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ANGELA SU

Elevating Extremes

BY PAMELA WONG

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Portrait of ANGELA SU. Photo by Winnie Yeung/Visual Voices. Courtesy M+, Hong Kong.

Hair can be a sign of feminine beauty when it's on one's head, but when it clogs the shower drain, it suggests stress-induced hair loss or the inability to care for oneself. Both beauty and agitation are captured in Angela Su's meticulous hair embroideries, which illustrate fantastical, hybrid organisms. From afar, these seemingly scientific images appear to be delicate and clean, but upon closer observation, the eerie details and hair protruding from the smooth surface suggest irrationality and chaos. These juxtapositions of opposites are frequently

seen in Su's drawings, embroideries, videos, and performances, which play with the boundaries between body and machine, life and death, pain and pleasure, and most significantly, fact and fiction.

Anatomical drawings combining human body parts with plants, animals, insects, and even non-living objects reappear throughout Su's work. Though some critics have equated these drawings with her science background, as she graduated from university in Canada with a degree in biochemistry, Su said her interests in

these drawings began earlier in high school. "I would flip through the textbook just to enjoy looking at the interior of the human body, a bit like looking at porn somehow." She later borrowed the style of the black-and-white drawings in *Heck's Pictorial Archive of Nature and Science* (1851). For Su, art and science "have more similarities than differences: both rely heavily on visual images; both can be very ritualistic; both use jargon that normal people don't understand, so both sound authoritative; and both are about gaining an alternative perspective of the universe."

Experimenting with the similarities between these two disciplines, Su began the series *Paracelsus' Garden* (2007), the title of which references the 16th-century Swiss physician and alchemist Paracelsus. On drafting film, a translucent type of paper used for technical or scientific drawings, she rendered the symmetrical anatomies of creatures that she imagined Paracelsus concocted; for others, she embroidered with hair on silk. Each piece is labeled with the organism's Linnaean-like Latin name: for example, *Basilisk* depicts a bat consisting of human intestines, and *Aporophyla Lutulenta* is a moth whose parts are made of human bones. In Su's rendering, despite these organisms' distinct forms, they possess an uncanny similarity within, as the viewer recognizes parts from different species. "I have people coming to me saying 'Is that real?'" Su laughed. "That's the interesting part of scientific drawing because it's telling people that whatever you're looking at is the truth. I like to play with this idea." Su compared it with antique maps, which appear to be accurate, but are infused with people's projections onto Earth and geopolitical boundaries. "[The resulting image] depends on who makes the maps and who has the authority, so I'm interested in the kind of power dynamics within."

From there, she started combining other objects with the human body, exploring different modes of hybridity. For her drawings shown at the 2011 exhibition "BwO," she combined body parts with medieval torture tools including needles, the "pear of anguish," "cat's claw," a head crusher, and thumbscrews. Later, for *IN BERTY WE TRUST!* (2013), she combined forms resembling these devices, along with gears, cogs, pulleys, and tubes to form an endless-seeming, "living" cyborg machine that she displayed in a panoramic view across a three-channel animation. A beating heart, distorted limbs stabbed with needles and screws, a skull, and other organs are



ANGELA SU, *The Afterlife of Rosy Leavers*, 2017, stills from single-channel video: 14 min 35 sec. Courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong.



ANGELA SU, *Laden Raven* (detail), 2022, hair embroidery on fabric, 140 x 290 cm. Photo by Lok Cheng. Courtesy the artist and M+, Hong Kong.

seen in different parts of the machine. Through her disturbing depictions, Su asks whether machines are extensions of the body, or whether the body itself is a kind of machine.

