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Art as a Guarantee of Sanity: Interview with Holly Ballard Martz



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By Alicia Puig

The pieces in Holly Ballard Martz's current body of work act as physical manifestations of the perpetual quandary that she and many Americans feel they have been living in over the past several years. The thematic direction of her work focuses on such hot button topics as the prevalence of gun violence, the volatile nature of contemporary politics in America, and stigmas surrounding mental health with the underlying question of 'how did we get here?', while more importantly also prompting the viewer to consider 'so, what are we going to do about it?'

Holly's sculptures and installations are arresting, sometimes for both the scale and subject matter. They are inviting in the sense that they encourage you not only to look, but also to think and question. She utilizes found objects in her artwork, initially drawing the viewer in with a sense of familiarity. But upon closer inspection, she has either subverted each material's intended use or altered the context to change how it is perceived, occasionally also employing text to underscore the work's meaning. With a clear artistic voice that straightforwardly captures the current zeitgeist, one might expect that she had always had a strong interest in creating politically oriented art. However, it took not years, but decades and several decisive moments in her life and career for her to arrive at the work she is known for today.

Being the product of a father working in advertising and a mother who was a "Martha Stewart before there was Martha Stewart"-type, Holly knew that she wanted to make art when she grew up and couldn't imagine doing anything else. While at first she thought that she would follow in her father's footsteps with creating commercial art, by the time

she went off to college, she had decided to instead study printmaking and earn a business degree on the side. Several years after graduating, during which time she tried to launch herself into the art world as a painter, she got pregnant and placed her artistic pursuits aside in order to focus on raising her two daughters.

As is the case with many creatives, once you stop it can be difficult to return to and stay consistent with your art practice. For many years, the combination of mom-guilt and a fear of putting herself out there again kept her from pursuing art wholeheartedly. She dabbled in creative projects such as the occasional watercolor or decorating her home on a budget, but it wasn't until about 15 years ago that she picked up her brushes, resumed painting, and resolved to take her art career seriously again. At this time, she was working in acrylic on canvas, mostly for practical reasons as it was easier to clean up and do in between the time she spent with her kids. After applying and exhibiting at a local art fair, she eventually began showing her artwork with a regional gallery that ended up representing her work for around five years. Quickly making up for lost time, Holly continued to develop and push her art practice, moving into encaustic and then finally into the sculpture and assemblages which she is known for today.

Holly expresses a deep admiration for those who balance both their creative career and familial obligations. But although there is a part of her that wonders where she would be if she never took time away from her art, in many ways it has served her well. By the time she returned to her craft, she not only had an increased motivation to make it work this time around, but also had learned what she wanted to say with her art through life experience.



She cites American artists Robert Rauschenberg and Joseph Cornell as well as French-American artist Louise Bourgeois as sources of inspiration and mentions that she developed her interest and love of collecting objects from trolling thrift stores and flea markets. Yet, what marked a turning point in her life was when one of her teenage daughters fell into a deep depression in 2011. Holly embraced her art as a means of coping and began making sculptures and encaustic paintings that allowed her to express grief and anxiety over her daughter's well-being. She connected with a local curator who first organized a two-person exhibition and then a group show with her work alongside other artists also grappling with mental health issues within their respective families. Although some of the reaction to her work was shock at her willingness to be so open and vulnerable about a difficult topic, she was also pleasantly surprised to find incredible support within her art community. "When you make work about it, it opens the door," she said. Exploring the subjects of depression and grief in her artwork encouraged others to commiserate and share their own personal stories with her.

One of the series of works she created during this time was called *Crooked Thoughts*. It includes sculptures such as a silk chiffon straightjacket with the injurious epithets often used to describe those suffering from a mental illness (but words can never hurt me) and a draped wall hanging made of polyester medic alert bands fastened together in the form of a net (catch me when I fall). A showpiece from this collection utilizes vintage x-ray viewers that when illuminated prominently display the phrase 'I'm fine' in all caps. In dealing with her daughter's struggles with depression, she notes that "I got to the point where I couldn't respond I'm fine anymore." Titled *my mantra of lies up in lights*, this piece transforms the common,

detached response into something mechanical and automatic that turns on in the company of others. It was acquired by an anonymous collector who later revealed herself and shared that the work had such an emotional impact on her she decided to purchase it even though it was out of her budget at the time.



Based on the positive responses to exhibiting her work about mental health issues, Holly resolved to incorporate more of her opinions and beliefs into her art. “I’m not going to be quiet,” she states, adding “we need to talk about the things we don’t talk about.” For example, after her cousin died by suicide, she delved into work about gun control. Then the 2016 presidential election happened and just like the popular late-night talk show hosts have claimed, she too has had daily inspiration since then. “I feel like I have no choice but to make work about this,” she explains. Thus, issues such as racism and the fight for female reproductive rights have found their way into her art as well.

Holly eventually secured representation with the Seattle based art gallery ZINC Contemporary, whose director, Laura Zeck, she says has been an incredible champion of her work. In her second solo exhibition, Pattern Recognition, she created an installation meant to mimic decorative wallpaper. From far away, the gleaming wire forms create an elegant pattern of repeating lines and curves, but upon closer inspection, it is revealed that she has twisted and manipulated wire clothes hangers into the shape of the female reproductive system. “I want to create work that is visually beautiful so that you spend time with them, then as you do, the layers of meaning are revealed” she says, noting that it has been interesting to see how people react when her pieces finally click in their mind. Inevitably, there are some for whom the work is too controversial, but for many, the moment of recognition spurs conversations or inspires them to share opinions and stories with the artist.

Danger of nostalgia in wallpaper form (in utero) was most recently presented at the Seattle Art Fair in the summer of 2019, but Holly has since been invited to show it again at two regional museums in 2020. In the early months of the new decade, she will be busy preparing for her solo show, Domestic Bliss, to be held at the San Juan Islands Museum of Art beginning in March. She will present new works in this exhibition in addition to the coat hanger installation. Then, during the summer, a larger scale version of the installation will be installed in the lobby of the Bellevue Arts Museum.

She acknowledges her immense gratitude for having her husband, gallery, and the other institutions she works with support her art so fully and allow her the freedom to create what she feels compelled to create. With this stability, she has settled into her distinctive style of artmaking over the past several years and gained recognition among private collectors, media outlets, museums, and more. Regardless of where one lands along the political spectrum, her work can be appreciated for tapping into the universal truth that “we all want to be seen and acknowledged for what we are feeling.” Perhaps if more of us kept this in mind as we talk to those we disagree with, the issues at the heart of her work would not exist.

Find more of her work at www.hollyballardmartz.com, on Instagram at [@hballardmartz](https://www.instagram.com/hballardmartz), and with ZINC Contemporary.

