

Tufting with Angela

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Interview and Photography by Izzy Einstein



Portrait of artist. Photo by Izzy Einstein.

Los Angeles based artist Angela Nguyen makes the floor pop, scream, laugh, smile, and brood. Completely self taught, for the past five years she has honed in on the nuances of a process called tufting to create phenomenal rugs that contain an abundance of stylistic flares unique to her work.

These giant creatures that she calls “rugs” ooze with energy, pairing together chaotic imagery with a minimalist color palate fit for both a living room or gallery floor — she is adamant that her works be shown on the floor rather than hung on the wall.

Maybe it was because we sat on her newest rug for the interview, but as we talked I became instantly immersed in the crazy and monopolistic world of tufting, a world to which she hesitantly belongs.

How did you initially get involved in tufting?

I started in late 2018 with a friend of mine and have been self-taught through trial and error. The renaissance of tufting in general is very DIY and completely self-taught, and something I find really interesting about it is that there's a "new age" of it and an "old age" of it. This practice has existed for ages, but there was kind of a halt to it because there was a lot of criticism from people who worked in rug manufacturing. And I've spoken to a lot of rug manufacturers who have criticized the practice because 1. the threads get loose, 2. it's cheaply made — it's the cheapest way to make a rug — and 3. it takes super long for these rugs to be finished, much longer than finishing a woven rug. With the new age of tufting I think there's sort of this disconnect between the practices and the criticisms. Part of what's really important to me regarding tufting is just understanding ways I can improve so I can challenge those critiques.

When you first got into the practice were you met with that backlash?

I was actually very unaware of it until I took my first rug to get outsource finished with a rug manufacturer, and he was like "what the fuck is this." I brought him my rug which is very untraditional to what old age tufting is. Old age tufting is really just like square, rectangle, and circle rugs. Something easy to get done. So I was met with that criticism, something that they're not used to. It's apparent when you're talking to people who are aware of the old age tufting styles or traditions of rug manufacturing. A majority of the people in the new age saturated market of tufting aren't aware of those criticisms. . New age tufting trends reflect quick cash grabs. You can buy very cheap material from JOANN, you can build a frame in one day, and you can have someone commission a piece of whatever their logo is and get paid 300-400 bucks for it. That's not the way I'd like to approach what I do, but that's kind of the reality of it.



Angela Anh Nguyen, *Gig's a Gig?*. 2022, Maine wool, secondhand merino, salvaged acrylic, 132 x 92 inches
335.5 x 233.5 cm. Photo by Julian Calero.

Do you think it's a form of elitism?

Part of me isn't really sure if it's elitist as much as it's just about traditionalism. I think it takes people challenging that notion by making crazier pieces, sourcing better material, and doing things that are very untraditional when it comes to tufting.

Have you found there to exist some sort of a community within the niche of tufting?

I think it's a little bit hard to navigate because it's such a saturated market. So it's really hard to find people who are working on the trade as an artistic practice. There's someone named Tori Wheeler who's a good friend of mine, we started tufting around the same time, and that's somebody I adore and love their work. Jabari as well, he's a textile artist but he learned how to tuft with me over the summer. He actually helped tuft parts of the rug that we're sitting on. There's also this guy named John who does this thing called Juicy Rugs, and he makes very lovely rugs of iconic faces and stuff. So those are some people that I like who tuft, but other than that I find it kind of difficult because the tufting community is very monopolized. There is this one guy who bought the rights to a tufting gun from China to sell domestically and had marked up the price dramatically, and that's what sucks. The community is kind of based in this guy's world. He runs the tufting forum, he charged me 250 dollars for the tufting manual, and he also has his own line of wool that everyone buys from. I refuse to buy any of it.

God, that's crazy. So you've only been doing this for 5 years, which is absurd, did you work in any other mediums before this?

I guess I was in a creative field before this, I worked in the music industry in A and R.

That's so random.

I know right. They fired me! But my dad taught me a lot about home goods and stuff. He's not so much of an interior designer as he is a manufacturer of goods. Now my aunts and uncles say they see the correlation between me and my father. But yeah I just kind of picked this up, I've always wanted to jump into more creative work than being in A and R, but it ended up working out the way that it did and I'm stoked.

Do you consult your Dad about your rugs at all?

He loves to feed me advice. My dad is an immigrant from Vietnam so there's a cultural disconnect in the way that we view art, but he gives me suggestions and I'm like "thanks dad, but no." But a huge role that my dad has played in me and my art is the way that I grew up. He loves popular culture, but he also loves talking about politics. Literally every single day of my childhood my dad would constantly talk about anything political, even when I was like 12.

But his tendencies have definitely rubbed off on you, I mean look at the images we're sitting on right now.

Yeah it has, now I'm just making fun of whatever he talks about.

Would you consider all of your pieces to be political?

Yeah I'd say so. All of my rugs are inherently political. I worked on this basketball rug and I even found that was a bit political too. People immediately resort to iconography of players and people of fame who are icons of the sports world, but less of the working class people and the fans that really create what that iconography exists because of. So I felt that piece was inherently political because I wanted to represent the other side of sports fandom in its community rather than its icons.

What you're describing plays into the notion that perhaps everything, not just art, is inherently political, is that something you'd agree with?

Yeah totally. 100%.



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