

Angela Su**ARTIST**

At one point in my life I really don't like to be called an artist or I refuse to call myself an artist. I would just say that I make art. And some of my friends really resent it because it's like I am denying what I do.

I just find it hard to relate to this term. I just like to create art and do what I like to do. But at this point of my life, when somebody asks me what I do, I would probably say, "I am an artist," but in that I would refer to me as a professional artist – meaning that I function within the art system.

What is my position in the art world? I tend not to think about it so often because it would be very depressing and I don't think it's a healthy way to think about your own self in the art world.

Another reason why I don't want to think about my position is that probably I really haven't made it. I haven't achieved any significant status in the global art world. And that's why. It's easier said than done. I mean, once in a while you will probably google yourself and see what kind of images are there on Google Image.

I think this is all about the romantic idea of being an artist. Like in school, I would think that "oh, ok, being an artist I would have an important role in society, I would critique this system, I would try to change art ... change the world with art." But as I grew up, I don't think this is going to happen because ultimately, being an artist is about self-expression without being self-indulgent – or this is the way I look at it. And I think art is very ambiguous. It really cannot mobilize anybody. So, I think an artist is pretty useless in this sense. (laughs) An artist is pretty useless.

It is a job. It's a lot of hard work. Actually, I believe in art, romantically. Or naively. But then I sort of resist that in a way and try to focus it and take it as a job. But I know deep down inside I don't.

All artists need to make a living and we need a stable income unless I really sell a lot. When I was in school I thought, "I can be a waitress all my life and do art in my spare time". And this very Bohemian kind of lifestyle. But in reality, it doesn't work out that way and as you grow older, you really don't want to be a bar tender or a waitress, especially in Hong Kong.

I usually work alone. It depends on what I am doing. If I do my embroidery or drawing, I work by myself.

But in recent years, I have collaborated with more people: Last year, I co-wrote a book with a friend of mine. It's science fiction, it's a novel and it got published.

Although these partners offer interesting professional opinion that benefit the projects. But ultimately, I will think I am the author and they are there to realize what I specifically want.

ARTWORK

I studied drawing and painting in school but right now... I am interested in a lot of different things. Right now, I still do drawing but I am moving into video, performance, animation, and I said before, I co-wrote a book. So, I think there is only a limited amount of things that can be expressed from a piece of drawing. And I'd like to incorporate more ideas and meaning that requires a lot of different kinds ... or means of expression.

In 2008, I did series of drawings called the Paracelsus Garden. I have been doing this kind of drawing for a long time. Those are like black-and-white scientific drawings and I find this kind of old scientific or anatomical drawings really fascinating to look at. Especially anatomical drawings of a human body. Because the looking inside, the act of looking inside the body ... it's voyeuristic, pornographic, or even a little bit perverse.

So actually, what you see here won't be a straight representation. It will more be like an artistic, personal, subjective interpretation of what a body looks like.

For me, this kind of discrepancy is very interesting because most of the time the drawing would come across or would convey an idea of truth or authority. But in fact, it doesn't.

And I find this very interesting as well. And that's why I am interested in doing this black-and-white scientific drawings. The usual method that I use is to take – for example – a drawing of the human body, break it apart into internal organs or bones and everything, reassemble everything into a new form, a new organism – maybe it's a plant, or an insect. So, for "Paracelsus Garden", this is what I did. And I sort of also took Darwin's evolutionary tree and flipped it around so that the human being is at

the bottom of the tree.

And the body of the human being would be evolved or de-evolved into all different kinds of fantastical or alchemical beings, such as the mandrake, basilisk, and homunculus.

The other piece of work that I want to talk about is called "Hardford Girl and Other Stories". It's basically a performative video work about pain and self-harm.

For the performance itself, I have hired a tattoo artist to inscribe 39 lines of text on the back of my back without ink. So, this is an inkless tattoo and none of the marks will stay on my body permanently. And the texts were drawn from prayers, almost fanatical prayers of blood and water and blood gushing from Jesus Christ's heart and something like that and again, I find this very perverse and almost cannibalistic. There is something crazy about the Catholic religion. So, anyway ... With this performance, the image of the performance, I wrote a text to accompany the image and it was presented as a voice-over. The text covered the different aspects of pain. Whether, for example, questioning if physical pain is a release of psychic pain; does pain mean some kind of transcendence of a religious point of view? And I got these texts from different sources – from Wikipedia, or different essays that I read along the way, and there are some personal writings as well. So, everything added up into ... got woven into some random stream of consciousness. And I had a lot of fun doing the project.

