

Using scents and chemicals—not to mention hormonal snails, tempura flowers, and bacterial growths—Anicka Yi is experimenting with the art world’s boundaries.

BY ANDREW RUSSETH PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADRIAN GAUT STYLED BY NORA MILCH

The artist Anicka Yi is sitting in her plant-filled dining room talking about the quixotic inventor Elon Musk. “He’s like, ‘Why would you want flying cars?’” she says, speaking animatedly about Musk’s idea to bore tunnels beneath Los Angeles for high-speed transport. “They’re super-heavy and noisy as all hell. And then, God forbid a hubcap falls and decapitates an entire school of children crossing the street. So, really, the future is underground, not overhead.”

Yi’s “jam,” as she puts it, is biology, because “that’s where the answers are.” But as she outlines Musk’s myriad visions, including his efforts to reuse rockets for space trips, she can’t deny he is “on to something. And I don’t even like space. It’s just cold death.” She’s wearing jeans, white socks with pink flop-flops, and a Balenciaga necklace strung with large keys. As the winter sun sets through the windows of her apartment in Long Island City, New York, she adds, “But I care about the *drive*. I care about the *risk-taking*. Those attributes are really appealing to artists.”

No one, it must be said, would accuse Yi of lacking in either department. In just a decade of showing art, the 47-year-old has cut a remarkable and unusual swath through the art world. For her 2014 solo show “Divorce,” at 47 Canal gallery, in New York, she presented hormone-injected snails in scattered cardboard packing boxes, DVDs dripping with honey partially embedded in the walls, and the chambers of two clothes dryers containing scents made in collaboration with the French perfumer Christophe Laudamiel. One scent, as she explained in an accompanying text, was redolent of “prehistoric wetland, brackish vegetation, offshore breeze, yellow-throated bullfrog.” The total effect was unsettling—a deliriously oblique scene of upended life, with substances and organisms in search of connection. But Yi’s eclecticism is not mere novelty. Changing over time, decaying or blooming in unpredictable ways, her output engages the politics and personal resonance of chemicals, bacteria, and other overlooked entities, plumbing a moment that feels precarious and off-balance and taking on issues as disparate as gender inequity and environmental degradation.

Yi was just back from a research visit to Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. She has shown prominently in Basel, Lyon, Miami, and Hong Kong, and last year she appeared in the Whitney Biennial and had a solo exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York—her 10th one-person exhibition in seven years—after winning the 2016 Hugo Boss Prize. Now she seems to be shifting her attention. She recently canceled two planned shows so that she can restructure her studio and escape the pattern of doing one show after another. “There’s so much more to being an artist than just making exhibitions,” she says.

For Yi, new projects entail creating whole new universes through scientific research. Though she says it wasn’t planned, scent has emerged as her trademark: She likens her first olfactory discoveries to “getting the flu or some virus that you can’t shake so easily, so then you must surrender to it. There is so little we know about olfaction—that is why I am so compelled to understand, communicate, and extend the field.” In 2014, at the Cleveland Museum of Art, Yi made tempura-fried flowers in gallons of peanut oil, placing some atop a red turtle-neck, in lieu of a head. “Even a seasoned art viewer is going to recoil at first at this idea of having to smell something,” says Beau Rutland, that exhibition’s curator. “Anicka’s work makes you uncomfortable because it’s asking things of the viewer—not just to view.” The following year, Yi upped the ante considerably by gathering live bacteria from 100 female art world peers, who were asked to swab their various orifices. These samples, cultured using agar in a vitrine at the Kitchen art and performance space, in New York, became a wild abstraction of fuzzy gray circles, hazy fields, and

blood orange swirls. “The smell was very overwhelming,” Lumi Tan, a curator at the Kitchen, says, recalling how the piece grew before the show’s start. “The amount of air fresheners—I just ordered boxes and boxes and installed them all over the building.” Yi, barely containing her laughter, remembers a man on opening night exclaiming, “It smells like feces in here! I’m going to throw up! I need to leave!”

