

Anicka Yi's Strangely Persuasive World of Smells

The artist's Guggenheim show uses olfactory experiments to overturn assumptions about gender, race, and hygiene.

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June, 2017



A detailed image of Anicka Yi's *Force Majeure* (2017), made of Plexiglas, aluminum, agar, bacteria, refrigeration system, LED lights, glass, epoxy resin, powder coated stainless steel, light bulbs, digital clocks, silicone, and silk flowers

David Heald / Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

There's a reason museum-goers pause at the entrance to *Life Is Cheap*, Anicka Yi's current show at the Guggenheim. A faint scent greets them, emanating at intervals from a set of metal canisters positioned next to the gated entryway. It's slightly antiseptic but sweet—not enough to be disruptive, but disorienting nonetheless. And so, the day I visited, it was common to see casual viewers take a moment to acclimate themselves, to figure out whether they were turned off by the perfumed odor hanging in the air, or charmed. Either way, to see the exhibit, you need to inhale.

The scent is, in fact, an artwork called *Immigrant Caucus*, and is made, according to the wall text, from “chemical compounds derived from Asian American women and carpenter ants.” If the description sounds odd or nonsensical, consider its creator. Yi, a Seoul-born, Queens-based artist who is crafting some of today's most intriguing experimental art, is interested in the common psychology of smells: the sort of appointment viewing that unifies people in a space, while allowing for myriad interpretations. In the past few years, the artist has worked with a synthetic biologist to create a pungent piece made of microbial samples (swabbed from the cheeks and vaginas of women artists), filled a gallery with the scent of menthol, and fried up inedible flowers coated in tempura batter. With each project, Yi appears to be intrigued by olfaction's ability to manipulate how people discern the things in front of them—by, in effect, the subtle invasiveness of smell.

In fiddling with perception, Yi operates at an intensely timely moment, when the language of persuasion plays out explicitly across newspaper opinion pages and on Facebook feeds. Her deep dive into the mind-altering possibilities of smells suggests a totally different way of taking up space and legitimizing a point of view (in this case, that of an ant, an immigrant woman, or some combination of both). Yi calls her work a “biopolitics of the senses,” and indeed she seems intent on cheerily debunking a variety of hierarchies—whether of gender or citizenship or cleanliness—through some strangely winsome world-building.

The Guggenheim show represents the culmination of Yi's Hugo Boss Prize win in 2016 (edging out more established artists like Tania Bruguera and Mark Leckey). The set-up is simple: Two dioramas face each other in a cozy but high-ceilinged room. One, *Force Majeure*, continues a preoccupation the artist has long had with bacteria, in this case gathered and cultivated from sites in Manhattan's Chinatown and Koreatown. A lively, moldy growth of varied colors—blues, greens, pinks, and marigold yellows—creeps over framed silk flowers and agar plates. Up close, the spotted surfaces remind you of high-school lab experiments. From afar, the colorful drips and dots create a delicate, living mural, a sly comment, perhaps, on what gets perceived as lovely, and why.



Anicka Yi's *Lifestyle Wars* (2017), which incorporates elements including ants, glitter, aquarium gravel, and imitation pearls. (David Heald / Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.)

The walls of the other diorama, *Lifestyle Wars*, are essentially a maze filled with live ants; the same scent visitors are smelling is piped into the display. In the middle, a tangle of Ethernet cables, aquarium gravel, and imitation pearls create a graphic, black-and-white bizarre world reminiscent of the surface of a motherboard. Yi was apparently drawn to ants for their matriarchal societal structures, and the efficacy of their labor; the work as a whole suggests an intricate technological system, made up of both organic and synthetic parts. The scent connects viewers to the ants, a kind of invisible force that pulls everyone onto the same playing field.

Both pieces illuminate Yi's interest in building rich, sensory universes that undercut common assumptions (for instance, that mold is disgusting, ants are tiny and therefore trifling, and art spaces should not smell of anything). Yi has tweaked such expectations before: In her 2015 show, *You Can Call Me F*, at the experimental art space The Kitchen, the artist used the stigma of disease and fear of contagion as metaphors for how society sanitizes women—cue the tampon and deodorant ads—by erecting quarantine tents alongside a “collective bacteria” created from women's DNA samples. (Things went beyond metaphor, with a musky odor from the latter permeating the room over the course of the show.)

Yi's extreme, almost academic, focus on her chosen themes could be off-putting, but it's paired with a refreshingly humane curiosity. This sensibility was on full display in a video

of hers included in this year's Whitney Biennial. *The Flavor Genome* (2016) was a peculiar, gorgeous travelogue: Half-surrealist manifesto, half-documentary, the 22-minute fictive work follows a "flavor chemist" into the Amazon. A woman narrates the journey in ornate, quasi-scientific language, discussing the possibilities of a drug derived from a mythical flower that might be able to produce empathy in humans. (As Yi has said, "And if you take this drug you can perceive what it's like to be a pink dolphin or an angry teenager.") It was one of the more audacious and convincing examples of narrative-driven art that I'd seen in some time.

The bulk of Yi's work (even *The Flavor Genome*, with its deliriously obsessive search for an elusive flower essence) underscores a desire to push back against a world that so prizes what the eye can see—and to explore, thoughtfully and with no small amount of joy, the lesser senses. This is a hard sell in the art world, as the concurrent show of mostly paintings by masters from the Guggenheim's collection (Picasso, Modigliani, Kandinsky, and the like) makes eminently clear. But *Life Is Cheap* makes a strong case for Yi to continue deepening the singular story she's been telling over the years.

With *Immigrant Caucus* in particular, museum-goers will grasp what Yi means when she says, "Smell is a form of sculpture because it has a lot of volume. Also, it collapses the distance that painting has built into it—it's like, 'Look, but don't touch, and keep your distance.'" Smell is also a really good stand-in for intolerance of other sorts. Because smell is most certainly more than itself: It's a thing that, as it pertains to humans, gets tangled so often and so much with ethnicity and identity and class: Who sweats? Who showers? Who works all day on their feet with no air conditioning? Who steps from temperature-controlled apartment to temperature-controlled cab to temperature-controlled office? Who handles fish? Who then eats in on a pristine plate?

And so, that scent being spritzed from the canisters in the Guggenheim does many things at once. It pulls from sites that are seen as gross (say, a toilet handle in Chinatown) and translates that grossness into something that is a little more appealing, a little more sweet, but that still, indubitably, retains something of its origins. And then it enters your nostrils.