I guess I am interested in the body, in pain and maybe some people would say torture. Something that is dark and gothic. I like something that gives me goose bumps and I am also interested in biotechnology, the body and the machine, the idea of the post-human.

PRODUCTION

I do everything at home. I don't have a studio because rent is very expensive here in Hong Kong. I think for me it is very isolated process.

Idea. Sometimes an idea would pop up in my mind - like, all of a sudden, without any reason. And sometimes, an idea will be lurking in the back of my mind for years, brewing, transforming, accumulating until I am ready to do something about it. I spend a lot of time in bed, staring into space or sleeping. Because I believe that, even if I am sleeping, my brain is still working out ideas.

Sometimes I will be drawing randomly and then slowly it will become a project idea. Like, last year, when I did my exhibition "Berty", it started with some drawings and then I did research, reading books and essays and I gathered a lot of ideas about the relationship between body and machine and I thought, "ok, drawings might not be a very good idea to try to express all these ideas about human and machine, the body and machine." So, I decided to write a book.

So, I came up with a plot and worked with a friend and decided to publish a book about that. And then I moved on from drawings to animation because when I look at my drawing, I see like gears turning, machine parts running ... so, I thought, "ok, it's a good excuse to try my hand on animation." What I am trying to say is that there is no one single idea that I stick to. There's this general idea about something and then the ideas and the image develop simultaneously feeding each other.

I don't think I would ever be sure that my work is successful. Maybe it looks satisfactory now at this moment, but two years later, ten years later, I will turn out hating the work. I think I know when a piece failed for sure. But whether you want to admit that to the public is another matter. It takes a lot of courage to admit failure.

For me, production is almost like a learning process or an exercise of the brain. It's a lot about problem-solving as well rather than inspiration. And it's a lot of work – again –, it's a lot of research because I believe in background readings. Because I won't be confident in going ahead with a piece of work without sufficient knowledge about the subject matter. And that's how I want to be responsible to my audience.

MATERIAL

I use a simple pen and a drafting film. Drafting film is usually used by architects. It's very difficult to combine nowadays because most architects use computer nowadays instead of drawing on a

piece of draft-ing film. It's a sort of a mix between plastic and paper and there are different kinds of drafting films around something more plastic than the other. The one that I use is very smooth, translucent and the sensation of physically drawing on the paper is very enjoyable, it's very sensual. And it's almost like draw-ing on skin. I love touching the paper although I shouldn't. When I work with material, for example a piece of paper, I would lay it on a table, look at it for the longest time, walk around it before I make the first move, before I draw the first line because a piece of blank paper or blank canvas for me is very in-timidating. And it is also almost like a love affair with your material. You have to get to know your material before you dive in. You fantasize about what the final image will be like on the paper. You know, there is little ... I would say character, for example with the pen. Different brands of pen and different pens will have different characters. You have to learn to know in order to make the best use of it.

Performance – it's very hard to predict the outcome because the audience would be the material itself. There are only a certain number of things that you can plan ahead. I can give you an example. For ex-ample the parade that I did in 2013 for Art Basel Hong Kong: I orchestrated a performance for a parade, curated by Arto Lindsay.

So, in the performance, I hired four actors who tried to prevent me from moving forward in the parade. So, I got wine poured over me, I got garbage dumped over me, I was burnt by a cigarette, I was slapped in the face. One particular scene which is interesting was a rape scene. A simulated rape. During the parade the audience a very close to me and the actor. And during the rape scene, everybody was out with their camera, with cell phones. And there were also journalists with their big professional cameras taking pictures of the rape.

And I was very engaged with the performance but at the same time I have an idea of what people are doing. They weren't cheering on the performance or anything. But the fact that they were being part of the performance right there and then, it reminded me of how paparazzi were taking photographs of Princess Di's car crash instead of helping her. And for me that was fascinating and unexpected. So, when you talk about material, this is what I can think of for a performance.

