

Feminism as an Organism | Anicka Yi at The Kitchen

by EMILY EASON on Apr 8, 2015 • 2:46 am



Installation view. Image courtesy of The Kitchen.

Walking through the doorway to The Kitchen's upstairs gallery feels like climbing into a middle school locker on the last day of school; it is very dark and smells of something growing. It is not really a bad scent, just musty and wet, like a garden shed in April. This musty growth that ensoups the viewer is the combination of vaginal bacteria taken from 100 women in the art world (think Juliana Huxtable, K8 Hardy, Bridget Donahue, Stefania Bortolami) and it is a full-bodied scent and sight alike.

In what has become a very successful first solo show, Anicka Yi along with Kitchen curator Lumi Tan have created a multi-sensory exhibition that relies less on seeing and more on smelling to affect the viewer. The exhibition is titled 'You Can Call Me F' and, with help from synthetic biology labs at MIT, consists of a shelf petri dish which receives the viewer in the forward part of the gallery and five quarantine-style tents. The dish is illuminated in a garish yellow-orange glow, and beneath a thick layer of mold/ bacterial growth "YOU CAN CALL ME" is printed in bold letters, the dish then functioning as a placard or billboard for the show. Inside the gallery, the tents are illuminated, three of which contain an oscillating air diffuser inside a motorcycle helmet. This scent—almost undetectable—contains hints of citrus and leather and something a bit heavier, even, than the 100-woman odor. The scent oozing out of the helmets is, by some unimaginable stretch of perfumery skills, the scent of Gagosian gallery. The press release for 'You Can Call Me F' states that Gagosian Gallery is "the ultimate patriarchal-model network in the art world" and through a capture-and-manufacture method of scent recreation, Yi (with help from artist Sean Raspet) has pitted the microbacterial scent of women in the art world against the representational scent of male power in the art world, and thus the tension begins.

The heart of the show is eerie and feels somewhat abandoned. The quarantine tents are lit by neon rings and each tent contains a different, sparse, arrangement of items. The range is from bright blue liquid in bottles to dried shrimp, SCOBY 'leather' (SCOBY being the colony of bacteria and yeast that acts as the "mother" for kombucha), bowls filled with gel beads or plastic letters and many more offbeat objects throughout. The vinyl siding of the structures are dressed in brightly-colored cutouts of shapes which uncomfortably protect their spread of objects within.

Yi is notorious for creating unstable sculptures that deal with states of perishability, usually in dialogue with the body and more likely tinged with twisted humor. Earlier works of hers at 47 Canal include a bubbling soup containing antidepressants, palm tree essence and shaved sea lice, among other things, (*Convex Dialer Double Distance Of A Shining Path*, 2011) as well as a frozen human bust made of deer urine featuring a lamb heart where the brain would be (*forensics and cryonics [what i would like to be if i wasn't what i am, issue #1]*, 2013). But Yi's latest endeavor at The Kitchen has proven to be a not-so-subtle undertaking of gender and gender expectations, appropriately placed after a period of piqued national health anxiety surrounding outbreaks of Ebola.

The tents are in dialogue with containment and sanitation, and Yi has smartly contained the scent of Gagosian within these areas associated with cleanliness, which is furthered by the containment within a male-associated object of safety. Her recreation of Gagosian is quarantined; it is controlled and protected, but most importantly it is diluted beneath the uncontrolled, mingling scent of women. Yi commented on her choice of safe scent, or lack thereof, by stating, "In the West, we equate power, especially power structures, with the absence of smell, because we are so repressed about smell. If you think about the president of the United States, you should not be thinking about a smell."

Through thinking about patriarchal institutions as sanitized and odorless, the narrative of 'You Can Call Me F' seems to rest on the idea that congregations of women are dangerous, dirty and somehow contagious. Yi is very bluntly commenting on the parallel need to scrub away disease the same way powerful, radical women in groups need to be contained and quarantined. However, the tents are set up somewhat like abandoned laboratories and the objects inside are left to collect dust. The Gagosian scent diffuser is left oscillating, quietly humming to itself while the woman bacteria is teeming with life, growing more robust and pungent with each day the exhibition runs. The literal growth of women in art spaces is unfolding in real-time, and the concept of feminism as an organism is powerful as well as potent.

(Through April 11)