**Monica Shulman**

Self-taught photographer and abstract expressionist painter who has been creating art in various mediums for over 25 years. She believes in the power of art to create a moment and to evoke emotion. Her work is energetic and playful and reflects her interest in flawed beauty rather than perfection. Using strong colors and contrasts, coupled with heavy, sculptural layering, Monica strive to create connection and movement in each piece. Since the beginning of her career as an artist, Monica has had the pleasure of working with private collectors, art dealers, television producers, interior designers, bloggers, influencers, real estate developers, galleries, curators, shop owners among others.

Right before our call, Monica was listening to my podcast and she said: “This podcast gives us a view into someone’s experience. The more you hear people - you are like oh, I have the same experience or different experience, and you try things that worked out for others.” The important thing for Monica is to get talking as the art world can fell so mysterious to people.  I can’t agree more on that!

***Curator on the Go:*** Hi Monica, thank you so much for joining me today. I am so excited to learn more about your unique story. Welcome!

***Monica:*** Thank you Liza! So nice to be here! Thank you for inviting me!

***Curator on the Go:*** Thank you! So, going back in time, I know that you were exposed to art and crafts from an early age. You worked with raw materials in your Grandfather’s workshop in Argentina and learned how to sew with your Cuban grandmother. Were you thinking about working as an artist or creative at that time, at an early age?

***Monica:*** So, I always loved making art and it’s true that I did from when I was young especially with my grandparents who were all artists in their own way. In fact, my grandmother in Argentina was also a seamstress and when she went very young – she used to take black&white photographs and she would watercolor them. So, it’s so interesting as we had it in our house as well. So, I was always surrounded by art. My mother is an art collector as well, but I never really thought about it as a career other than I just really enjoyed doing it. I never thought about the possibilities of an art career – not for any other reason that I was interested in it but I never knew what that meant. I didn’t know what I wanted to do.

***Curator on the Go:*** Yea, absolutely! And I know that you are a self-taught photographer. You

Got a camera as a present and you started learning how to develop photos in your basement. And at the same time, you became passionate about painting. Did you explore those two media separately, trying to figure out which one is more you or they intertwined and started forming one art practice?

***Monica:*** They were definitely intertwined! I started learning how to paint, well I guess my whole life, but classically trained when I was about middle school and all through high school I went to an art school. And at the same time, my father had been developing pictures at our home for years. So, it was all kind of happening at the same time. I was just always exposed to art. So, I was learning my own way, I was doing sculpture, taking art classes in my high school, doing this afterschool classes, just taking pictures for fun with my father and still making art with my grandparents, and sawing and doing a variety of different things.

***Curator on the Go:*** But you didn’t peruse art at University, you attended law school and practiced as a corporate attorney in NYC for several years. Was it your choice and why did you decide to give up your career and return back to photography?

***Monica:*** I do take responsibility for my own choices. So, yes, definitely it was my choice. It is funny the way it happened. I had the opportunity to apply to any school I basically wanted to apply to, but I went to Boston University and it was actually my dream school. I’ve always been interested in history and languages and liberal arts. So, it was just the right choice for me for that reason too. Not necessary because I was forgoing art school. I just went to school that was best for me at the time. I loved my school – I had an amazing time in college, I met incredible people, I took really great classes. It just worked out that way. And law school seemed like an obvious choice, I guess. So many people from my major were going straight to law school. I took off two years to just come back home and regroup before I applied to law school. So, it was definitely a choice that I made willingly at that time and purposefully. But. I’ve never imagined that things just transpired the way that they did. Everything just fell in place in a way that I really imagined.

***Curator on the Go:*** How did you decide to give up the career and return back to photography and being an artist?

***Monica:*** Well... I was looking for a creative outlet and to be honest I’ve been very lucky that in college, in law school and afterward starting my career as an attorney – I always was surrounded by an incredible group of people. I still felt kind of lost when I was practicing. So, I knew I had a great community around me – I was very unhappy, I was working very long hours, I didn’t have much of a life outside my work. And I was a newlywed when I eventually went into practice – so it was very-very difficult but I was looking for a creative outlet and then, that year when I started working, my parents gifted me a digital camera. And suddenly this whole new world opened up to me. And at the time, Flicker was a relatively new place online – people were sharing their photos. So, a friend of mine had encouraged me to share some pictures on there. I started sharing and then it kind of just snowballed from there.

