy. The image of the paintings themselves may not completely expose the philosophical premises, just as the writings of Kierkegaard or Coleridge never exhausted their insights."[2] A French literature major in college and extremely well-read, Zuckerman-Hartung is steeped in French philosophy and theory and a prolific writer. Yet her highly visceral and expressive paintings belie the primal matter of language, text, and theory employed by the artist before, during, and after their making, reflecting the fact that she simultaneously gets out of her head and into her body, discovering the pleasure of the flesh, paint, and touch. The physical representation of the flesh is explored most recently in her addition of representational images, particularly in works incorporating vintage pornographic imagery from the 1970s, into abstract paintings. This juxtaposition raises many questions: Can representations of the body be disconnected from their cultural associations and be transformed into a purely formal element? How do we read abstract paintings, and how does this reading shift when found images and objects, elements of "real life," are added? How does painting become an extension of the body, through action and play (or desire) rather than thought? How can a position—philosophical, art historical, or otherwise—be represented through painting? Paradoxically, Zuckerman-Hartung's paintings embody a realm without narrative and outside language. They are perfectly happy to just be.

This contentment, however, is hard earned. The artist's practice of starting anew with each canvas creates a productive anxiety within the paintings. And even though they are worked and re-worked, sometimes over years, they still bear the immediacy of Henri Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment, the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as the precise organization of forms which gives that event its proper expression."[3] Zuckerman-Hartung's moment is not the first but rather the last moment in a painting's creation, which may be a sudden or long-brewing moment. The evidence of her decisions and process of cutting, weaving, adding, balancing, covering, revealing, and layering complicate our understanding of how much time was invested in these "decisive moments" as she explored how painting was that hour, that day, that year.

Julie Rodrigues Widholm is Pamela Alper Associate Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

2 Thomas B. Hess, *Willem de Kooning* (New York: George Braziller, 1959), 9.
3 Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Mind's Eye: Writings on Photography and Photographers* (New York: Aperture, 1998), 42.



Molly Zuckerman-Hartung. *Scalps in French* (detail), 2011.Oil, spray-paint, caulk, Plexiglas, old paintbrushes, and string on canvas. 16 × 34 × 5 in. (40.6 × 86.4 × 12.7 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

Delicious Cake

Michelle Grabner

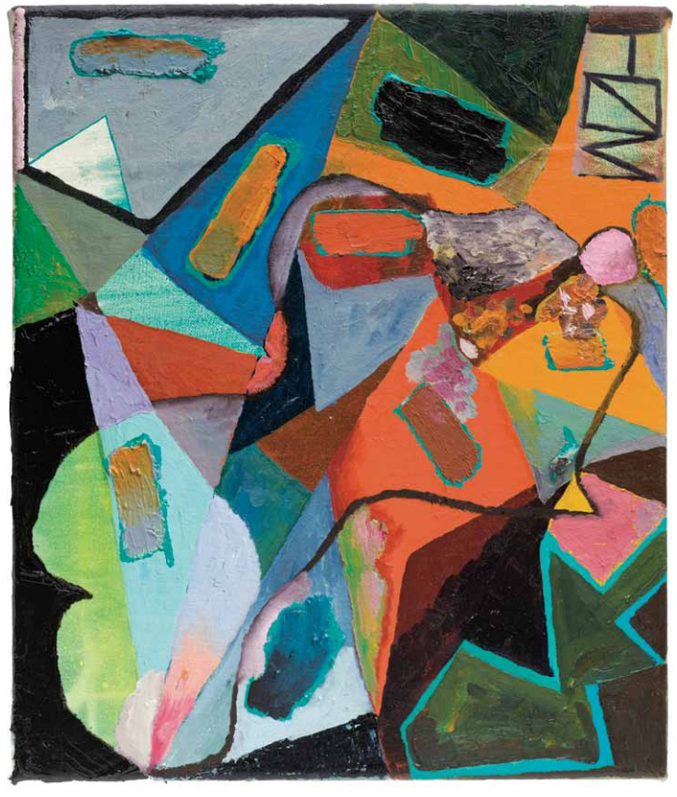
Read her *(95 Theses on Painting)* and you will likely think that Molly Zuckerman-Hartung is hysterical, given the feverishly emotional and riotous claims she makes in the interest of painting. But you would be wrong. The interconnectedness, the oscillating histories, and the illocutionary lessons comprising her variant on Martin Luther's notorious disputation are timely, genuine, and dramaturgically mindful, each thesis performing a theatrical part in her narrative script. In her writing, as in her painting, we witness something akin to what Douglas Coupland observes in the literary genre he calls "Translit": "a long-form solidity emerges, even though the links between substories can be as ethereal as a snatch of music, a drug induced sensation, a quality of light or a rock formation."[1] This is also Zuckerman-Hartung's bailiwick.

