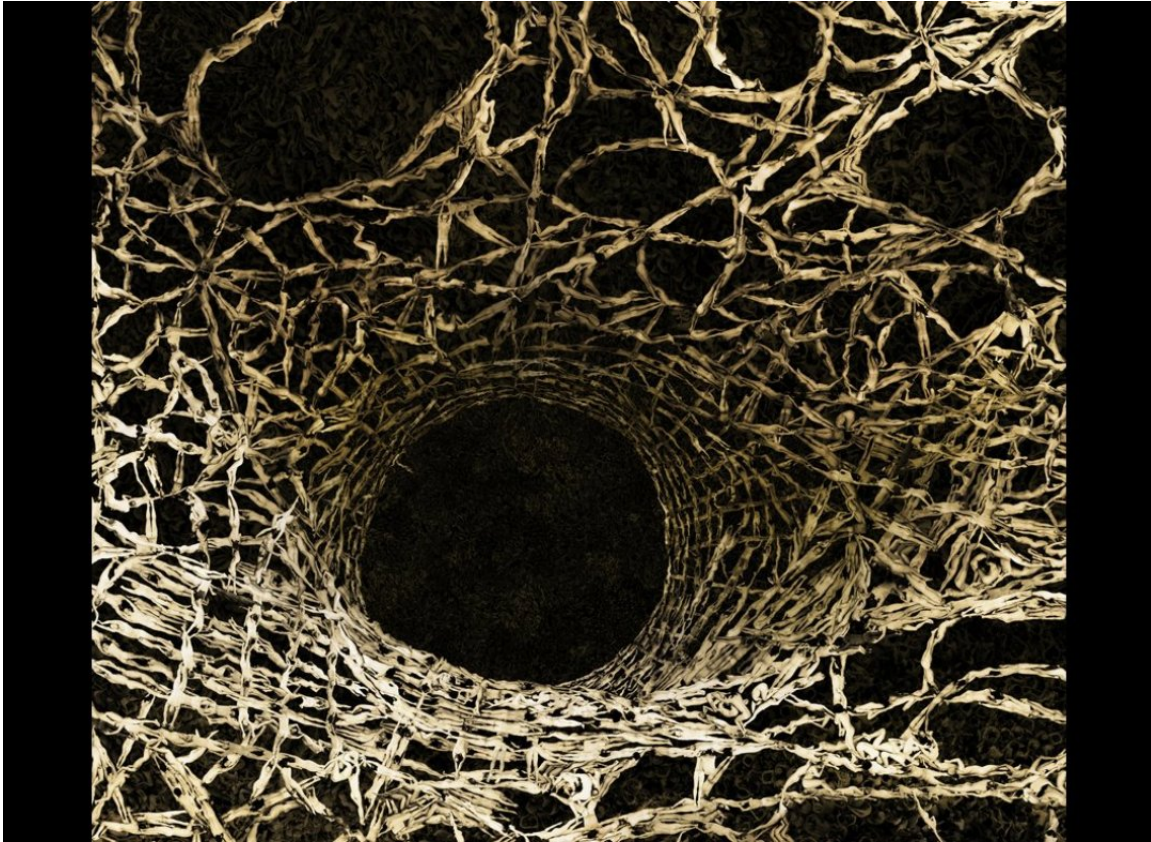


Angelo Musco: Unfathomable Pictures

Peter B Lloyd, 4th November 2013



Aranea, © Angelo Musco 2009

Infinitude does not lend itself to being depicted by mortal hands, but Angelo Musco's digital photomontages stand astride of the finite and the infinite. A common epithet applied to Musco's art is that it is "insane" in the positive sense of the word, which captures the wildly transcendent nature of his work, in which he is inspired and driven beyond the normal landscape of artistic ideas and methods, into an intriguing world that he has created and populated with millions of souls.

Musco's method is disarmingly simple: he takes photographs of people in the nude, and digitally assembles a montage of their bodies. But Musco has a Borgesian delight in what mathematicians call the 'combinatorial explosion', for in his photomontages he uses unimaginable numbers of bodily images to manifest his unique vision. For example, in *Ovum*, he assembled two million nudes. He uses hundreds of models—volunteers who pour themselves as raw materials into his artistic process—taking dozens of photographs of them in systematic poses, and then employing this reservoir of flesh as the palette for his electronic paintbrush.

What do two million writhing, naked bodies look like? It is not something that most of us can readily picture in our mind's eye. It is a construction that slips out of the penumbra of the brain's visual cognition, and glides towards the outer horizons of visual possibility, towards what can be conceived intellectually but not actually envisioned. Somehow Musco's mind has a grasp of this plenitude so that he can mould it into beautiful shapes on his computer.

A haunting beauty inhabits the deep and curvaceous forms that Musco kneads from his mass of photographs. That alone would suffice to make him an interesting artist. What lifts his work into the category of the 'great' is the human texture—the limitless detail of bodies, faces, expressions, and souls. According to Musco, the atoms of his constructed world are not mere digitised bodies but the very souls that dwell on those bodies.