I just was in this really strange place in my career where I knew that I’ve been practicing for a while and I knew that if I really wanted to try this – this was a perfect time. I just turned thirty. I was trying to figure out what my next steps were. And I was at the point of my career where I could go forward and advance or I can take a step back and think about what else I want to do. So, the career change was not a choice I made lightly, but it was something I just needed. I was scared but I did it.

***Curator on the Go:*** So proud of you! Can you talk more about your art practice today that consists of evoking emotions, using strong colors, making contrasts, creating texture, etc?

***Monica:*** Yes, so I focused on my career as a photographer for about 10 years. My husband and I were living in the city at that time, and then I had children and we were thinking about moving. We moved up to the lower Hudson Valley in New York. It is just 25 miles North of New York City. At that time, I wasn’t even really taking so many pictures, fine art photographs or even working with clients because I didn’t have the time. When I moved up here, I have been thinking for a very long time to going back to painting and really it was just again my community rallying around me. My sister and my parents were like: “You know, you should start painting again. You love it so much. Why don’t you just do it?” And I was like: “when I am going to do that – I don’t have time.” And my sister actually said to me: “you have all the space now. You have a home, you have a house, you are not in your apartment anymore. Why don’t you just try it?”

So, I did. So it was, it sounds cliché, but I literally went to Michaels, picked up some supplies, started, and now I really don’t know how I waited so long! My practice after a year of working from home, I was able to get a small space. I have been working here for about three years now and I graduated to a bigger space. I focus primarily on my paintings which a lot of are inspired not just by nature and my surroundings now but by my photos.

***Curator on the Go:*** Amazing! So, I know that you use a visual journal as part of your creative process? Can you tell us more about journaling and how it shapes your practice?

***Monica:*** Yes! Absolutely! I didn’t always journal for my art. I would just come to work and go right to the canvas and then I got this idea one day when I was just doodling in my written journal. And I thought: “maybe I should put it on paper.” I took one of the notebooks and I started doodling in there. And I started the visual journal – instead of writing my feelings I am getting them out. And my ideas started growing from there.

It’s the very first thing that I do when I walk in the door on any given day when I come to work! It’s so freeing and feels less intense in the way that my art is where I start with something and I don’t know where it’s going to go. Here, it’s ok as I just flip the page. I never through anything away – I keep it. I feel it’s an important part of my process to keep everything that I make. So, I have a lot of paper. [laughs] But it has become a tremendously important part of my practice.

***Curator on the Go:*** Absolutely! What inspires you to make art?

***Monica:*** I am inspired by so many things! Children, nature, family, my travels, photographs that I’ve taken from different moments in my life…

***Curator on the Go:*** Do you put those things in a journal and come back?

***Monica:*** Sometimes the idea will just come to me and I will start, but usually it’s from time. For example, I just took a trip to Italy this summer and I had these very strong colors in my head. I brought them home with me. I started journaling and I started mixing the color on my own and then transferring them on the canvas. Sometimes they align, sometimes they will come exactly as I envisioned them and planned it. But the nice thing about painting with oils, which I am doing now, is that you can just paint over it, start fresh and change it as you need to.

***Curator on the Go:*** While reading one of your articles, I came across a very personal statement. You wrote that your work was rejected almost 3 million times and there were moments that you couldn’t get into shows or just couldn’t afford them. How did you cope with rejection and overcame limitations?

***Monica:*** I feel this is something people don’t talk about because it’s scary. It’s very easy to be overcome with your fear or what you perceive to be your own limitations, but I think it’s really important to just keep going and I think it’s really important to face whatever fear that is and not give up! One of the things that I love about art and is also the thing that I don’t like about it – is that it is so subjective. Not everybody is going to like what you do, and it’s not my job to like what everybody does either! So, I started thinking about it in that way – where it’s not a personal thing. Everybody has their own taste. Obviously, I can’t get into every show I ever applied to, to every gallery that I would like to be in, and every opportunity I wish that I could have. So, I just keep going and focus on the ones that I think could work. It’s really just a mindset! It really has helped me to be just positive and to keep going! I never could have imagined that I would be where I am now if somebody had said that to me 10 years ago. So, I like to think of the next 10 years with the same trajectory where I just keep going and keep trying new things. Some will wort out great and some and others not as much, but that doesn’t mean that I should stop!

