SUSPENSION OF BELIEF
Angela Su's alter-egos and acts of defiance

By Barbara Pollack

"*Hellraiser* was a key influence," says the artist Angela Su, only half joking when she recalls a B-movie monster with a head full of pins. For Su, who lives and works in Hong Kong, horror and science fiction expand history's repository of body imagery and should be taken as seriously as Leonardo's studies in anatomy or 21st-century microscopy. All of these references can be spotted in Su's body of work—intricate drawings inspired by medical illustrations, embroideries of human hair and hypnotic videos that spin faux histories from found footage. "For me, opening up the human body and staring inside is like watching pornography," Su says, somehow without seeming too perverse.

Su's personal style—a combination of Goth and nerd—reflects her long-standing feeling as an outsider in a city where pink Birkin bags and strappy heels are favored over Doc Martens. But she is now having to adjust to being celebrated in her hometown. In June, the museum M+ exhibited her installation work *Lauren O—The Greatest Levitator in the Polyhedric Cosmos of Time*, a pseudo-history about levitation as told through the biography of a fictional heroine. The work continues Su's interest in levitation as a form of cultural or political resistance, a theme she also explored in *Arise: Hong Kong* in Venice, created for the Hong Kong pavilion at the 2022 Venice Biennale.

"In Venice, I felt a responsibility to talk about Hong Kong—I thought it was important to talk about how the world had changed," she said, adding that she found this possible despite increasing censorship in Hong Kong because "some leeway, some cracks" still exist. Instead of directly pointing fingers, she said, she spoke obliquely through themes like levitation, circus acts and subcultures. The goal was to capture the precarious state of living in Hong Kong without succumbing to didacticism or sentimentality. For Su, a sense of hopelessness—an experience shared by her peers—becomes like a puzzle to be solved rather than a cause for depression.

At the opening of the Hong Kong Pavilion in April 2022, I barely recognized Su, who was sporting closely cropped pink hair and dressed in leather with a chain choker. She was in the middle of telling a journalist, "To walk that line, you really have to guess what is dangerous and what is safe." Was she talking about China's influence over Hong Kong and the new levels of censorship? Could her title, *Arise*, be a call to action or a provocation? If so, how was she going to get away with such public declarations?

Once inside the four-chamber pavilion, I got my answer. She was not talking about politics but was instead describing the act of walking a tightrope blindfolded, as shown in archival footage of highwire performers and aerial acrobats. Presented on fifteen monitors hanging from the ceiling, these balancing acts functioned as incisive metaphors for the situation in Hong Kong, without ever mentioning quarantines or arrests, headlines or current events.

Above: Film still of Angela Su, *The Magnificent Levitation Act of Lauren O*, 2022. Single-channel video, 15 minutes. Courtesy the artist and M+, Hong Kong

Opposite: Film still of Angela Su, *Cosmic Call*, 2019. Single-channel video, 12 minutes. Image courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery

The Magnificent Levitation Act of Lauren O. was the cinematic centerpiece of *Arise*. A pseudo-documentary, it tells the story of a character named Lauren O. and, through her, a history of elevating bodies in the air. Lauren was inspired in part by Lauren Oya Olamina, the hero of Octavia E. Butler's dystopian 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower*. The film also includes stories of psychics and psychedelics, CIA agents and scientists, all derived from found footage and ninety percent factual. Few people may remember that Jerry Rubin and 50,000 Yippies showed up to levitate the Pentagon on October 21, 1967, a story the film retells by attributing the episode to a fictional counterculture group called the Laden Ravens. The only non-altered moment in the film is documentation of Su herself as aerialist, bound and hoisted in the air with fabric dripping from her costume. This ravishing performance took a full day to film, with Su rigged in a harness and hoisted fifteen meters in the air for only a few minutes at a time, the most her body could bear. Traumatic and erotic, the performance becomes a symbol of bravery and defiance within the imaginary history laid out in the film. As I watched the conclusion, I felt goose bumps, realizing that if a yellow umbrella or a blank piece of paper can serve as a form of protest, so too can levitation.

The 1970s feminist battle cry "The personal is political" is central to Su's methodology, though her investigation of the body is about the body politic, not gender dynamics. She explains that Hong Kong artists "cannot avoid channeling the feelings and experience of recent history," but she typically avoids references to her own life, saying that it is not "relevant to her practice." When I try to pin her down, Su responds by playing with the facts, just as she edits and re-edits sequences in her films. She has, for example, changed the year of her birth several times over the course of her career, now stating only that she "grew up in Hong Kong in the 1970s." Without specifying a year, she recounts traveling alone at the age of sixteen to attend boarding school in Canada and earning a degree in biochemistry at University of Toronto in 1990. She then left science behind and followed her dream of becoming an artist, attending the Ontario College of Art and Design, from which she graduated in 1994. Five years later, she returned to Hong Kong, and her work and career have grown gradually ever since, coinciding with Hong Kong's meteoric rise to international art capital.

