

Lifestyle / Arts & Culture

'Myths have more power than reality': how Hong Kong show by Angela Su's levitating anti-war alter ego draws on 1960s hippy movement to question truth

- Visual artist Angela Su represented Hong Kong at the 2022 Venice Biennale with her exhibition 'Arise', and now a spin-off of this show has come to the M+ museum
- Based on fictitious Vietnam war protester Lauren O, it includes erratic journal entries and whimsical 3D shapes in a composition straddling reality and fantasy



Enid Tsui

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"Angela Su proudly presents: Lauren O—The Greatest Levitator in the Polyhedric Cosmos of Time", at Hong Kong's M+ museum, is Angela Su's adaptation of her 2022 Venice Biennale exhibition centred on an anti-war alter ego from the 1960s. Photo: Lok Cheng/ M+

In April 2022, Angela Su opened her exhibition "Arise" at the Venice Biennale with a rousing speech that explained her latest alter ego.

Lauren O is an anti-war activist in 1960s America who believes she can float in air, and she symbolises a response to a world that seems frozen in apathy or paralysed by fear and conflict.

Each artist representing Hong Kong in the Biennale typically brings home a "response show" adapted from their presentation at the Venice Hong Kong pavilion.

Compared with "Arise", the new version that has just opened at M+ museum in Hong Kong's West Kowloon Cultural District is more sombre in tone and ambivalent in its message.



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Su photographed with some of the hundreds of polyhedrons that feature in her exhibition "Lauren O—The Greatest Levitator in the Polyhedric Cosmos of Time". Photo: Lok Cheng/ M+

Called "Lauren O—The Greatest Levitator in the Polyhedric Cosmos of Time", it features many new objects that were not seen before, although Su has retained a 15-minute-long pseudo-documentary that was the centrepiece of the Venice exhibition and was ostensibly about the sociopolitical context in which Lauren O lived (the hippy era, the Vietnam war, the Cold War).

The first of two dimly lit, wood-panelled galleries shows the "archives" of Lauren O that Su supposedly uncovered.



The film that is the centrepiece of Su's "Lauren O—The Greatest Levitator in the Polyhedric Cosmos of Time" also featured in the artist's "Arise" exhibition as part of the 2022 Venice Biennale. Photo: Lok Cheng/ M+

Some 260 pages of handwritten journal notes and illustrations are pinned to a giant display board. The text – all written in the same hand, presumably by Su, though she insists she merely "discovered" them – range from detailed accounts of the 1960s protests against the Vietnam war to a rambling stream of consciousness that is difficult to comprehend.



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Not that you are supposed to read all of them. Most of the pages are too high up to see and the text, which is densely packed together, is often arranged in shapes which makes it even more illegible.

These form the “mind map” of someone who, like so many women living on the fringe of society and dismissed as “mad”, was determined to find her own way to cure the world’s ills, Su said at the exhibition opening.



Lauren O, Su’s “mad”, levitating alter ego, in her studio. Photo: courtesy of Angela Su and the archives of Lauren O

Another section includes around 200 handmade paper models of different polyhedrons – 3D sculptures – resembling a star cluster made up of fantastical asteroid bodies. Su says Lauren O became so “obsessed” with making new shapes, which she believed could be the answer to a new world order, that she became quite disturbed.

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Meanwhile, music by a real-life 1960s band called The Fugs plays in the background. They were active in the protest movement and were known for subversive songs such as “CIA Man”.

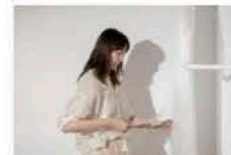
Is Su doing all this to channel the spirit of another time and another place as camouflage? There are certainly some parallels between the geopolitics of the 1960s and today, and the handwritten notes and drawings of clashes between protesters and the police will stir memories of [Hong Kong’s own mass protests in 2019](#).

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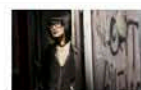
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But the excessive amount of journal notes and the overflowing piles of polyhedrons merely leave us in a fug of incomprehension. In Lauren O's "writing", one senses a spirit which refused to go with the flow and was sceptical about some of the actions of her fellow protesters.

Taken together, this seems to be a display of the confusion and disillusion that follows the realisation that there is no such thing as moral exactitude; that truths cannot be separated from fantasy.

And there are bird symbols everywhere: from a 3-metre-wide hair embroidery that shows a raven pregnant with a human infant – a reminder of Su's long interest in using images of fantastical, hybrid forms to symbolise metamorphosis and alterity – to other images of birds embroidered with human hair shown in light boxes mounted on exhibition stands. Humans have always dreamed of being able to fly.



"Lauren O" ponders shapes like those that appear in Su's M+ exhibition. Photo: courtesy of Angela Su and the archives of Lauren O

Here, Su is taking flight from the restrictions of the contemporary.

But why did she invest so much effort in making all these objects – and then claim she didn't make them? It could be an assertion of power – she is refusing to let her identity be pinned down.

Perhaps it is also an assertion that in this era of post-truth politics, "myths have more power than reality", as one of Lauren O's journal pages declares. And that is what artists do – they create myths. No wonder, then, that the Chinese title of the exhibition declares Lauren O to be "the strongest in the universe".

Angela Su proudly presents: Lauren O – The Greatest Levitator in the Polyhedric Cosmos of Time, 2023. Cissy Pui-Lai Pao and Shinichiro Watari Galleries, M+, West Kowloon Cultural District, 38 Museum Drive, Kowloon, Tue-Thurs and weekends, 10am-6pm, Fri, 10am-10pm, Mon closed. Until Oct. 8.

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Enid joined the Post as senior culture writer in 2015 after a long career as a business and politics journalist at the Financial Times, the Nikkei Asian Review, RTHK Radio 3, and the Economist Group in Hong Kong and in London. She returned as the Post's arts editor in 2020 after taking a year off to pursue a Master's degree in art history.



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