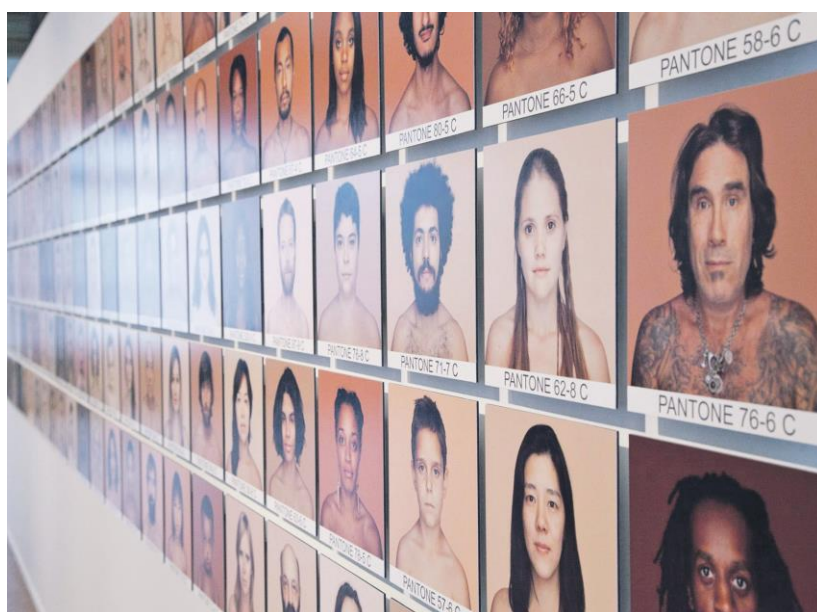




Our colourful human race

This gorgeous work of art brings together people of many different races, forming a rainbow of warm colours. It gives us hope that humanity can live in peace, says NG YI-SHENG.



[Photo: HUMANAE FACEBOOK]

Angelica Dass is a photographer from Brazil, an extremely multi-racial country. Even her family includes people with many different skin colours.

“My father is the son of a maid from whom he inherited an intense dark chocolate tone,” she explained in a TED talk earlier this year. “He was adopted by... my grandma, [who] has a **porcelain** skin and cotton-like hair. My mother is a cinnamon-skin daughter of a native Brazilian, with a pinch of hazel and honey, and a man – a mix of coffee with milk, but with a lot of coffee.”

Because her family was so diverse, Ms Dass did not experience racism as a little girl. But, when she started going to school, she realised that the colour of her skin mattered.

“I remember my first drawing lessons in school,” she said. “It was exciting and creative, but I never understood the unique flesh-coloured pencil. I was made of flesh, but I wasn’t pink. My skin was brown, and people said I was black. I was seven years old with a mess of colours in my head.”

Later on, she experienced much worse discrimination. When she accompanied her cousin to school, she was mistaken for a nanny. When she helped her friends cook food for parties, some guests thought she was a maid.

Often, when she visited her grandmother or her friends in their flats, security guards would tell her not to use the main lift. “In the end, with this colour and this hair, I cannot belong to some places,” she said.

A few years ago, she got married to a Spanish man with pink skin and green eyes. People started asking what their children would look like. She felt troubled when she thought of how her kids would have to struggle with racism.

Unique art project

So, in 2012, she decided to create an art project about race called “Humanae”. She took photos of people against a white background. Then, she identified each of their skin colours. Finally, she changed the white backgrounds in their portraits to the same colour as their skins.

At first, she saw this as a small private project. But, strangers saw her work on the Internet and began sharing it. Soon, museums and galleries from all over the world were asking if they could put the images on display.

People were fascinated by the work because it challenged their ideas about race. It is common to say that Caucasians have white skin, Africans have black skin and East Asians have yellow skin. But, Humanae shows that human skin actually comes in thousands of different tones of pink and brown. It suggests that our racial categories are not very meaningful.

Ms Dass also deliberately chose not to mention the race or nationality of each person in her portraits. Instead, she named the colour of their skins using a system designed by an American paint company named Pantone. Because the names of these Pantone colours are just numbers, none of them have any positive or negative associations. This reminds us that everyone in the pictures is equal.

Over the years, Ms Dass has expanded her project. She has photographed over 3,000 people in 13 different nations. These include rich people and poor people, disabled people and able-bodied people, newborn babies and elderly people with deadly diseases, CEOs, United Nations employees, students and refugees. “We all together build Humanae,” she says.



Angelica Dass giving a TED Talk.
[Photo: TED.COM]

Wonderful response

Many people have been moved by the project. One mother of an 11-year-old child emailed Ms Dass, saying that it had greatly helped her daughter's confidence. "This past weekend one of her girlfriends argued with her that she does not belong and should not be allowed to live in Norway," she wrote. "So your work has a very special place in my heart and it's very important for me."

She has also learned that it is being used by others in completely unexpected ways. For instance, there are artists who use it to practise their drawing skills, and brain scientists who use it to test people's ability to recognise faces.

What really pleases her, however, is that some teachers are using it in classrooms for discussions of racial issues. "Their passion encourages me to go back to drawing classes, but this time as a teacher myself," she said.

In addition to her work as a photographer, she now teaches children and adults to create their own self-portraits. She helps them to discover their own individual colours, so that they can learn to love their own skins.

VOCABULARY

porcelain (say "por-se-lin"; noun used as an adjective) = delicate white. Porcelain is a hard, white ceramic often used for fine dinner sets.

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