

Wetterling Gallery

Angela de la Cruz

Storage

Text by Thomas Frangenberg

An encounter with the work of Angela de la Cruz is a peculiar, and a peculiarly intense, affair. In her paintings and sculptures which in traditional terms you would have to call abstract, you encounter the artist herself – vestiges of her mind and heart, her body and its workings. Traces of her will to embrace life, her wit, her intelligence, her perception of her condition, her suffering. Yet more – in these works you will discover some of yourself.

In a career that began in the mid-1990s, Angela has used canvases as objects, and objects as canvases, to create portrayals of human existence. Initially breaking stretchers or lacerating canvases she produced works that blur the distinction between painting and sculpture and confront you with urgent immediacy. You encounter fear, lust, abjection, complacency, laughter. In short, you encounter the stuff your own life is made up of. Angela's works do not aim to be particularly polite or discreet.

From early on, sculptural canvases were put in dialogue with readymade objects such as chairs and tables, that is, objects that directly relate to the human body. *Misery* of 1998, for instance, has a folding chair 'painfully' pressing down on a somewhat crumpled canvas taken off its stretcher. The experiences embodied in such works are fundamentally human, and you will read them and share them as your own life will have taught you to do.

In spite of what has been said at the beginning, I feel uncomfortable applying the label of 'abstract' to Angela's creations. They are not figurative in a traditional sense, of course. But then they are - what they say they say with such directness that they approximate their subjects in ways that are directly representational. *Ashamed* of 1995 cowers in a corner because it is ashamed, to be a painting, and to be around generally. This mode of communication is not only not abstract, it is not metaphorical either – the little painting is indeed hiding in a corner. This immediacy, this directness, make Angela's works some of the most affecting to have been produced in recent years.

Human frailty has been at the core of Angela's work, in permanent dialogue with self-possession and strength. Some early canvas based works were crushed or bullied, or were too large or too small for their stretchers or their environments. With works such as *Clutter VI with White Blanket* of 2004, on the other hand, Angela is also embracing the theme of death. You will not easily read the white canvas taken off its stretcher and spread over a shallow heap of reject canvases and bits of broken stretchers as anything other than a funerary shroud.

Beginning with works such as *Upright Piano* of 2002 and *Clutter with Wardrobes* of 2004 Angela used reconfigured objects as her material, and she has since produced increasing numbers of works that do not involve the use of canvas, but often maintain a strong pictorial

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character. These explorations of charging the everyday with profound significance were ongoing when a catastrophic misbehaviour of some veins in her brain confined Angela first to bed and then to a wheelchair. Whilst all earlier works speak to you about Angela's way of viewing and feeling the world, her work has now acquired a new auto-biographical dimension. In *Transfer (white)* of 2011 a box the length of Angela's height rests on an armchair and a chair, haphazard and perhaps last-minute choices of support for what we are led to assume is Angela's coffin. This direct confrontation with her own mortality led on to series of works in which boxes stand in for the dimensions of Angela's body, but no longer configure her as deceased.

This brings us to the present exhibition, 'Storage'. On entering you encounter an empty space, and only when you walk around the corner on your left will you see a dense assembly of works. Increasingly, in Angela's recent exhibitions individual works are made to be part of a larger whole, of site-specific installations. Relationships between objects are brought to the fore as much as clashes between them, and the configuration of things adds its own level of strong emotional impact. In the case of 'Storage', the emptiness of the larger gallery space greatly enhances the sense of an almost claustrophobic fullness once you have turned around the corner. This striking accumulation appears to be playing with the notion that you are not in fact in an exhibition, but are witnessing work temporarily put aside, perhaps being prepared for shipping or stored for other reasons. In spite of this suggestion of temporariness, the result of the clustering of works is an almost overwhelming visual abundance.

A sense of potential impermanence pervades every single piece making up this assembly which consists of three distinct groups. On a side wall you find two red canvases covered in alienating plastic sheets, as if just received and still packed, or protected against the grime of everyday use in a questionable taste (*Plastic Cover*; all works in the exhibition 2016). All other artworks are presented in two dense groups, increasing in height from the front towards the back, positioned in the centre of this corner space. These parallel groups begin with two works both named *Mudanza* (in English 'Moving'), plastic chairs on which you see neatly folded canvases painted green and then taken off their stretchers. The painted margins, a hallmark of many of Angela's canvases, are therefore apparent only in part. You might imagine these to be blankets ready to be used when relaxing outside, or coats placed on the first available chairs on arrival. Whatever the reading, the human body, or indeed your body, are at the core of making sense of these objects.

All remaining works are carefully painted boxes, as usual in Angela's work prohibiting a clear distinction between painting and sculpture. The subtly executed brushstrokes give the metal surfaces a strangely seductive quality. The colours are those associated with bodily functions, shades of red for blood, shades of brown for excrement. In the second row two boxes stand on the floor (*Floor Based Red* and *Floor Based Brown*). Like the 'coffin' in *Transfer (white)* these boxes once had the height of Angela's body, but unlike the work of 2011 they are crumpled, violently compressed to equal Angela's height when now seated in her wheelchair. That the metal of the boxes suffered trauma is clear from the occasional tear in the sturdy material, in strange contrast to the glamorous sheen of the coating in paint that is applied after the boxes have been deformed. They are followed by *Floor Based Combo Red* and *Floor Based Combo Brown*. In these, similarly modified boxes carry others, smaller ones, like heads, in slightly brighter shades of red or brown and likewise deprived of their

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geometric purity by compression. Their size is based on that of the wheels on which Angela's locomotion now depends. Whilst the latter are also positioned on the ground, in the last row you witness an elevation, perhaps insinuating apotheosis or redemption – *Wall Combo Red* and *Wall Combo Brown*, both again consisting of a larger box beneath and a smaller one above, suspended from the wall.

Framed by the restriction of *Plastic Cover* and the orderliness of *Mudanza*, the rising rows of boxes pulsate with life, with painful and fully lived life. All of these works have a strong individual presence, and are in fact independent artworks, but their arrangement in 'Storage' at the same time makes them part of a larger whole that adds its own suggestions of meaning which to probe and experience is your privilege.