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As told to Greta Rainbow, 2155 words.

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# On surrendering to your subconscious

Tattoo artists Angel Garcia and Samantha Rehack (aka Body Spells) discuss finding synchronicity in creative partnership, translating mysticism to Instagram, and allowing the art to be its own author.

## What does a Body Spells tattoo consist of?

Samantha Rehack: We combine one spontaneous drawing made by me with one by Angel. We created the project as a traveling, live series where we host a party and give clients—here they are querents—a reading and a tattoo of whatever card they pulled. I hand-poke some lines and Angel does the others with a machine.

## How did your creative collaboration begin?

Angel Garcia: We met in 2017 at a residency called The Golden Dome School, which is dedicated to the intersections of art, metaphysics, and ecology. Each session is themed around a different tarot card from the Major Arcana and ours was The Lovers. We realized that we were both tattooers and had similar interests by the end of an intense week of creating and meditating.

SR: We kept in touch and planned to do another residency, this time for the Hermit card. We had a crazy day of texting where we came up with the whole idea: spontaneous, oracle mystery tattoos made together. Out in California we started doing drawings at the same time of day: one for when we got up in the morning, one midday, and one at the end of the day. We actually were sharing a bed so we would get up at 3 a.m.—the witching hour—and do one. But we weren't ever showing each other our drawings at the time.

AG: We ended up with 22 pairs of drawings, a happy accident because that's the same amount of cards as there are in the Major Arcana. From there we went to L.A. and had the first Body Spells event at a friend's house. It was super DIY. We weren't sure anybody would show up. This was before we had an Instagram account; it was purely word of mouth. And these two people who were total strangers came and it was amazing. I feel like I'll love them forever. They're a part of the deck forever.

SR: To continue building the deck and eventually have 78 cards, like the tarot, now we make drawings on every new moon and every full moon. The moment it goes exact we just stop whatever we're doing or we wake up from sleep and make a drawing. Every other month or so we workshop the drawings, find what fits, and make them into cards.

## I'm trying to imagine you picking up a pen and paper off the floor in the middle of the night and creating an image. What is the key to making these drawings?

AG: My best tool is my intuition. As soon as I start to overthink it, I just stop. It's supposed to be a second of drawing, a moment in time.

SR: Sometimes they're silly or ugly or stuff that cracks us up. Sometimes we do things that are oddly synchronous. Of course we're drawing all the time and working with certain imagery because of our individual tattoo practices, and that can come into it. But we're trying to be as free as possible. It's honestly very dreamy; we're pulling the subconscious into the light. When we get together and overlay them, that's when we think about them a little more—how they work as a composition, how it will work as a tattoo. But throughout the whole process we're extremely serious about not attaching any meaning to the

card.

AG: No meaning, no interpretation. When we're drawing the card it's about the image. It's really hard but we want to surrender to surprise.

**Why is that important to you?**

SR: The mysteriousness is the whole point. You're pulling an oracular message from the ether that's going to end up on your body. We're the stewards of that image. Ultimately it's something that you are going to have a relationship with forever.

AG: It's important not to impose any of our person onto the card when the person that the card belongs to is there. We want the image to belong to them.

SR: With certain magical rituals, pop culture often leaves out the part where you need to do a little homework. You get a tarot reading and you have a lot to think about afterwards, your problems aren't solved. Body Spells is similar; it's your responsibility to exist with it and to work with what comes up. We're not trying to provide a spiritual service. If you end up having a spiritual relationship with your tattoo, or any other tattoo you have, I think that's awesome and really personal.

**I'm curious how tarot, or mysticism, entered your lives.**

SR: I've always been fascinated with the mysterious nature of objects like tarot cards and sacred tools, which perhaps is partly rooted in my religious upbringing. My exploration of these objects has been part of how I've navigated my relationship to ritual practices as an adult.

AG: I'm a super nerd about mythology. I have a lot of the information that's in the story of the cards and my approach to reading them is pretty academic. For as long as I can remember I've been interested in mystical practice. My family is from Cuba and we used to watch this astrologer on TV, Walter Mercado. A friend gave me my first tarot deck when I went to college. It was chakra-themed, very funny illustrations. I mean, it was my first deck. It was a good one. I lost it, actually.

SR: My first deck I lost, too. I buried it in the sand at the beach and totally forgot about it. I felt fine about it. Sometimes they're just done with you.

**Hearing you talk, you're clearly on the same page but like you're reading from your own copies of the book. How is Body Spells different from, or how does it interact with, your solo practices?**

SR: It's really fun to play and to collaborate with each other. We always approach tattoos as a collaboration with the client.

