

*When
and
where
i enter*

October 6 –
December 2, 2017

Angela
Hennessy

All works 2017

Mourning Wreath

Synthetic and human hair, found hair, artists's hair, gold leaf on copper, enamel paint, chain, wire frame, cement base

Black Hole

Synthetic and human hair, velvet, pigment, salt, ground mirror, foam, wood base

Black Rainbow

Synthetic hair, LED lighting, frame

Unidentified Grieving Objects

Synthetic hair

Southern Exposure is proud to present major new work by Oakland based artist Angela Hennessy. We relish the occasion of the first major solo exhibition by this important Bay Area artist, visionary, and educator who also works extensively with dying and end-of-life practices. *When and where I enter* is a bold expansion of the artist's textile-based practice, which often addresses cultural narratives about the body and mortality. The exhibition includes four newly commissioned installations that are woven, crocheted, and braided from synthetic and human hair, reclaiming delicate Victorian-era crafts of mourning rituals and African-American braiding techniques. Each piece has a distinct presence, layered with complex signifiers of race, femininity, and sensuality. They claim space with dramatic weight and liberatory, libidinal expansiveness.

Hennessy's large-scale sculptures—*Black Hole*, *Black Rainbow*, and *Mourning Wreath* (all works 2017)—are each shaped like holes or portals at whose thresholds we linger. They are multifarious refractions of blackness, grounded by their reference to the body and the artist's hand while also holding a reverential longing for a

mystical space beyond. Along with her *Unidentified Grieving Objects*, a party garland of puffballs, these sculptures reside in a thoroughly chromatically saturated ground of black that overtakes the gallery space and absorbs its light. In this symbolic negation of the blinding normativity of the white cube, they charge exhibition venues as imbricated within a larger culture of oppressive institutional hierarchies that systematically refuse entrance to processes, ideas, or bodies that resemble Hennessy's.

With her installation and its title—*When and where I enter*—Hennessy instead sets the terms by which she commands the space. She also tacitly acknowledges the racial and material bias that may have precluded prior widespread acclaim for her richly deserving work. Southern Exposure is humbled to present it here and acknowledge an artist who has been an influential force in the Bay Area arts community for some time.

—Valerie Imus

When and where I enter: Work by Angela Hennessy

By Elena Cross

What does black reveal? This may seem an incongruous question: Black is more often assumed to be a color of obfuscation than of revelation. However, black exists along a complex spectrum between light and dark, visibility and invisibility, everything and nothingness, and especially within a complex sociocultural spectrum that identifies and marks black bodies as distinct from white bodies.

Approaching black equally as material, color, and concept, textile artist Angela Hennessy weaves, braids, and constructs the complicated relationship between blackness, black bodies, and white space in her solo exhibition *When and where I enter*. Using hair as her primary vehicle, Hennessy constructs this exhibition around three seemingly ephemeral objects set against walls painted black: a Victorian mourning wreath, a black hole, and a rainbow.

Hennessy's installations are expansive and consuming, taking up as much space as they need. The exhibition's subjects reference otherworldly portals, the sprawling beauty and terror of death, and phantasmagoric bands of endless light, while constructing each decidedly in earthly, terrestrial material. The title refers to the words of Anna Julia Cooper, a black scholar and activist, who, in 1892, boldly proclaimed: "Only the black woman can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole...race enters with me.'" Both Cooper's words and Hennessy's statement as an artist speak to the radical act of claiming space, not only for herself in the here-and-now but for all of the selves that are present, emotionally or metaphysically, even in their absence.

Black Hole, for example, evokes that absence by suggesting an orbital, weightless mass. It was constructed on the studio floor and remains on the floor within the gallery. The horizontal positioning of the black hole

grounds the work, creating an open door into the shadowy void. *Black Hole* resembles both Narcissus looking into the river at his own reflection—though, in this instance, seeing nothing but black—and that of an open grave. This relationship between the physical and perceptual selves continues to develop throughout the installations in material forms.

