

Angela Santana

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Beyond the Flesh: Angela Santana's Reimagining of the Female Body

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Though deeply engaged with the representation of the female body and the reappropriation of the traditional, canonical dimensions of the female form, Santana's work extends far beyond the confines of flesh. Interrogating broader themes of identity, agency, and the metaphysical resonance of the body, her practice unearths new dimensions of corporeality within a hyper-mediated, digital age. The artist cites her early experiences with painting: "My parents gave me large paper rolls, much bigger than myself, and I would just paint outside in the grass. Everything was possible, anything could be imagined." This formative period, marked by freedom and boundless creativity, established a foundation for her later work. Santana imports this early urge to play and reimagine with an unencumbered vigour into her adult practice, merging these instincts with a deliberate, critical engagement with themes of identity and representation.

Santana's work challenges typical depictions of the nude, both in content and method, using a rigorous digital process to transform fleeting online images—ranging from illicit sites to makeup advertisements—into layered compositions that she deconstructs, weaving fragments into unpredictable, tapestry-like forms. The artist notes that these are: "Images, products, ideals or short lived pleasures" typically discarded and swept away. Santana, alchemises the digital constructions onto canvas through oil painting, forging an uneasy synthesis between mediums often understood as oppositional. Citing the Dadaist and Pop Art movements as sources for inspiration, she expands on both their radical redefinitions of mass media and popular culture by embracing the subversive potential of cyber imagery. Like Dadaists, who challenged the conventions of art through absurdity and randomness, Santana's work challenges the online images she appropriates, disassembling them into new forms. Through this, she elevates what is often seen

as disposable, into an enduring visual language that forces the viewer to reconsider the meaning and value of the digital landscape that increasingly surrounds us.

Navigating the fraught terrain of corporeality and its representations, Santana's practice dismantles the hegemonic structures that have historically codified the female body as an objectified spectacle. The artist observes that historical depictions have dictated and codified what a woman is expected to look like, shaping the narrative of the female body through the history of images. Operating on the liminal space between the digital and the organic, Santana disrupts binaries to question not only how bodies are seen but also how they are rendered, fragmented, and consumed.

The beauty and sex industries cultivate a pervasive estrangement in women, demanding a paradoxical self-awareness that is both hyper-critical and deeply alienating. Women are compelled to scrutinise themselves painfully while simultaneously resenting their perceived inadequacies, fostering a profound disconnection from their own identities. These industries do not define what women are but instead project an endless absence—a relentless insistence on what they are not, coupled with an unattainable mandate of what they must become. In response, Santana constructs a visual landscape where women might be themselves, through an amalgamation of what they might still become. To label her works as mere 'hybrid' or novel collations of the female form, would limit the artists' work. Her works can instead be understood as reframing the body as a site of estrangement, into one of reinvention.

Theorist Vilém Flusser, warned of the "tyranny of the programmed image" arguing that the algorithmic image prioritises clarity eliminating human touch, threatening to displace the interpretative openness of analogue image with a pre-programmed visual language. Rather than succumbing to the sterility of the virtual landscape, Santana actively subverts this logic, harnessing the digital realm to evoke something distinctly painterly. Existing in direct opposition to the

hyper-slick aesthetic often demanded by digital culture, Santana transforms the algorithm into a source of reimagined potential, reasserting the chaotic vitality of the human form against the backdrop of a digital landscape. Social relations are increasingly mediated by images, transforming lived experience into sterile representation. Santana's subversion of the algorithmic, aligns with Guy Debord's notion that such representations serve to alienate individuals from their authentic selves, reducing human existence to a cycle of passive spectatorship. By preserving the organically reconfigured image, Santana's work becomes an act of defiance, challenging the homogenising forces of visual culture.

Reflecting on her practice, Santana observes: "As an artist, I observe the digital phenomena from a more meta perspective and comment on it in my own language of painting'. On this, she notes that she wishes to disrupt consumerist, image-based ideologies: "I am opposed to the concept that we just need what the images are trying to sell us, to be fulfilled." Santana's work deeply opposes the dry mechanical onslaught of digitised products, while subverting digital mechanisms as her tool. As a result of reimagining the virtual within painterly expression, Santana's figures inhabit a state of becoming, truthful to the nature of both realms. The bulbous, blurred bodies resist fixed identities, existing as assemblages of projection and demand. The figures are at once familiar and alien, refusing to be recognised as easily consumable icons.

This refusal is echoed in Santana's return to the tactile materiality of oil painting, which situates her practice within a lineage of canonical figuration while offering a radical departure from its historical precedents. The sumptuous textures of her paintings evoke the decadence of Titian and Rubens, yet her figures reject the idealized proportions and scopophilic pleasure of the traditional naked female body. The nude, occupies a contentious and charged position within the art-historical canon, embodying centuries of ideological construction. Historically, it has been less a representation of the individual and more a projection of societal ideals, laden with the expectations of beauty, morality, and power dynamics. From

Praxiteles' Aphrodite of Knidos to Titian's Venus of Urbino and Manet's Olympia, the female nude has been shaped by the lexicon of satiation—a form engineered for consumption, gratifying the gaze of its spectator. In this framework, the female body is not an autonomous subject but a vessel, made to fulfill the appetites of its viewers, both aesthetic and erotic.