***Curator on the Go:*** Absolutely! Love it! Did you have times when you had to decline an opportunity?

***Monica:*** Yes. I really do believe in waiting for things to be a good fit and not everything is going to be a good fit. I also believe that sometimes not only opportunities but some people are not going to be a very good fit. SO, I think it’s important to be honest with yourself as an artist and be ok with saying no sometimes because not everything is going to work out. Especially trusting your gut and going with your instincts on situations. I also think that sometimes you say no and you are the one doing the rejecting. I always believe that it’s for a reason that maybe something else will come up of it that’s better. And may be no, but at least in the moment you made the choice that was right for you.

***Curator on the Go:*** I love this mindset! So, you showed your works at [Art Hamptons](https://www.monicashulman.com/blog/art-hamptons-2019) Art Fair and you were represented by [a gallery](http://www.georgebillis.com/) and showed two of your works. One of the artists I interviewed for this podcast, told me that she had bad experience exhibiting at art fair through the gallery.

***Monica:*** I had a great experience! I mean, not everything works out all the time but in this case, I’ve been very lucky with the galleries and art dealers that I’ve had the opportunity to work with in my career. I think that it’s very important to be present. These shows are huge. There are a lot of people that attend. They can get very crazy! They can get very overwhelming. I think it’s important to go into it in a realistic way and think: “ok, I am going to sell something or I am going to get contacts and meet people.” And so, for that reason, from the many shows I’ve done, including [Art Hamptons](https://www.monicashulman.com/blog/art-hamptons-2019), even if I don’t sell something – I always look at it as an opportunity to learn, to grow and to network and to meet potential clients and potential collaborators. I think that is just important as selling which is not something that always happens. But I think that relationship building really matters.

***Curator on the Go:*** Were you there or it was the gallery selling for you?

***Monica:*** The gallery was selling but I was there personally. And I think that’s important to be there too. It’s not always possible, depending on where are you located, but I like to be present. Sometimes collectors also like to meet the artist, they want to get to know you, they want to know what your work is about, and you have to work together with the gallery.

***Curator on the Go:*** Absolutely! I also know that you were selected as the [Best Artist in Westchester](http://www.westchestermagazine.com/Westchester-Magazine/July-2019/Best-of-Westchester-2019/People-Media/) by Westchester Magazine this year. First of all, congratulations – you deserve it all! Did you apply to be considered for this competition or it was a surprise for you?

***Monica:*** Well… they have this amazing competition. Thank you so much! It was actually a very fun surprise! Anybody can be nominated. So, people were nominating me and I guess it worked out this way. I live in a very artistic community here in the Lover Hudson Valley. There are so many working artists and inspiring people doing tremendous things! And it kind of worked out this way. It was a wonderful surprise for me this year!

***Curator on the Go:*** Amazing! Congratulations again! So, where do you sell your works and how do you promote yourself and your art??

***Monica:*** This is like an ongoing thing, right? [laughs] Many artists we just trying to figure out what are the best avenues are. So, I work right now with an art collective, a female art collective, and we sell our work on artsy and it’s an on an exclusive basis. I also work with an art dealer who I’ve been working with for a few years. They started with my photographs and now selling some of my paintings as well. I sell some art via Instagram. People just reach out – they like my work and we just have a few conversations. I shipped my works all over the US for people who found me on Instagram. Facebook – not as much. Occasionally, I go back to my photography roots and will work with clients. I have clients that I’ve worked with for the last decade doing family photoshoots. When I was selling my fine art photos – I paid a lot for those by doing the photoshoots.

I did for a white have a shop on my site but I find that the majority of my clients always want to communicate so much about the artwork and they want to know about it. So, the shop wasn’t really a great option for me. But I tried it and I ended taking it down and go through other means.

***Curator on the Go:*** You have a very well-curated Instagram! I love it! Do you plan your posts in advance or you post them when you have inspiration?

***Monica:*** Oh, I wish I did plan them in advance! It’s on my to-do list for 2020. I want to get better about planning and doing more of an editorial calendar. There is just so little time for all of the things that I want to do. So, I have to choose my time wisely! I really like the stories feature because it allows for more spontaneity. My feed wasn’t always so curated and I really want it to feel like this is a real me! This is my authentic self! So, I try not to overly curate my Instagram - like I am sharing my work and I am sharing my story! Sometimes it can look that way –but it is what is going on in my life.

***Curator on the Go:*** I also know that you’ve worked with different clients like collectors, dealers, television producers, interior designers, bloggers, curators, among others. Do you have a targeted audience and how you select who to target and when?