MEDIUM

For example if the subject matter is a cadaver. You get the blood, you get the internal organs, but having it presented in a black-and-white drawing, people can spend time looking at it without being intimidated because it is a scientific drawing. You can look at it for as long as you want. I will give you another ex-ample (laughs). I put three or four genitalia together, one on top of the other. One of them is a male, one of them a female and the other, I think it's a she-male.

So, basically the audience would be looking at an orgy double penetration, looking at, you know, some perverse sex act. But then I have people standing in front of the drawing for like five or ten minutes, just staring at it. Because it gives them the license to. Because this is science.

I think coming from Hong Kong with an Asian descend, people would expect you to do something ... not exactly ink painting but a medium... use a medium, or choose a subject matter that relate to my culture, or the locality of being in Hong Kong. And I think it's beneficial. I hate to use the word, but I think it's somehow a vantage. It's ... to mark it, to frame the work of an artist to an international audience.

I have people saying that – not a criticism, but an observation seen – my work is very eurocentric or Western. I am not sure if it's a good thing or not that I want to stay true to myself, I don't want to switch material or switch subject matter just because I want to cater to an international audience.

The comment that I did about being Western, it would only occur because I do drawing. I don't see the concept of being Western or Eastern when you do sound work, when you do video work or new media work. This kind of cultural context is not relevant to this kind of medium I think. And I find it's quite inter-esting. It's because I do drawing and people have this kind of cultural references.

PROCESS

Long, hard, laborious process. Because when I do, for example, my embroidery, it's labour-intensive. When I first started to do labour-intensive work – whether it's drawing or embroidery – I, again, I roman-ticized the idea. I wanted to be contemplative.

... Sometimes it's painful to do labour-intensive work. But for some reason I think I really enjoy doing it in a way. It's sort of masochistic. Every time I finish something, for example an embroidery, I would think, "I'll never go back to it! I'll never do another piece of embroidery again!". But for some reason, I will always go back to something bigger and do something even more complicated. It's a very strange sentiment that I have. You know, it's stitch by stitch, stroke by stroke, 14 hours a day, day after day and week after week.

But the result is very rewarding because at the end of the day or at the end of the process, when you look at how much you have achieved (laughs), I feel very proud of myself. It also goes with video work as well. When you do video work – especially at the stage of editing – it's really repetitive. You go back to, for example, a one-minute footage, and going through again and again to get the right rhythm, to get the right juxtaposition and speed.

This is labour-intensive, too. And sometimes I would just collapse at my desk and want to gouge my eyes out. But again, I would go through the same process. (laughs) Because it's masochistic, probably. I don't know (laughs).

PRESENTATION

I usually present my work in a white cube gallery, a white space, a very normal kind of space.

And for me, presentation means communication. Communicating an idea with the audience. It's about problem solving, it's about design. It's to think about, "what's the best way to communicate your idea with an audience, given a specific venue, given a specific size and structure of the venue. I like something that is spectacular, I like to provide an enjoyable viewing experience from my audience.

My audience can be anybody. It's the general public. And I don't really think about my audience when I do my work. But the presence of an audience and the need for successful communication is always in the back of my mind. And again it goes back to responsibility to the people who look at my work. And I think once the work is in the exhibition, the author is dead. I mean, I am not there to present my work to my audience and the work needs to speak for themselves. I think this is also the beauty of art as well. I mean the audience is free to make their associations, they are free to take back to create different meanings out of the work. It's the ambiguity that intrigues me sometimes about a piece of work.

I think presentation is all about stepping back and imagining myself as the audience and what I want to see and what I would get out of the performance or the exhibition.

I would consciously think of how the audience is going to react. And I am a bit manipulative in that kind of sense. So, I think a performance and an exhibition is very similar. Before everything happens, I would try to anticipate, I would try to go into detail about how I dress, what colour, or what kind of framing in an exhibition space so that I can do my best to communicate my idea with the audience. But the end, what they get out of it, it's out of my control.