A parallel history informs Su's practice as well. When she first returned to Hong Kong in 1999, the territory had only recently been released from British rule and ceremonially returned to China in the handover of 1997. The terms of the agreement guaranteed that Hong Kong would retain self-governance for another

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Top:
Film still of Angela Su, *Methods of Art*, 2015. Single-channel video, 57 seconds. Courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery

Middle:
Film still of Angela Su, *The Afterlife of Rosy Leavers*, 2017 (film still). Single-channel video, 14 minutes. Courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery

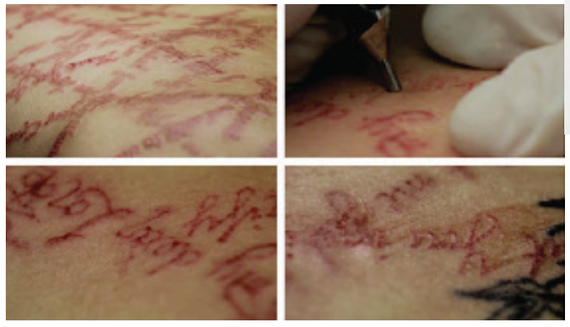
Right: Four film stills of Angela Su, *The Hartford Girl and Other Stories*, 2012. Video, 11 minutes. Courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery

fifty years, until 2047, but over the last three years, China has very publicly lost patience with the arrangement. Mass protests and resistance have not prevented increased control by Beijing over elections, laws, press, public debate and prosecutions. While the art market is still vibrant and exhibitions continue, a constant guessing game is now played within it: Where are the lines drawn? What might cause trouble?

The stress of living with uncertainty cannot be cured by medicine. But in the history of medicine, a story of centuries of deadly mistakes and revisions, Su found another door for her work. Combining Foucault's critique of the "medical gaze" with the horror-gynecology of David Cronenberg's film *Dead Ringers*, Su created eerie anatomical illustrations, sometimes in ink and sometimes embroidered in human hair. In *Paracelsus' Garden* (2007), she offered a zoology of insects and reptiles, part- alchemy, part biology. More recently, in a series based on Rorschach tests, she created perfectly symmetrical renditions of the inner organs and genitalia of cyborgs and simulants, intricate and seductive enough to compel viewers to overcome their repulsion and stare.

Video has served as the medium most liberating for Su, freeing her from personal and societal notions about which subject matter should or should not be "permissible" for an Asian woman artist. In one of her first videos, *The Hartford Girl and Other Stories*, in 2012, Su subjects herself to an inkless tattoo, her skin punctured with a needle that inscribes thirty-nine Catholic prayers (a reference to Christ's thirty-nine lashes) across her back. The film, almost painful to watch, shows her body becoming bloodied over the course of eleven minutes. Curator Valerie Doran, a key supporter of Su's first exhibitions, worried for her safety and sanity. In 2014, in an interview for an online series titled "Methods of Art," filmed at the Asian Art Archive, where Su worked as a researcher, she comes off as earnest and idealistic, happily answering questions. But a year later, she released a video of her own also titled *Methods of Art*, a kind of dark-matter version of the same process. In it, she is shown bound and gagged, dragged by a man in a panda mask to a dirty shed. Speaking through the silver duct tape across her mouth, she says to the camera, "I apologize for all the uninteresting art I have made and all the bullshit I have said"—offering a bondage-submission version of John Baldessari's famous 1971 pronouncement, "I will not make any more boring art."

Since then, Su has developed a pseudo-documentary approach aimed at expanding viewers' imaginations and belief systems. Often, a remembrance of a dream or a fleeting picture in her mind begins a two-to-three-month research project through film archives and databases. As she gathers images and information, she finds themes and drafts story boards. Serendipitous moments of early cinema—from Fleischer cartoons to *Metropolis*—are transformed into



seemingly real instances of evidence or proof.

With *The Afterlife of Rosy Leavers*, made in 2017, only two years after her performance videos, her work moved rapidly into more complex forms of narrative. Creating the illusion of a case study, the film follows a woman's transformation through hallucinogens, schizophrenia and participation in

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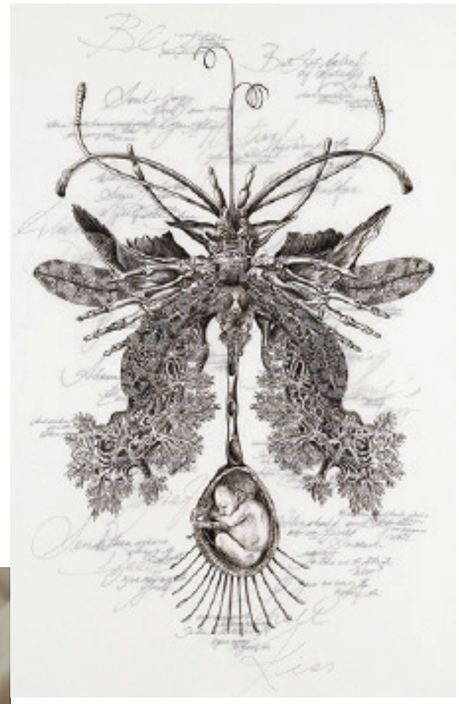