In fact, the odor was considerably contained at that point, because by then the growths had been sealed in Plexiglas. Still, a man disturbed by the presence of women’s bacteria highlights the sociological underpinnings of Yi’s art. “This very fierce feminist critique in the work is, by the day, more and more relevant,” says Katherine Brinson, who co-curated “Life Is Cheap,” Yi’s 2017 Guggenheim show. “She’s done scintillating work around fears of female networking and female potency and the female body.” Elsewhere in the gallery, diffusers let out a crisp, sterile scent formulated in collaboration with Sean Raspet, another olfactory-minded artist, channeling the smell that Yi collected inside a branch of the rather male-artist-dominated Gagosian gallery.

Born in Seoul in 1971, Yi, the third of four sisters, moved to the United States when she was 2, living first in Alabama, then Florida, and finally Southern California. Her mother worked for a biomedical firm, and her dad was an engineer who became a Presbyterian preacher, though an unsuccessful one, which meant the family “had to keep moving around between congregations,” Yi says. “Early on, it just infected my world: that kind of failure, that kind of misery and depression.”

She studied film theory at UCLA but never earned a degree, and in 1992 decamped to London with a fashion-photographer boyfriend, and did styling jobs and copywriting. “I didn’t choose any of those conventional paths that open up the next phase of your life,” says Yi, whose younger sister leads a monastic existence in Kathmandu. In 1996, she moved to New York after a friend proffered a \$500-a-month one-bedroom in the East Village. “I was just really unhappy in London,” she says. “I felt like I didn’t really fit in.” She took film-studies classes at Hunter College and fell in with art types, eventually making off-the-wall videos with the artist Josh Kline and the creative designer Jon Santos under the name Circular File. “We were doing these rogue pieces, projecting videos on the New Museum before it was open and soliciting casting from Craigslist. It was a lot of early Internet stuff. We wanted to be a functional TV studio.”

Yi speaks lovingly of that free-floating time, which produced early works that now look a bit like alien artifacts or absurdist jokes. A light box covered with potato chips and Cheetos dust, made in 2010, anticipates the look of her later bacteria pieces. A 2011 collaboration with the artist Ajay Kurian involved a bread-dough floor that was baked into loaves after being kneaded by congregants at a reception. Those improbable works have led to more sophisticated experiments, but a nimble mischievousness continues to pervade her practice. A few years back, Yi was in Los Angeles visiting Raspet when they decided to do a renegade project together, mixing a scent to release at a branch of Abercrombie & Fitch that would replace the store’s famously fulsome aroma. “I was interested in how you could really do social activism with smell,” she explains. Raspet describes it as “a very organic, living scent”—so much

Anicka Yi, in her Brooklyn studio with her works *When Species Meet Part 1 (Shine or Go Crazy)*, 2016, and *When Keeping It Real Goes Wrong*, 2017 (foreground). Yi wears a Simone Rocha shirt dress; the Row pants; Lagos jewelry; her own bracelet (right wrist); Céline shoes.





so that “they shut down the store,” Yi recalls, mirthfully, “because they smelled gasoline. The fire marshal came; everything. We were like, ‘Okay, we’ve got to go now.’” Though no gasoline notes were used, Yi says that she is always amazed by how readily people fear for their health “when they get a whiff of something that they feel is unpleasant or foreign.”

