I am a painter.

I decided to become a painter. No one asked me to do this.

Being 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 implicit values of our ‘human scale.’

5. I was never a doodler. I didn’t need to doodle, playfully, without self-judgment and insecurity, for fun.

6. A person of consequence tries to understand the possible effects of her actions.

7. One of the tragedies of civilization is that we have difficulty grasping what it is in some ways the same as the conversation with the world. The difference is similar to the distinction between speech and writing.

8. The painter today becomes familiar with shame.

9. The hot flush of shame, the constriction of muscles, the movement through the 95 theses is an avant-garde act.

10. We then make up new/old categories such as artisanal and mass production, handbags, fingerfood, and nouveau cuisine for the wealthy as a compensatory gesture.

11. The movement through the 95 theses is an avant-garde act.

12. The society is both self-electing and made from without, by the participation of all of us.

13. A fool bears the shame of society’s fears.

14. The fool is a scapegoat.

15. The fool today is a fool.

16. A fool today becomes familiar with shame.

17. The painter gives a gift that is unwanted and even hated.

18. The movement through the 95 theses is an avant-garde act.

19. We then make up new/old categories such as artisanal and mass production, handbags, fingerfood, and nouveau cuisine for the wealthy as a compensatory gesture.

20. A person of consequence is evidence of the work of living.

21. 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.

22. Painting is a paradoxically elite activity precisely because what it is engaged as a critical, lifelong practice, the painter gives up all of her life to this practice.

23. We then make up new/old categories such as artisanal and mass production, handbags, fingerfood, and nouveau cuisine for the wealthy as a compensatory gesture.

24. A painter knows that civilization is untenable.

25. The painter today becomes familiar with shame.

26. 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.

27. A painter knows that civilization is untenable.

28. To make paintings one must take seriously the history of civilization.

29. A painter knows that to do no harm is impossible.

30. The painter today becomes familiar with shame.

31. The painter today becomes familiar with shame.

32. 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.

33. A painter knows that civilization is untenable.

34. To make paintings one must take seriously the history of civilization.

35. A painter knows that to do no harm is impossible.

36. A painter knows that civilization is untenable.

37. An alternate body: the body of work.

38. A painter knows that civilization is untenable.

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61. A painter knows that civilization is untenable.

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 what it is engaged as a critical, lifelong practice, the painter gives up all of her life to this practice.

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95. The painter today becomes familiar with shame.
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 setting 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, ...
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.” 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.” 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.
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 dramatically 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 posts 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 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 (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.