***Monica:*** That’s a really hard question! I guess my targeted audience is everyone who appreciates and loves art. I guess maybe I should. Maybe it should be on my list for 2020. I feel like I have 9 lives and in my career had 9 lives… The first place where I sold my work when I started with art photography was on Etsy. So, I had a small selection of work and I did small-format prints there. I met a lot of people that way. That’s how I started working with interior designers and three of my photographs were picked up. I started thinking more broadly about who I wanted to target and now with the paintings, because of the size and price point, it’s anybody who loves art.

***Curator on the Go:*** I also ask every podcast guest about personal branding. Do you believe that artists need a brand or see themselves as creative entrepreneurs to be successful?

***Monica:*** I think that everybody walking around in their own personal brand and what you are choosing to share as entrepreneur and creative person is obviously very personal. You are putting your work out there, you are putting your heart and soul out there… It’s important to be authentic and to know your why (why you are doing it) and what stories do you want to tell. I want to share my work in a way that feels right and feels good! In a way that allows me to connect with people.

***Curator on the Go:*** I agree with that! I love your logo. Can you explain its meaning and how you came up with the design?

***Monica:*** Yes! I love my logo too, thank you! I actually worked with an incredible designer. She helps me with my branding and shaping my story based on what I want to do at that time. My website was due for an update and I needed to work with someone who can keep me focused. So, I gave her an idea about what I was seeking and sent her images of my work and my story. She created a website and a logo for me.

***Curator on the Go:*** So, a lot of artists, who work in different media at the same time, always ask me whether they should have 2 websites (for each media) or one? Why did you decide to include art and photography into one website?

***Monica:*** For me, it just made sense. I felt like I can handle one place. It would be very confusing for me to find one website for one person and find another one for another work. I know it can get a little bit muddy but a lot of my story has to do with this growth and evolution. I had a huge shift in my career. I went from focusing only on my photography for 10 years and it’s an important part of my story! I couldn’t talk about it if my work was separated. That’s why for me it works to have everything in one place. I am constantly thinking about ways to simplify, but I wanted everything to be under one umbrella!

***Curator on the Go:*** Perfect! You don’t have a shop option on your website, do you believe that having an online store devalues your art or not?

***Monica:*** I definitely don’t believe that it devalues your art because I know a lot of people who are very successful with having a shop on their site. It is just not something that worked for me. People were spending very little time in my shop. They just preferred to click around and look at my work. They were sending me screenshots asking about deferent pieces. I now have some work on Artsy and people reach out to me that way or if they see something on Instagram they reached out there.

***Curator on the Go:*** Can you tell us a little bit more about Google analytics?

***Monica:*** I am not an expert on it at all. It is whatever I was able to teach myself by using keywords and blinks and different methods of driving traffic. One of the reasons why I love square space is that everything is housed under one roof. It’s easy to make changes and see where people are coming from.

***Curator on the Go:*** What is your dream project and/or who is your dream client?

***Monica:*** My dream project would be to provide art to a big hotel. I would like to work with the designer and just fill the walls of beautiful hotels around the world. And eventually in people’s homes. I just want to grow!

***Curator on the Go:*** Absolutely! So,what one piece of advice would you give to emerging artists?

***Monica:*** Don’t be afraid to change and to grow! Don’t be afraid to change your mind about things and grow with it!

***Curator on the Go:*** Do you have any exciting projects, collaborations or exhibitions coming up that you'd like to share?

***Monica:*** I have a few things that I can’t share. I am just excited for the new decade to be honest with you! Growing with my work and having my work seen by more people!

***Curator on the Go:*** Where my listeners can find you online?

***Monica:***

<https://www.monicashulman.com/>

<https://www.instagram.com/monicashulman/>

***Curator on the Go:*** Thank you very much for sharing your story today! I am excited to see your new works and projects and hope to meet you in the near future!

***Monica:*** Thank you for having me Liza, this was wonderful!

I want to thank Monica one more time to taking the time and be my podcast guest!

Right after our interview, Monica sent me an email as she wanted to add one more thing to our conversation. During the interview, I asked her about a moment when she had to say no to the project. Monica did recently turn down the opportunity to show my work at SOFA in Chicago. She would have loved to do it but the timing didn’t work and it was too expensive to participate. It was very hard to turn it down as Monica was so excited but decided that it was beyond her budget.

Monica believes that artists shouldn’t be afraid to say “no” to things that aren’t right because the right things will usually happen. But also, don’t be afraid to say “yes” to things that scare you because you’re worried you don’t know enough. Say yes and then figure out how to do it later. That’s all a part of growing and evolving.