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Scent of a Woman

BY ANDREA K. SCOTT



Anicka Yi's "Grabbing at Newer Vegetables." Photography Courtesy Jason Mandella

The sculptor Anicka Yi's radical if not entirely successful new show at the Kitchen, "You Can Call Me F," starts with a bait and switch: a photographic close-up of a woman's ass, nearly grazed by the blade of a big knife that she holds in her hand. Her cheeks are coated with a crusty blue-green that evokes the patina on a bronze sculpture. The image, which appears on the show's announcement card, could be a companion to Marcel Duchamp's "L.H.O.O.Q.," a 1919 "assisted readymade" named for the letters the artist wrote on a postcard of the Mona Lisa. Read them out loud and, if you're French—"Elle a chaud au cul"—you've just said (roughly translated), "she has a hot ass." The ass in Yi's photograph may be hot, but it's also moldy—that's not patina, it's fungus. Or so the Kitchen's intrepid associate curator, Lumi Tan, told me. (Tan worked with Yi on the show.)

Duchampian strategies and women's bodies are both central to Yi's exhibition. But the erotic allure of the picture amounts to an F You to salacious male expectations. The most powerful representation of bodies in the show proper isn't something you see, it's something you smell—living bacteria—and the odor is rather off-putting. In the months leading up to the show, Yi, currently a visiting artist at M.I.T.'s Center for Art, Science, and Technology, invited a hundred women she knows professionally—artists, writers, art historians, curators, dealers—to provide her with samples, collected with cotton swabs. Where each volunteer swabbed her own body was a matter of choice, with locations reportedly ranging from the mouth and the hands to, yes, the vagina. Once all the samples were in, Tal Danino, a postdoctoral fellow in bioengineering at M.I.T., synthesized the material into a single bacterium.

The entrance to the gallery is dark except for a glowing vitrine. From afar, it seems empty. But when you reach it, look down and you'll see a rectangular slab of agar on which the show's title is faintly blooming, painted with the bacteria. (If you're having a hard time picturing this, you can watch a time-lapse video of a similar project, a bit of stunt marketing for the movie "Contagion.") Visitors who wander into the gallery without benefit of the backstory aren't likely to glean much from the piece, beyond the fact that it stinks and that it plants a flag for the non-retinal art championed by Duchamp. (And any time an artist relies on our sense of smell, there are inevitable affinities with Duchamp's perfume piece "Belle Haleine (Beautiful Breath).") Yi's sculpture is titled "Grabbing at Newer Vegetables," a line from John Ashbery's poem "Boundary Issues," a fitting reference for a work that pushes the boundary of what can be art, as it dissolves other boundaries completely, merging a hundred individual women into a single-celled micro-organism in a feminist cri de coeur.