Her interests in the mechanical elements of the human body and machine-like torture devices led her to delve into the paradox of pleasure and pain: “For most of our lives we try to avoid pain, but we’re also attracted to pain. Why is that?” This question animates her project *The Hartford Girl and Other Stories* (2012), for which Su had 39 lines of prayer excerpts tattooed across her body—without any ink. The resulting red marks across her back recall the 39 lashes that Jesus is believed to have suffered before being crucified—his worldly pain becoming a crucial element in his transcendence. The video documenting the tattooing process is overlaid with a voiceover of text fragments related to pain, self-expression, desperation, and detachment, including personal experiences, the story of the “Hartford Girl” who was attacked by a crowd in August 1976, actual self-harmers’ testimonies, song lyrics, and random-seeming facts.

The interweaving of fact and fiction is often at the center of Su’s pieces. “I conduct research on a specific topic, gather all the facts,” she explained, “and invent a character to link these events together in a sensible way.” For instance, her pseudo-documentary *The Afterlife of Rosy Leavers* (2017), derived from Su’s

interests in mental illness, introduces her alter ego. Narrated by Su, who researched topics including early-modern psychiatry, schizophrenia, and the use of psychedelics in treating mental illness and in political-brainwashing sessions, the video begins with Rosy Leavers’s interests in spirals, vertigo, and mind control, before explaining her involvement in the Socialist Patients’ Collective (SPK), and revealing her questions on the significance of knowing “whether one lives in a dream, a hallucination, or a simulated reality.” Rendered in animated form, the character eventually decides to conduct a “performance without the body,” which is seen in the second part of the video, where she uploads her consciousness to cyberspace, and transforms herself into an animated character. “The video is about me trying to find an answer through my research, so it’s like a learning process, which is really personal. That’s why it is important for me to actually perform or participate in the video.”

The video, first displayed at Su’s solo show at Blindspot Gallery in 2017, was placed alongside objects that Leavers supposedly left behind, including a screenshot of a Facebook message, posters from the SPK, as well as a series of ink drawings titled *Rorschach Test* (2016)—referring to the test used for diagnosing schizophrenia. Instead of inkblots, Su’s symmetrical patterns comprise hallucinatory webs of human organs and flowers, questioning our subjective

perception of reality. In this way, Su utilizes multiple media and formats within an exhibition to flesh out her character and story. “I also look at these alter egos as manifestations of multiple personality disorder,” Su said. “People invent all these different personas to tackle different problems or issues that are difficult to handle themselves. It’s like a survival skill.”

This resilience is encapsulated by another of Su’s personas, Lauren O, the heroine of Su’s multilayered presentation at Hong Kong’s exhibition at the 59th Venice Biennale. This strong female character was inspired by the protagonist Lauren Olamina, who survives the apocalypse and establishes a religion in Octavia Butler’s novel *Parable of the Sower* (1993), as well as the feminist activist Bertha Pappenheim (also known as Anna O), whose recovery from the suppression of her

thoughts and childhood memories largely influenced Sigmund Freud’s theories on psychoanalysis. Depicted in a pseudo-documentary set in the 1960s, Lauren O believes she can levitate and joins the anarchist collective Laden Raven, which leads an antiwar demonstration in 1967 that takes a curious form—a collective effort to levitate the Pentagon building in Washington, DC. Echoing the historical demonstrations led by Abbie Hoffman at the Pentagon to decry the American war in Vietnam, the fictional Laden Raven members, including Lauren O, are arrested in the 1970s and locked up in sensory-deprivation cells. Eventually, Lauren O turns into a disco ball, as displayed in an installation in one of the rooms at the exhibition, reflecting the energies of others.

In reality, the act of levitation did take place, as the video-performance *The Magnificent Levitation Act of Lauren O* (2022) features Su spinning upside down, suspended by ropes in the darkness with the help of a *shibari* artist. Su considers risk-taking as her responsibility as an artist, which allows her to venture into other territories of practice. Through a mix of fact and fiction, she asks us to look closer and to constantly question what we see. “It’s about not being complacent with the present. The only way to do this is to question whatever we’re facing now: if this is what we want, if this is leading to the future that we want.” For Su, the revelation lies in the demystification of extremes.