

REVIEWS JUN. 10, 2015

Anicka Yi

NEW YORK,
at The Kitchen

by Joseph Henry

In the fall of 2011, the marketing team of Steven Soderbergh's thriller *Contagion* tried a novel advertising tactic. They commissioned a laboratory to design bacteria and bioluminescent fungi that gradually spelled out the film's title on two billboards in Toronto as they grew. The controlled multiplication on the ads kept pace with the growth of the film's consumer base. The blockbuster's cast featured Gwyneth Paltrow as the tragic patient zero. Paltrow also manages *goop*, an online lifestyle magazine that feeds the bodies of its constituents with tastefully curated food and health endorsements as it feeds off their page views to maintain a viral online presence.

A similar concatenation of gender, body politics, illness and consumption characterized Anicka Yi's exhibition "You Can Call Me F," curated by The Kitchen's Lumi Tan. Yi adopted the billboard strategy from *Contagion*, using bacteria to inscribe her show's title in a glass vitrine in the gallery's antechamber. The letters cohered in smeary, earthy strokes; growths of bio-matter dotted the jaundiced canvas-cum-petri dish. But the bacteria were more than a visual tool: with the help of scientists at MIT, Yi had cultivated microorganisms from the DNA samples of 100 women who work in the art world. Her strain of bacteria is like the goop supporting *goop*, the organic substrate of a cultural slice of the female population.



View of Anicka Yi's exhibition "You Can Call Me F," 2015, at The Kitchen.

The most pervasive feature of Yi's exhibition was its smell. The odor of the bacteria secreted from the vitrine into the main gallery, and was one of two components in a fragrance manufactured by Yi and present throughout the show. In this fragrance, the bacteria's concentrated femininity was tempered by a scent of corporate professionalism, based on a sample from the air at Gagosian Gallery's Madison Avenue location. The result registered somewhere between rotting food and Mrs. Meyer's soap.

A series of freestanding rectangular cells, made of vinyl sheets and steel-pipe frames, populated the space. Resembling quarantine tents, they prohibited entry and limited visibility. Yi's signature combines resided inside: mouthwash, socks and plastic bottles composed one, while another featured beeswax, dried shrimp, hair gel and seaweed. Graphic insignia that evoked the biohazard symbol as well as Gabriel Orozco's geometric abstract paintings stretched across the vinyl barriers; the tempered-bacteria scent wafted from diffusers hidden beneath spinning motorcycle helmets. Bright work lights and dimmed house lighting provided dramatic contrast.

Yi's work often joins careful sculptural composition with a devoted attention to the properties of her materials. Organic matter and low-key readymades sit in uneasy tension. While white-cube settings have in the past reified Yi's installations into overdetermined investigations of texture and object, the theatrics at *The Kitchen* intensified her style into a provocative political *mise-en-scène*.

Yi enacted what feminist theory has labeled "strategic essentialism": she constructed a reductive notion of femininity and staged it as an unruly outbreak of sights and smells. The "scent" of women, a commodified trope of heterosexual romance, engaged the aesthetics of hygiene and control, as the enigmatic matter in each cell threatened to escape its restrictive contexts. In "You Can Call Me F," gender troubled at the level of both bodily presence and subliminal cultural codes.