



HUGO BOSS PRIZE WINNER ANICKA YI IS FORCING THE ART WORLD TO TAKE SCENTS SERIOUSLY

The surprise winner of the prestigious artist prize is bringing all her senses to the Guggenheim.

by [Alexandra Pechman](#)
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On a cold, rainy New York morning after the Hugo Boss Prize party at the Guggenheim last week, the artist Anicka Yi was mulling over the events of the night before, and her thoughts immediately went to her people.

"It's the kind of place that you do need your friends and family, I think, because you just feel really unmoored," Yi said of the celebrity-packed party, where she learned that she won the \$100,000 prize along with a solo exhibition next April at the museum. Her reaction after being awarded what is considered among the most prestigious international prizes for a contemporary artist might have seemed odd, but for those who know Yi's work, it was a fitting sentiment.

Yi's art deals with networks, dialogue, and populations through unlikely materials — namely smell, as well as flavor, bacteria, and perishable matter. Her works are more likely to breed, fester, or waft away than be carried off as collectible art objects — like an installation in which a book dangles burning over a burning flame, a portal imbued with scent, or a sculpture made of kombucha leather in the process of decomposing.

The choice of the 45-year-old Yi to receive the prize surprised some art world insiders, who might have thought first of the politically topical work of the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, or that of esteemed choreographer-cum-artist Ralph Lemon, both finalists. Others in contention included painter Laura Owens, who has been featured in the Venice Biennale and Whitney Biennial, as well as Mark Leckey and Wael Shawky, who each have had solo shows at MoMA PS1 in the past year. Yi has only had a handful of solo shows, mostly in the past two years. But much like the processes reflected in her work itself, the results have been viral. Her 2015 solo exhibition at The Kitchen in New York, "You Can Call Me F," made waves for its novel use of live bacteria (the rank smell of which drifted through the galleries) collected from women in her art world social circle. Her 2015 show at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, "6,070,430K of Digital Spit," was expanded and brought to the Kunsthalle Basel later that year. Most recently, she comes off her first solo exhibition in Germany, at the Fridericianum, which just closed last month. The show, "Jungle Stripe," includes a video work, *The Flavor Genome*, about a trek for taste. "Flavor chemists are illusionists," the narrator begins, adding later: "We could bottle these emotions for a functional apocalypse."

Yi's practice isn't even all about art objects. Previously, she put out a podcast, focused on feminism in the post-Occupy climate, and one of her first major exhibitions centered around a perfume she created using a narrative about the former leader of the Japanese Red Army.

"One of the reasons I've been attracted to olfaction is because we know so little about it," Yi said. "If there was more information or more objective truths around it, I wouldn't have to be so vigilant. Because it's hard to agree, and the language just isn't there. We don't have a way of talking about all things olfactive... It's always analogy based. Like, 'Oh, that smells citrusy.' But if you've never smelled citrus, how would you know what that is?"

Born in Seoul, Yi grew up in Florida and in Southern California before moving to New York 20 years ago. Now she calls the city her hometown: "It's the essence of who I am. It's psychic. It's cultural. It's habitual. It's reflexes." Her relationship with science and smell, however, was not planned; she has no science background and was a self-described bad chemistry student.

Her interest in smell owes a large part to the research of the art historian Caroline A. Jones, who wrote an essay on Yi's work for the Hugo Boss Prize catalog, declaring: "Welcome to biofiction, nose to nose with Anicka Yi." Jones's 2005 book *Eyesight Alone*, on midcentury critic Clement Greenberg, marked a turning point for Yi.

"A lot of their anxieties came from their repression around smell," Yi said of modernist critics like Greenberg. "It just floored me when I read this book. I'd never read anyone's take on modernism through the other senses."

Over the years, Yi has developed a close working relationship with MIT in order to carry out her olfactive inquires, and she works on many of her projects collaboratively with scientists there.

"There's a saying, 'Once you enter MIT, you never really leave,'" she said of the university, where she gives talks, works in the labs, and forges relationships with grad students. "The science was a necessity more than anything because I needed answers. And what do you do? How do you educate yourself? You have to knock on a lot of doors."

Ideally, her upcoming solo show at the Guggenheim will relate to new scent-related projects she is currently developing with MIT.

Her work, in her words, aims to "re-shift the focus of this hierarchical system with humans on the top and all the organisms on the bottom," she explained. "The bacteria pieces definitely foreground that... This organism has been around and will be around long after humans are gone, and we should just acknowledge it." It's a surprising notion from a contemporary artist in New York, particularly given that her interest in matters on an organism level often means that her pieces possess almost zero shelf life. But to her there is poetry in life cycles. "I'm in awe of that kind of power and potential," she said.