Angela Su, *Thalia*, 2009, Ink on drafting film, 29 1/2 × 47 1/4 in. (75 × 120 cm). Courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery

a so-called Socialist Patients' Collective. Rosy, the protagonist, ultimately takes control of her life and escapes molestation by a man (again dressed in a Panda suit) by entering cyberspace and living as an avatar. Incorporating film clips that range from Marcel Duchamp's roto-reliefs to scenes from Felix the Cat cartoons, the film functions as equal parts medical report and road movie, and also a kind of homage to the use of art as a means of escape. Is it a coincidence that Rosy Leavers was created on the twentieth anniversary of the Hong Kong handover? Su says that the timing wasn't planned, but the connection is evident.

In her film *Cosmic Call*, originally commissioned in 2018 by the Wellcome Trust to mark the centenary of the so-called Spanish flu, Su's subject matter becomes uncannily prescient Inspired by her experience with the SARS epidemic in 2003, she created a faux lecture in which she argues that comets are the source of infective bacteria, drawing on sources from the 2nd- century BCE, the Enlightenment, 19th-century medical practices and recent science-fiction films. Slipped into a steady stream of fictional, entertaining images are some very serious assertions from the World Health Organization about contagious diseases in overpopulated cities, like Hong Kong, and about the passage of Article 23, the precedent for more oppressive national security laws. *Cosmic Call* premiered just months before the Covid-19 outbreak in Wuhan. "I thought, 'Wow! What a coincidence,'" says Su, when she heard the news, adding: "*Cosmic Call* is certainly foreboding, but I can't claim credit for predicting a pandemic."

Su was in New York City in January 2020 when she heard the first news reports about Covid-19. "There was a lot of sadness in Hong Kong and a lot of polarization, and I couldn't talk to my friends about it because I was too emotional," she recalls. She had come to New York to support an exhibition titled "AFTERBEFORE," a survey of work by Hong Kong artists and documentary filmmakers presented at Chinatown Soup, an alternative space and café. Instead of returning home, she went to Malaysia, where she began working on one of her most moving films, *Lacrima*, which took more than a year to finish and premiered at the Helsinki Biennial in 2021. "I wanted to bring things to justice," she says of the film. "I wanted to know why people, when confronted with the truth, refuse to see it."

Overlaid with an aura of mythology, *Lacrima* is a twenty-minute speculation on the fate of the population of an imaginary island enclosed in fog, an island that looks remarkably like Hong Kong. Conditions in Lacrima cause people to disappear, among them a pseudo-Angela Su character, on the eve of the opening of an important exhibition. This meta-Su is studying the life of a psychic named Nina Palladino, or "Nin," a fictional love child of 19th-century spiritualist Eusapia Palladino and criminologist Cesare Lombroso (actual historic figures). Nin has the powers to transmit messages from the dead and missing, providing answers to the mystery of disappearances. *Lacrima* tells this fictional story with remarkable clarity, in part through the use of nonfictional voice-over and film clips by Georges Méliès, Hans Richter, Luis Buñuel, Fritz Lang and Busby Berkeley, as well as archival footage of 1930s Paris, Communist rallies, Harry Houdini and Nikola Tesla. Just when the account appears to spin out of control and lose all connection to reality, a chilling announcement interrupts:

"In 2021, The International Court of Justice recognized the unlawful deaths of 20,000 Lacrimians. Nin's original messages were provided by family members of the victims and were accepted by the court as witness statements of bioweapons."

This message, presented like a title card in a silent movie, prompts the viewer to rethink the narrative and search back through it for unstated connections with present-day politics. In the final scene, Su appears as a diva, wrapped in fur, lip-synching an aria drawn from Baudelaire's "L'Invitation au voyage." Using the poet's words, she pours out her desire, "To love at leisure, love and die in that land that resembles you!" In response to her singing, she is shot and pulled off screen as the music continues to play.

"I don't think any of my works are political—they are just my personal sentiments about what is happening around me," Su tells me, though she adds that she is always somewhat concerned about how Western critics interpret her works. Her installation at M+, she points out, has not, at least yet, run into any controversy or criticism, and she stresses that empathy is far more important than politics in understanding her meaning. "I am not a political artist," she repeats, "but I don't think anyone can be immune from the political situation."

Angela Su's solo exhibition at the Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, New York opens February 2, 2024.