With each new show, Yi seems to assemble an ad hoc team more specialized than the last. In the run-up to “Life Is Cheap,” a London art dealer suggested to Yi that she meet his half-brother, Filippo Mancia, a biochemist and structural biologist at Columbia University Medical Center who had studied olfaction. “I thought it would be interesting for my lab to have an opening to art,” Mancia recalls, “so I invited Anicka to present at my regular lab meetings.” Pretty soon, his grad students were working with Yi, coming up with a way to grow lavender- and peach-colored bacteria in a vitrine, making it act like ever-evolving paint. (All of it eventually had to be refrigerated to prevent a health hazard.) “Life Is Cheap” also included a colony of 10,000 ants that Yi created inside a network of computer parts. Ants, as she points out, communicate via scent, so she tapped two perfumers—Raspet and the Frenchman Barnabé Fillion—to each make a fragrance that combined the aroma of an ant with that of an Asian-American woman. (Fillion discussed stereotypes about smell and race with Yi, before settling on a blend that was, as she has described it, “vegetal and floral, with notes of cedar, hay, cumin, and cellophane,” for the woman, and “citrusy and meaty” for the ants.) Yi later mixed the two smells and spritzed the resulting concoction onto visitors as they entered the installation.

“Telling a story with chemicals” is how Yi describes her work, which, despite its volatile components, is coveted by top collectors. Among them are Mera and Don Rubell, of the Rubell Family Collection/Contemporary Arts Foundation, in Miami. They own several pieces, including a plastic quarantine bubble filled with a large totem of tempura-fried flowers—the grand offspring of that tempura-flower sweater. Mera sees Yi as part of a group of artists who are “dealing with man’s survival on earth.” Acknowledging the tricky conservation issues associated with their output, Rubell notes, “What are you going to say to these artists? Stop using vulnerable materials? Make sure it lasts forever?” »

Objects and tools in her studio. Below: A detail of *When Species Meet Part 3* (Sessile), 2016.



HAIR BY RUBI LONES AT JULIAN WATSON AGENCY; MAKEUP BY DEANNA MELLUSO FOR CHANEL ROUGE COCO AT SEE MANAGEMENT; PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT: CHRISTIAN STRAND; FASHION ASSISTANT: MICHELLE PELLETIER; WHEN SPECIES MANAGEMENT; LIFESTYLE WARS: DAVID HEALD/SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM FOUNDATION; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND 47 CANAL, NEW YORK; INSTALLATION: PHILIPP HÄNGER; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, 47 CANAL, NEW YORK, AND KUNSTHALLE BASEL.

From top: Yi, in her studio; a detail of *Lifestyle Wars*, 2017, at New York’s Guggenheim Museum; an installation view of *7,070,430K of Digital Spit*, at the Kunsthalle Basel, 2015. Yi wears a Pleats Please Issey Miyake top; Lagos earrings and bracelets (left wrist); her own bracelet (right wrist).

These days Yi is throwing herself into new projects with an urgency spurred, in part, by the recent death of one of her sisters, after a three-year fight with colon cancer. “There’s just too much I want to communicate, and we’re all losing time—as a species, as individuals,” she says. One involves a perfume line (in development with Fillion) focused on semifamous and notorious women, such as Hatshepsut, the second female pharaoh of ancient Egypt, and the Chinese-American human smuggler Sister Ping, who died in federal prison in 2014. Shigenobu Twilight, created with the architect Maggie Peng and referencing Fusako Shigenobu, the imprisoned former leader of the revolutionary group Japanese Red Army, is the first of a new series that will be launched next year at Dover Street Market in New York. “They are bold characters, very brave and courageous,” Yi says. “But morally speaking, they’re not necessarily the kind of people you put on postage stamps.”

This year, Yi is being featured in two group shows: “In Tune With the World,” at the Fondation Louis Vuitton, in Paris (through August 27), and “The Marvellous Cacophony,” at the Belgrade City Museum (September 15 through October 28). There is also a virtual-reality piece she’s developing as her work becomes more concerned with “notions of artificial intelligence” through her explorations into biotech and genetic engineering. “VR is literally going to be ubiquitous in five years—like smartphones,” she says. For now, the art world provides fertile ground for her interdisciplinary experiments, but Yi sees her role as bridging gaps between disparate fields, and it’s easy to imagine her spiraling off into new realms. As her reputation has grown, so has her ability to connect with other thinkers. “I want a seat at the table of innovation, with people who are really moving the needle forward,” she says with casual determination. “I don’t want to rest.” ♦