In discussing her body of works, Santana notes: "My desire is to recontextualise historical notions of the nude". For Santana this reflects a deliberate engagement with the cultural, aesthetic, and ideological weight that the natural form has carried across art history. Santana's approach interrogates not only how we societally value the nude—as a marker of beauty, vulnerability, or power—but also the ways in which her work emerges as both an intimate exploration of embodiment and a reimagining of the female form as mutable, profoundly resistant to hegemonic systems of representation. For Santana, the nude becomes a crucible for exploring the politics of representation, where it functions not merely as an artistic trope but as a critical and generative space—one where historical weight is not discarded but reimagined.

Santana's deliberate rejection to align her work with autobiographical self-portraiture, deepens the critical framework through which her figures are understood. Repositioning the female natural form, not as a subjective locus, but as a multifaceted archetype—Santana reworks it to be read as a terrain of contested meanings, historical inscriptions, and symbolic potential. On this the artist states: "I firmly believe my paintings don't have to be autobiographical to be very personal, even intimate. I am many women in one body, a myriad of women." Santana's figures are not fixed reflections of a singular self but embodiments of a collective, multi-temporal femininity—a mass of several women swirl in an office chair, while thighs blend into a dozen sloping forms resembling fleshy flowers—where the skin ends, and the backdrop begins is unclear—where the female body is typically positioned within invisible spatial barriers, Angela's figures boldly take up space. Despite the tyranny of slenderness, her subjects sprawl never-ending limbs. The





disciplinary bindings through which women's bodies are regulated (close your legs, be polite, don't be vulgar) are rendered obsolete. Becoming polyphonic symbols, Santana's subjects carry the weight of histories and futures that resist the reductive logic of the technocratic, and patriarchal, gaze.

Though constructed with luscious textures and painterly detail, her subjects refuse to be resolved within the viewer's gaze, evading satiation. Their blurred edges, fragmented forms, and distorted proportions subvert the traditional clarity and completeness of the canonical nude. The absence of definitive boundaries in her figures denies the visual "closure" that the traditional nude offers, replacing it with ambiguity. This refusal is radical: it interrupts the historical trajectory of the female body as a byproduct of male dominance and transforms it into a site of reimagination.

What does it mean to represent a body that cannot be consumed, wholly visible, understood? To paint the female nude in an era when bodies are increasingly mediated by screens, censorship algorithms, and virtual interfaces? Where women are endlessly bound by beauty standards, despite late body-positivity movements, we find ourselves once more in an era of thinness, no doubt fuelled by Ozempic fury and glorification of the 90s. Santana's works demand that the viewer confront their own assumptions about representation, visibility, and power. Her figures, though lushly rendered, embody the "poverty" of refusal—a refusal to conform to the polished, hyper-visible bodies that dominate digital platforms. By reconstructing the body in ways that defy coherence or legibility, Santana displaces the female nude from its historical role as a passive vessel and repositions it as a moving, breathing form. Her work suggests that reclamation of the female nude in the digital culture, is not about restoring the body to an imagined ideal, but about transforming it into a new form altogether—one that resists the constraints of categorisation. Santana's figures are therefore not "empowered" in a conventional sense; they are empowered by their refusal to conform. In Santana's hands, the body becomes a zone of excavation, where layers of history, identity, and desire

are reconfigured, reminding us that it demands continual transformation, in order to survive.

The glazed blur in Santana's works emerges as a central motif developing this sentiment—her subjects appear as though glimpsed through frosted glass, or as if caught in the interminable loading cycle of a social media feed: we wait patiently for the image to load, refreshing the page, or the application itself, in frustration. Mirroring the glitches and distortions of algorithmic compression, Santana's work recalls the aesthetics of early net art and glitch feminism. The artist's technique is intentional, invoking the politics of censorship and visibility. She interrogates the parameters of what we are permitted to see and what remains hidden. The blurred surface becomes a space of negotiation, inviting the viewer to reckon with the power dynamics of looking. The blurred bodies, fragmented yet cohesive, challenge the viewer to embrace an aesthetic of incompleteness—a rejection of the imperative for total understanding. Santana's blurred forms evoke Judith Butler's notion of the "frame" in *Frames of War*, where visibility is not merely about what is obscured or revealed but about the conditions that structure how bodies appear at all. The blur, in this context, does not passively conceal but actively reconfigures the terms of representation, confronting the viewer with the mechanisms of power that dictate whose bodies are rendered intelligible.

Ambivalence becomes weaponised, the harsh jagged edges are violent and disruptive, and yet her works still retain a soft, rosied, roundedness, perhaps reflective of the female experience itself, to be a woman is to be a jagged edge, fragmented, and reordered of our own volition, and yet, it is to be soft, to spill over, extend flesh and warm reds beyond the imposed confines of four cornered edges.

Santana's work is grounded in a deep engagement with flux, which she describes as "the only truth and constant—socially, politically, bodily, and geographically." This focus on movement and transformation underscores the kinesthetic energy present in her practice, where to create movement in her works is not to remedy

pace, but to credit it as the underbelly of our social psyche. Santana reimagines the body as an endless terrain of becoming, a site where the history, identity, and desire coalesces into something resolutely alive, unyielding, and boundlessly transformative. Through this radical act of reclamation, her work does not merely reframe the body—it redefines it as a catalyst for rethinking the world itself. In speaking to Santana about this show, she notes: "I intuitively knew what I wanted to express". She adds, "I could only find it within myself", and it is from within the richness of her own mind, and images it holds, that she pulls fourth a million more: offering them as scattered spectres of the female form, of what it was, and of what it might still become.