INTENTION

My intention ... I think my art is for myself. It's a thought exercise. It's an excuse for me to read. I would like to read more. It's an excuse for me to ... you know ... I want to observe. I want to map out different ideas that I have in my mind. And it's very selfish, it's very private.

It's not only for me. But because – I'll be very honest to you – maybe it's vanity as well.

You want some kind of acknowledgment from the public, from the audience. And that's why I show my work in the gallery. I don't know. Showing it in the gallery is probably also part of my work as

well. But I don't want to be ... I said it's very selfish. But it's different from being self-indulgent. I am still responsible for what people see. And I don't want to, you know, have people saying, "ok, you are the artist, you are licensed to say or do whatever you want." I have heard about people saying that. And I don't want to be this kind of artist. I want to ... you know ... again: true to myself and be responsible.

METHOD

I am not sure if I like the word strategy and I don't have a specific method. I mean, ultimately, it depends on what you want to do and what your theme is and then you decide on what kind of method to tackle a specific theme. I think I would rather focus on an artist taste. I know there are a lot of different strategies out there.

For example, if new media art is the new trend now, maybe I choose to do new media art. But this is not true to what I am. Although I do different works, I recycle different materials. But I still want to have my own voice. And I want people to see links between different ideas. I want them to see some kind of consistency in my work, even though they are about different mediums – animation or drawings or books – so they see my own voice in it.

So, maybe this is my method. It's more about my asking what I want to do, what I really feel like doing.

ART

I think the beauty of art is – I think I said this – in its ambiguity. It offers freedom. Freedom of imagination. It opens up doorways. It opens ... it gives you possibility to bring you to another dimension. It's an exercise of the brain, like I said again and again. And it's also a bridge between the brain and the heart and the mind and the soul.

So, art for me is anything and it's everything. And this is the interesting thing about art because everybody is entitled to have different interpretation and different definition of what art is.

It's never a fixed idea for anybody.

For me, art is also about transcendence – for me personally. Like, being an artist is like being an alchemist. Very sensitive to the environment or political situation or social problems. And the experiment itself or the result of the experiment would be the piece of artwork. So sometimes ... I am trying to distinguish what is art and what is artistic. For example, for socially engaged art or research based art, process is absolutely amazing and artistic and fascinating. But then at the end of the day, at the final presentation, something might get lost. Maybe I am looking for that transcendence which might not be there. I am not discrediting this kind of art. I love research-based art, I love socially engaged art, but it makes me sometimes question, "what is art? what I am seeing, is it 'art' or 'artistic'?" And if this is what I wanted to, how would I present my work? Do I present it as an anthropological point of view and how do I present it so that it has my own input as well? So, this is what I think about.

And then if you say ... if you try to define art, I think it's very difficult because the concept of art is constantly changing. And I think art is always trying to incorporate other disciplines, other methods and ideas into itself. For example, you can take a mathematical formula or you can take a scientific method and incorporate that into your art-making process. And for me, this is also art. Also, for example, you can stage a cooking party in the museum, you can stage a dance piece in the museum.

Here, I am talking about performance art, institution critique and relational aesthetic. So, in that context, anything can be art: cooking, having a party, having a coffee. All this action can be art. Not because of the act itself, not because cooking is art. It's because there is this transformation in there. Transforming the nature of cooking with the act of cooking or the context of the museum into – for

example – a critique or a comment about the idea. So, I think there is some sort of transcendence or transformation in between that makes something art.

BIO

Angela Su received a degree in biochemistry in Canada before pursuing visual arts. By adopting existing scientific belief systems, Su creates works that prompt us to contemplate our own being, our inscription in space and in time. Her biological drawings often combine the precision of scientific sketches with a mythical sense of aesthetic to challenge the audience's visual sensory on the pleasure of pain. Not only has Angela been interested in exploring the perception and imagery of the body, through her performance-based works such as "One-Woman-Apartment" (2008) and "The Hartford Girl and Other Stories" (2012), she continuously investigates the tension of the artist's dualistic state of being when under physical endangerment or distress. Su's works have been exhibited in the 2nd CAFAM Biennale, 17th Biennale of Sydney, Rossi & Rossi and Saatchi Gallery in London.

WEB: <http://angela-su.blogspot.ch/>

Credits

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