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Willfully Metabolizing: Anicka Yi Mixes Bacteria and Feminism at the Kitchen

BY THEA BALLARD, MODERN PAINTERS | MARCH 04, 2015



Anicka Yi in her studio.
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“Most of my work has a strong narrative component,” says Anicka Yi, sitting in her Sunset Park studio, which — thanks to a fish tank containing a SCOBY (the symbiotic colony of bacteria and yeast that acts as the “mother” for kombucha), but one of many unusual materials in her upcoming show at the Kitchen, opening this month — bears a faint smell of vinegar. “It’s very hard for me to work with a hermetic formal approach. My practice is very much about me being in and responding to the world, whether it’s autobiographical or ripped from the headlines.”

For this exhibition, Yi — who has long taken an interest in hygiene, often via scent — was spurred by the ongoing Ebola crisis, pairing concerns about public safety with notions of the personal and private. Specifically, she says, “the idea was to parallel the growing paranoia of feminism with the language of contagion, viewing it as a deeply threatening societal disease.”

A number of overlapping parts developed: Using the aforementioned SCOBY to create a paper-thin “leather,” she is constructing quarantine tents, which will house incubating lizard eggs. (Of the eggs, she says, “I wanted to heighten the sense of a gestation period. And they’re shockingly easy to acquire!”) Yi also invited 100 women with whom she’s had personal contact to contribute bacterial samples, and with the help of a synthetic biologist from MIT, where she began a residency in October, she will use them to engineer and grow a superbacterium. This organism will in turn provide the base for a scent that she projects will be “not that funky but unpleasantish, maybe stale.” However, she’ll also pit that odor against a different synthetic smell, “a masculine one.”

Yi's residency, and the bridge to the science community it provided, came at a key point in the development of her practice, which has long held ties to scientific concerns both materially and conceptually. She recalls a chemist friend advising her to use Crisco, rather than butter, to grease the walls of a Zürich gallery, as its synthetic nature makes it less prone to rotting. The notion of bacteria began surfacing in her work a few years ago, when she began her soap paintings: transparent glycerin hunks containing petri dishes and other colorful objects. "I'd been interested for a while in bacteria, it being the genesis of life but also having this very negative reputation," she explains. "Being Korean, I'm also familiar with fermentation and that culture." Works developed through a negotiation of both aesthetic and material-based problem solving; for example, Yi learned early on that glycerin is a humectant, meaning it draws moisture to itself and even sweats in the warmer months. She added sodium silicate — a "dessicant, what you put in those packets of potato chips so they stay crisp," but also a visually pleasing bead-like material — to her works, an early chemical experiment, later adding a coating of resin to trap in moisture.

"I refer to a lot of my work as stomachs," she explains, pointing out various materials collected on a table in the studio that have or will enter the micro-systems she creates within her soap works. "I've been working with metabolisms for the past five or six years. The stomach is the second brain, gut instincts, things like that. But also metabolisms throughout social life, in terms of willfully metabolizing yourself into different systems, and also being metabolizing, willfully or not." Similar, then, is the network she's incubating at the Kitchen — containing shades of both utopian female space and the patriarchal violence that circulates around such efforts.

"There are a lot of layers to this show, but the main point is that I wanted to highlight and investigate women together: Is a group of a hundred women threatening?" asks Yi. "Society's attitudes tend to point toward yes." The urgency with which she approaches the topic of female networks comes not only from her interaction with art world misogyny — something she also addresses in her ongoing podcast "Lonely Samurai," which features conversations with mostly female art world figures — but also from her interactions with the scientific community, similarly plagued, she points out, by a deep-rooted hierarchical structure. "We're in a climate where we don't even give each other permission to talk about this; you're supposed to be happy with what you have. I think that's stunting a lot of communication, a lot of further progress that's desperately needed," she notes. "Why hasn't there been a female mafia?"

A version of this story appears in the March 2015 issue of Modern Painters.