AG: Body Spells feels more free. We're not trying to fit the drawings onto a flash sheet, we're not imagining how they'd look on an arm. There's no classical or archetypal imagery associated with them. They are coming completely out of nowhere. It's so intuitive that sometimes we don't even digest what it is that we've drawn until we look at it again when the card's pulled.

SR: There's intuition in the inking process, too. When we're talking to the querent maybe we'll notice that their body language is hovering around their chest and we'll suggest placing it there. Maybe they're radiating the color red and we could incorporate that.

**I remember red laces on a boot from the Body Spells Instagram. So many tattoo artists rely heavily on that platform to promote their work. I mean, that's how I found both of you. What is it like to talk about magic and ritual inside digital spaces?**

SR: We're always trying not to come off as... "super cute." Is it bad that I said that?

AG: [laughs] We both get that a lot. People saying, "Oh, cute project!" And we're like, "No! This project is actually really hard and complicated!" It can be dark, it can be about facing a fear. The image that you see on Instagram doesn't replace the experience. There's so much deeper work that's happening when the querent pulls the card or when we're doing the drawing. It's tough to try to represent that.

SR: The digital platform has obviously been awesome for both of our careers. We get this reach to all these people that want to make art together. We just want to make sure that we don't seem as if we're providing a really pretty package that you can unwrap and we give you a magical answer.

You also never know what the algorithm is doing behind the scenes to change your audience. Maybe only women of a certain age range are seeing our posts. We're working on a website as an archive and a tool for explaining Body Spells. There's something about Instagram that's about consumption, like "I'm just shoppin' around," and a site conveys more of an art piece.

**What were your paths to tattooing, an art form that I think is inherently less focused on commodity than many other mediums?**

AG: I had a really traditional tattoo apprenticeship at a street shop in Miami—classic American, Japanese, tribal styles. I painted the walls, did the appointments, swept the floor. I tattooed melons until I annoyed them enough to let me pick up a machine. I've been tattooing professionally for seven years now. I

love it. I think it's like the proletariat or the democratic way to share your artwork. I love working with people and their bodies. I got weird with it and found my own relationship to tattooing that my apprenticeship didn't engender in me. I thought I was entering into an industry that was breaking all the rules, until I realized that there were actually so many rules, so much gatekeeping. I guess what Sam and I saw in each other is that we're trying to break the rules in the same way.

SR: My background is totally different. I went to art school; I feel like everybody just tattoos each other in art school. I had a lot of anxiety then and I didn't love to party and I didn't smoke cigarettes and felt like I missed out on a lot of social opportunities. So I was always looking for avenues to make friends. I tattooed someone for fun, a chubby dolphin, and it turned out really good. It took awhile before I took it seriously but I did start packing up a little stick-and-poke kit wherever I went. Eventually I tattooed out of a private studio but I was also a theatrical makeup artist, so nightlife drained most of my energy. Between the two, I discovered that I love working with people's bodies. I think it's endlessly fascinating. Skin is crazy, bodies are wild, people love to see themselves transformed. People love the chance to talk about transformation. For a long time I thought I needed to go back to school to be an art therapist or something. I've kind of checked that box; what I needed was to have these conversations with people about themselves.

**You started as long-distance friends and now you're sharing a studio space. How has your relationship shifted?**

AG: Our collaboration used to be so much figuring out when we would cross paths next. Which actually did happen a lot. But since I moved to New York last year we don't have to make big decisions over long phone calls.

SR: Right before COVID happened, we were like, what should we name the spot? How much do we want to spend on materials and rent? Of course all that's important but our perspective had to suddenly change. It became impossible to look for a space let alone know if we could ever tattoo again. It was even hard for me to draw flash. So Body Spells started taking up more mental space for us. We developed a language around it and that became the meat of our physical space (which right now is a private studio).

AG: We want the new space to become like a third-party collaborator, the manifestation of the work we put into the project.

**What does your ideal working space look like?**

AG: A window is important.

SR: The drawings themselves literally happen on a piece of paper by the bed or on the back of a receipt with a crayon. It's just wherever we are. So we always come together with this pile of weird shit. We need a space to spread out. We recently upgraded and got iPads, but we used to require a light table in our working space. We overlap our images on there and Xerox them. By coincidence we have a similar way of sketching and refining. We've guested at shops that literally didn't have a pen and we were like, "Uh, how do you guys draw your tattoos?"

**Once the card is made, how is it determined who tattoos which parts?**

SK: I think we're probably unique in that we like to abandon ownership. I could see that not working for other artists.

AG: Often I'm tattooing something that Sam drew and she's tattooing something that I drew, which is so cool to see how the lines change with the method. The whole thing is there's really no separation after the card is made. Body Spells is the author.

Body Spells 5 things:

Hilma af Klint

Alice Coltrane

horror musicals

fizzy cola Haribos

*Meditations On the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism* by Anonymous

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