Hair, the most ubiquitous of Hennessy's materials, is also the most potent and easily misunderstood component of her textile work. Its presence is often reduced to an autobiographical allusion rather than a metaphor for larger semiotic and cultural problems. Both human and synthetic, hair becomes more than just material substance but a trigger eliciting feelings of racial belonging and dissonance, tactile desire and eroticism, abject horror and repulsion. In his 1987 essay "Black Hair/Style Politics," scholar Kobena Mercer mines through these varied manifestations of black hair within a cultural context. Mercer states that hair is second only to skin-color as the "most tangible sign of racial difference." In lieu of skin, hair stands in.

Mourning Wreath is the most straightforward use of hair in the exhibition. Hennessy draws on African-American braiding techniques and nineteenth-century traditions, in which one would honor one's dead loved one with an elaborate design using locks of the deceased's hair. The wreath is comprised of many tightly braided hair "flowers" forming a large, blooming ring standing in the center of the dark gallery, almost as if one has entered an all-black mausoleum, signaling that this body of work will be more meditation than spectacle.

Sourcing hair from Oakland-based wig and beauty shops, Hennessy plays with familiar signifiers of racial and gendered identity. Some viewers come to these works with the sense of acute recognition, mentally projecting an image of themselves onto Hennessy's figure-less bodies. Others immediately experience a sense of foreignness and difference, understanding their

bodies as separate from the experiences Hennessy's work represents.

Hennessy materially and conceptually constructs complex, interlocking layers of meaning for her audience. In *Black Rainbow*, layered hues of hair embody each band of light in a cascade of color from deep black to platinum blonde. Hair's malleability makes for a particularly fertile place to consider the misleading relationship between visibility and identity. This paradox is most evident in the light-colored bands of the rainbow. Much the way that black hair has been culturally associated with (racial) blackness, abjection, and ugliness, blonde hair has borne an historic relationship to (racial) whiteness, purity, and femininity. However, the blonde locks in Hennessy's hair rainbow are of the same thickness and sport the same kinky-curl pattern as the rows of dark hair. While *color* might suggest one thing to the eye, *texture* reveals something else. Blackness as a mechanism of race is not solely visual but an embodied experience of difference. Mere color alone is not enough to subvert other codes of racialization at play. The body itself keeps a record in its skin, in its hair, in its blood.

In 1992, conceptual artist Glenn Ligon turned the words of black female novelist Zora Neale Hurston into a large-scale etching of black text that reads: *I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background*. As the words repeat over and over, they blur together and become illegible, the letters taking on even thicker applications of taint. Regardless of color, the walls of any institution are that sharp white background. For artists like Ligon, Hurston, or Hennessy, navigating one's blackness against such a background requires a certain amount of maneuvering and manipulation of language. Hennessy proves this in choosing her exhibition title, recognizing her work's positionality within the institution. Her installations enter the gallery and envelops its walls in a thick black light, their darkness beaming as both melancholic and radiant.

October 6, 7:00 – 9:00 PM

Opening reception

Angela Hennessy, *When and where I enter*

Rodney Ewing, *Days and Occasions: The Unexpected Griot*

The Center for Tactical Magic, *If You See Something, Say Something*

October 14, 7:00 – 9:00 PM

URL/IRL & Shadow Workshop: performance and skillshare

by Wizard Apprentice

October 20, 7:00 – 9:00 PM

Our Sacred Noise in Street Light Shadows: live performance

by Radio Healer

I would like to thank Southern Exposure for the opportunity to exhibit my work at this particular moment in time when the black things in white spaces are often subject to an unprecedented degree of spectacle and art institutions are charged with undertaking their own evolution.

Thank you to Valerie Imus for extending the initial invitation and for being open to my ideas in their earliest stages. I am grateful to Jackie Francis for a studio visit that came at a critical juncture in my working process and to Elena Gross whose insightful words provide necessary context for the work. The exhibition would not be possible without the unwavering support of Jamee Crusan who constructed bases and frames and let me take over their studio as the works outgrew my own.

Southern Exposure thanks Angela Hennessy, Jamee Crusan, Jackie Francis, Elena Gross, Mary Eannarino, Anthony Russell, Jesus Landin Torrez, Angel Rafael Vázquez-Concepción, and Leila Weefur.

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