Who are those souls? Why are they there? I met some of them—indeed, became one of them—on October 19th, when the New York-based artist Angelo Musco held a photoshoot in London, his first in England. As I arrived at Sunbeam Studios, I was reminded of the film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, where random individuals are drawn, for reasons they cannot fathom, toward a specific mountain to meet emissaries from another world. In Musco's photoshoot, random individuals are likewise drawn to his visionary and vast act of creation for some reason that none of us can quite put our finger on.

During the five-hour shoot, Musco ordered the bodies into a series of structural forms. We models formed standing walls, circular discs flat on the floor, arches and columns also flat on the floor, and long chains. He has previously said his arranging of the bodies is like knitting, an analogy that seemed quite apt. Some aspects of the arranging were explicitly controlled by Musco, while other aspects were left to chance and the whim of the models.

The written pre-shoot instructions advise that models should “look after your own personal hygiene”, hardly necessary for the pleasant people who volunteered to be models for the day, but it does indicate the degree of physical intimacy that strangers found themselves in during the poses. In one pose, my head rested on the cold and flabby buttock of a hairy gentleman. In another pose, my head ended up nuzzled between the thighs of the charming young lady who had introduced me to Musco's web site (when we modelled together for *Spirited Bodies*). It was really rather random: one moment, I was nose-to-testicle with a bony male body, and the next I was spooning a very pretty lady of a certain age. There was polite conversation about the mechanics of lying on top of each other on the hard concrete floor: “Would you mind moving your leg a bit, please, it's too much pressure on my arm.” At first, people seemed politely to keep their hands to themselves, but gradually as we warmed to the safe and friendly atmosphere, people draped arms and legs over each other's bodies, which allowed both more physical comfort and greater visual interest in the photographs. Whilst it might look orgiastic in the photographs, everyone behaved impeccably with no inappropriate forms of touch.

Musco organises the bodies up to a point, but allows individual initiative in the details of limb position. When we were posed into large circular discs on the floor, our direction was to form a tight bundle, leaving no white space visible between the bodies. People self-organised themselves on the floor, squeezing up against one another to block out the white space. Musco's assistants moved a few limbs to fill in small gaps that had appeared, but otherwise left the pattern of torsos and limbs to find its own way, like a many-bodied amoeba flowing into the space. In the posing of the columns and chains, he was more prescriptive: we had to lie in perfectly straight rows, with our arms outstretched onto the next body in the line, with arms wrapped around legs to form a linked chain. We could lie face-up, face-down, or sideways, as long as we were each a straight link in a straight chain.

As I mentioned earlier, Musco thinks of the units of his pictures as souls rather than bodies. It was therefore interesting that he gave no directions as to facial expression or frame of mind to adopt. So people were just themselves. This randomness adds an almost fractal complexity to the pictures. Not only are the bodies all different but each person in each pose is expressing whatever is going on in their own personal mind at that moment. There is no mechanical uniformity that the viewer can abstract away to make the pictures easy to digest, but instead an imponderable plethora of faces, expressions, gestures, each one pulling you into the unique life-story of that naked soul. In one chain-link, a woman's head turns away from the feet of the man she is clasping; one man nuzzles his face into a woman's bottom, another clasps his neighbour's ankles. This haphazardness within an overall coherent structure gives Musco's pictures their biomorphic realism. In *Xylem*, for example, the bodies in his photomontage bind to each other in a directed way that is nonetheless random in its details, which mirrors the way that the roots of a tree follow their hydrotropic instincts and tunnel willy-nilly towards the water in the soil.

Who has not watched bees scurrying about their affairs, each bee seemingly running and flying at random, but all guided by a network of signals to enable the colony as a whole to function with a single purpose? Angelo Musco is the 'spirit of the beehive' of his nest of models, where each soul lies down with a arbitrary placing of body parts, and yet his gentle directions steer people into the structural forms that he subsequently uses as the building blocks of his vision inside the computer.

Nature can sometimes be challenging rather than pretty. Indeed, Musco says his traumatic birth experience informs his work. Some people have commented that Musco's piles of bodies are redolent of the Nazi death camps; and others are put in mind of buckets of maggots wriggling over one another. The polymorphous potential of the human nude allows it to be any of these things: fish, roots, columns, archs, or maggots!

Musco's genius lies in the unfathomable depth and scale of his constructions, as well as in the biomorphicity of his directed haphazardness—and the gentle moulding of this raw material into natural forms that resonate fractally with their tiniest details. As many people have exclaimed, his work is "insane"—but it is richly and rewardingly so.

Links

Angelo Musco official web site:

<http://www.angelomusco.com>

Angelo Musco on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/ANGELO-MUSCO/214462229125>

Steve Ritter's blog post on the Sunbeam Studios photoshoot:

<https://charoigne.wordpress.com/2013/10/21/angelo-musco/>