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Guest Blogger: Interview with Anicka Yi by “Mad Perfumista” Katherine Chan



I Decided To Give Birth To You Under An Apple Tree

(Shigenobu Twilight Launch Exhibition, 2008)

Editor's note: One of my favorite perfume blogs is [Mad Perfumista](#) because the woman behind the sobriquet, Katherine Chan, brings a new perspective to writing about fragrance. As a contemporary art dealer she sees fragrance as olfactory art from a whole different point of view. I asked her to do a guest piece and I am very happy that she agreed. -MB

I've often wondered aloud on my [blog](#) if there could be a movement within the perfume world for an anti-commercial, anti-aesthetic avant garde movement to emerge. When I think of avant garde designers in the apparel world, my mind goes to Japan, to Comme des Garçons, Yohji Yamamoto, and Issey Miyake. For decades these icons have challenged

conventional notions regarding the body as dictated by Western fashion. They prefer line and volume over color and exposure of the skin and body. Through the use of non-traditional fabrics and construction techniques, these minimal designers sculpt clothes that de-emphasize the body, expanding the field of fashion into art and architecture.



Nuts in May (2010)

Successful perfumes and fashion must have one important characteristic: wearability. As mass-produced consumer goods, most perfumers shoot for a common denominator. [In an interview by Denyse Beaulieu of Grain de Musc with Antoine Lie](#), the creator of Etat Libre d'Orange's *Sécrétions Magnifiques*, the scent that everyone seems to love to hate. Lie states, "Etienne de Swardt wanted to make a provocative, unconventional perfume which would break the codes and that might only please five people in the world."



By Acceptable Substitute I Mean One Acceptable To Me

(Shigenobu Twilight Installation, 2009)

As the transgressiveness of perfumery gives way to “celebuscents” to boost the multibillion dollar fragrance industry, contemporary visual artists are increasingly turning to it as an expressive medium. Shigenobu Twilight is the creation of artist Anicka Yi and architect Maggie Peng. Enclosed by a fragrant wood case that could have been sculpted by Brancusi, notes of cedar wood and oud meld with the bright crispness of shiso and yuzu, contrasting hard and soft, dark and light. Shigenobu Twilight poetically pays homage to the Japanese Red Army faction leader Fusako Shigenobu. The Japanese Red Army was a militant Marxist group intent on catalyzing a global socialist revolution. Shigenobu moved to Lebanon in 1971, and has been accused of plotting the bombing of the Tel Aviv airport in 1972 that killed 26 people. Shigenobu stayed in Lebanon for thirty years until she was arrested in Japan in 2000.



Shigenobu Twilight Packaging

It is Fusako Shigenobu's incredible story that inspired Yi and Peng to create the perfume in 2008. *Twilight* is part of a larger oeuvre by Anicka Yi, whose art centers on sensorial experience. Resistant to the monolithic discourse of monumental, male-dominated Modernism, Yi prefers to engage all of the senses to tap into our experience of the world. Substances simmer in aluminum pots, oil oozes down walls from punctured holes, tempura fried flowers leech oil onto pristine turtleneck shirts. Yi's works are ephemeral—after each gallery or museum exhibition, the works are dismantled and destroyed. The artist states: “In terms of objects, I am interested in coded, yet unstable, often perishable or volatile materials. Many of my techniques could be seen as the application of culinary methodologies to indigestible materials, a form of traumatization (deep-frying) that underscores the vulnerability of objects to time and violence, and the “shelf-life” of ideas, objects, and trends.”



Empty Nest (2010)

Artists like Anicka Yi and Lisa Kirk ([who I wrote about previously in this post](#)) have made perfume as a new way to address an audience. Though Kirk reformulated Revolution, the scented artwork she exhibited at Participant Inc., to produce a commercial version, Yi and Peng had no intention of making it a viable business. Instead of coming up with ideas and approaching a fragrance and flavor company to produce a scent, Yi approached the process as one would as an artist with a burning idea: from scratch. During an interview I conducted with Yi in her Williamsburg, Brooklyn apartment, Yi described the process of learning how to create a perfume. She states:



Shigenobu Twilight Infused Gummies

As an artist, you don't think twice about doing something. If you have an idea, you figure out how to do it, how to get it actualized. This is how all of this is possible. If I thought about how long people train to become noses, the apparatus, and equipment, not to mention the multibillion dollar industry. It's quite daunting when you think about it, but it's so subjective, so that makes it possible to do something.



GLHF (2012)

Yi spent days in her apartment, experimenting with oils, chemical compounds, and solvents, stumbling in the dark. She and Peng stole into a lab at Sarah Lawrence College and tried to distill cedar, yuzu, and shiso. She says, "It was hilarious because we had to use so much to yield so little. It's the equivalent of painters grinding their own pigment in order to make a painting. The initial experience was comical, like, are we kidding?"



Excuse Me Your Necklace Is Leaking

(2011 Installation)

Fascinated by the subjectivity of the act of smelling, she hoped to narrate a story through scent. In speaking of Fusako Shigenobu, Yi says, "I was really captivated by her story and by the utter metamorphosis one can create with fragrance and narrative. It can come from this memory machine we call the perfume industry. The narrative has been really limited in terms of the beauty, fashion house, celebrity, athlete narrative. It wasn't that I set out to do something different, it was just a lot more subjective and personal. I wasn't trying to change the perfume world. It was something I wanted to do for myself."

-Katherine Chan aka [Mad Perfumista](#), Guest Post

All photos and art by Anicka Yi

Editor's Note 2: Thanks to Katherine for introducing me to Anicka Yi. I just had to include Anicka Yi's description of the installation called "Excuse Me Your Necklace Is Leaking" as it is another fascinating experiment in fragrance by this artist.

"Perfume, beer, and mouthwash were individually aged in these oak barrels for the duration of the exhibition. Their structural flavor and scent were significantly altered by the oak vessel, pushing, transforming its materialism, its identity into a unique sensorial metamorphosis. The three liquids/scents signify different meaning as they entangle, overlap in a narrative on aging,

rape, malaria, dissidents, the body in crisis. Their function is sculptural, linguistic, in order to tap into memory, intangibility, synesthesia, presence through absence. One barrel is a concept of rape: a forced hybrid, liquid commingling; classic perfume (Guerlain) Shalimar is invaded by (Dsquared2) HeWood fragrance. Another barrel is a concept of political dissidence in the form of Tsing Tao beer and the other is a concept of malaria and failing livers with the mouthwash. Salt crystals were grown throughout the floor of the installation. by the exhibition's end, the liquid was packaged as an original fragrance."