More than ten years ago, the term Hysterical Realism, with its overly intellectualized vitality—its use of journalese, multiple voices, double talk, invented vocabulary, slang—was lobbed critically at the literature of Zadie Smith, Salman Rushdie, and David Foster Wallace. Contrary to its critics' conjecture, Hysterical Realism was never abandoned or dismissed as a postmodern parlor trick or as literary social theory. Instead its manic prose matured into an example of how we have come to live. Navigating history, geography, time, and space without concern for the historical or geographical principles buttressing institutions and ideological frameworks is now common practice in crafting narratives, whether colloquial or literary compositions.

Confronting the Translit genre, Coupland writes: "[W]e get our very delicious cake, and we get to eat it, too, as we visit multiple pasts safe in the knowledge we'll get off the ride intact, in our bold new perceptual every-era/no era," an "aura-free universe in which all eras coexist at once—a state of possibly permanent atemporality given to us courtesy of the Internet," a "post-era era without forms of its own powerful enough to brand the times."[2] This is the condition from which I believe Zuckerman-Hartung paints, and, based on her studio output, she relishes the challenge. Hyper attentive, she pinballs among syntactical operations, emotional intensities, and the material affects of painting, loading her canvases with the transitivity and sensibility of Coupland's "every-era."

Deploying convergence, Zuckerman-Hartung works an accumulative field of fact, taste, and desire. Heavily edited but never polished, modern quotations, postmodern citations, and a vast vocabulary of painterly expression—viscous drips, cloying pours, brutal slashes—are rehearsed and jury-rigged. Sometimes her paintings struggle to claim the authority of invention, directing attention instead toward bits of found photographic representation (vintage porn), the literalness of embedded things (books, sea urchins, slide mounts), the canvases' outer edges, and the tactility of painting's matter. This is also a strategic rerouting of

1 Douglas Coupland, "Convergences," *New York Times Book Review* (March 11, 2012), 10.
2 Ibid.



artistic expression into affect as raw material: information wrangles with modes of interference over time and space. She is the witty pataphysician and a romantic visionary, a fabricator, a creator, and a transcriber. Style and subjectivity are transacted in, over, under, and around a silver-coated crab, a blue spray-painted line, a feeble length of taped-together paintbrushes, tile grout, a wristwatch, glitter, and linen.

Zuckerman-Hartung deals in an active language, responding to heterogeneous triggers that wind and congeal into painting. More admirable, she originates a practice that dodges painting's endgames while influencing broader memes of cultural engagement. Her declaration in thesis number 75—"This dream is foolish and necessary, and the wholeness of its vision is what makes it foolish, and the wholeness of its vision is what makes it necessary"—suggests that she recognizes her hand in making Coupland's "delicious cake," a cake that manifests here as abstract painting.

Michelle Grabner is an artist and writer who lives and works in Oak Park, Illinois, and Waupaca County, Wisconsin. She is a professor and Chair of Painting and Drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung. *The Initial Painting*, 2012. Oil and spray-paint on canvas. 14 × 12 in. (35.6 × 30.5 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey.

Chicago Works 93

BMO Harris Bank

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung (American, b. 1975), who lives and works in Chicago, is an instructor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she earned her MFA in 2007. She will be Visiting Artist at Northwestern University in 2012–13. Originally from Olympia, Washington, she has a BA in French Language, Literature, and Philosophy from the Evergreen State College. She is a member of the artist-run project space Julius Caesar along with Dana DeGiulio, Min Son, Chris Naka, and Sean Ward. Her work has been featured most recently in exhibitions at Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago (2012); Anna Kustera Gallery, New York (2011); and Harris Lieberman, New York (2011), among others.

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