

Tending the garden

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69 Reservoir Street, Sydney

The human body is not a machine but a garden, an ecosystem that can heal itself under the right conditions. Springing from this analogy, Ayka Go expands her scope of inquiry from previous themes of girlhood nostalgia to bolder, mature examinations on feminist theory. Through an empowering exploration of the female form, she presents a visceral, deeply personal body of work that is also resonant to the collective experience of self-reclamation.

A collection of nine paintings depicts torn layers of paper that have been formed into shapes of the vulva. The artist abstracts her representation of this intimate body part by creating paper models using red and pink crepe paper, white tissue sheets and thread. The translucency of these materials allow a faint penetration of light, shifting their colors and producing shadows. With intentional focus on the nuances of color and depth, she paints from these references in assiduous detail.

Several years ago, Ayka was diagnosed with hypothyroidism, an ailment that disrupted many of her physiological systems. Among other symptoms, she experienced prolonged fatigue, sensitivity to temperature, appetite fluctuations, and became prediabetic. Most unsettling was the havoc it wreaked on her hormones, ultimately affecting her reproductive system. To manage these afflictions, Ayka undergoes extensive blood tests every three months to constantly adjust medical dosages. She imbibes medications multiple times a day and has adapted healthier, sustainable lifestyle changes.

The way that Ayka's reference objects form part of her process can be compared to three-dimensional sketching. They are a departure from past origami and collage studies, yet still involve playful sculpting that simultaneously conceal and reveal. Some of her new maquettes are unevenly sewn across the gaps; a gesture of mending, while also showing that the healing process is messy, imperfect, even brutal. Her sewing needle is reminiscent of the extraction needles that regularly pierce her flesh; the redness echoing the sight of blood that often permeates her thoughts. Trailing threads appear like roots or veins, visual metaphors for the connections and cycles of life.

Three smaller paintings are based on more abstract maquettes. *vessel* resembles a single breast, torn and hanging by a thread. *traced holes* is a stitched-up wound; its combination of sharpness and fragility gives a sense of unease. *at thirty-one, traces of white* features seven pins, white threads dangling like the white hair that has begun to emerge within her mane, undeniable evidence of her ageing physicality. Poetic in their spareness, these three pieces are laden with meaning.

Ayka, now in her thirties, inhabits that uncertain phase between youth and middle age. She begins to confront difficult truths on biological programming and the expected social roles of women. When certain functions cannot be performed, how does that impact the definition of womanhood? The artist joined online support groups to discuss treatment options and psychoanalytical issues related to health. Through this, she realised the importance of community dialogue and the vital need to share these stories.

Tactile acts of making and experimenting demonstrate the artist's fearless commitment to convey hard-won wisdom that follows trauma. They mirror a courageous journey of battling internal substances that are unseen, physical results that are unknown. Her enigmatic and powerful images are an homage to the invisible scars that women carry. They serve as a lens offering profound insight into bodily autonomy. It is a pivotal moment in Ayka's career in which a more sophisticated portrayal of objects possesses a balance of subtlety and depth. Here we witness the emergence of a voice who is free to choose how and when she can be called woman.

By Stephanie Frondoso