

ARTS & CULTURE

Feminist Fumes

April 6, 2015 | by Jane Yong Kim

Anicka Yi's miasmatic art.



Anicka Yi, *Grabbing at Newer Vegetables*, 2015, plexiglas, agar, female bacteria, fungus, 84.5" x 24.5". Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal. Photo: Jason Mandella

In nineteenth-century England, it was believed that the poor, foul-smelling parts of cities were points of origin for disease. The word *malaria* is from the Italian *mal'aria*: "bad air." Cholera was believed to come from decayed organic matter, miasmata. Adherents of miasma theory followed their noses: bad odors, they thought, carried infectious disease. In *The Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population*, published in 1842, the British social reformer Edwin Chadwick proclaimed that smell "generally gives certain warning of the presence of malaria or gases noxious to the health."

The artist Anicka Yi plays with this amorphous, olfactory fear in her show "You Can Call Me F," a meditation on contagion and femininity up through April 11 at The Kitchen. Yi's media are bacteria and smell, and a sense of bodily invasion pervades the exhibition. She worked with cheek swabs from a hundred women—her creative peers, artists, collectors, curators, and the like—to form a bacteria collective that will grow for the duration of the show. It's a sort of feminist ecosystem, powerful but fragile. Quarantine tents dot the dark, barren space, and the scent that permeates it is at once perfumed and antiseptic, redolent of a doctor's office operating out of a woman's bedroom. It's almost pleasant, but it carries an undercurrent of danger: Where does this smell come from, exactly, and where is it going?

At the entrance to the exhibit, working in tandem with the scent, is a billboard-size petri dish teeming with bacterial growth; Yi has daubed it with the a hundred bio-samples. It could be taken as a playful, knowing nod to the minor delirium that that slyly invasive scent instinctively produces. Like the red herring at its most literal, the scent intrigues and bothers us; we can't decide whether it's a treat or a threat. In contrast, the bacteria are a look-at-me reminder of where the true source of infection lies. (Miasma theory, after all, was disproven and gave way to the idea that microorganisms, rather than poisonous vapors, cause disease.)

These bacteria also spell out the show's ambiguous title, "You Can Call Me F," which defies the conventions of scientific nomenclature. To name something is to claim the power of framing: when a smell is dubbed a *miasma*, when a bacterium is filed in its appropriate taxa, each becomes a known quantity, something to be managed, made smaller, scrubbed away, counteracted. Yi's truncated title, spelled out in bacteria, undoes the clinical lens through which we prefer to consider disease. It reinvigorates the mystery and power of infection.

Yi's work on the invisible, tactile qualities of invasion brings to mind the research of Ignaz Semmelweis, an Austrian obstetrician. In 1847, Semmelweis observed that pregnant women had higher rates of postpartum infection when their babies were delivered by doctors or medical students rather than midwives. He concluded that this was because the doctors and medical students were performing autopsies on corpses before attending to the women, whereas the midwives were not. Here is Louis-Ferdinand Céline, assuming Semmelweis's voice in his fictionalized biography of the obstetrician:

It is the fingers of the medical students, soiled by recent dissections, which carry the fatal cadaveric particles into the genital organs of the pregnant women, and especially up to the cervix of the uterus.

Semmelweis came up with a simple solution. "Deodorize the hands," he decided: "the whole problem is there." His peers thought him crazy, but clinics that followed his directive saw declining mortality rates.

"The hands, by their simple contact, may be infectious," he wrote ... From that moment, each student, whether he had been practicing dissection or not during the preceding days, was made to submit to careful disinfection of the hands using a solution of calcium chloride.

The result was immediate, it was magnificent. In the following month, the puerperal mortality rate became almost zero, it sank, for the first time, to the figure of the best contemporary Maternity Hospitals in the world: 0.23%!

In a clever turn, Yi inverts this notion of gendered invasion: where once the hands of medical students infected women's uteri, now bacteria from women could infect us. Far from being threatened, the female body—and, by proxy, the ideas contained within—is itself the threat.

In a sense, the private parts of these women are on display—few things are more essentially personal than DNA. Consciously or not, we have an expectation to be titillated—the show uses real female bodies, and culturally we're trained to objectify them. And yet what we see doesn't titillate at all: our gaze wants to pry, but there's almost literally nothing to see here. Only by engaging with the show for its duration, as the bacteria grow, might we be confronted with a physical object worth ogling.

Elsewhere in the show, shiny black helmets evoke physical armor, though it's unclear what good they might do in a world of microbes. Liquid- and powder-filled dishes conjure bodily fluids and medicinal talcums—but they're beautiful, jewel-toned, one a mesmerizing amber, another a blistering ruby—and thus disarming, not unlike the antiseptic perfume in the air. These objects are enshrined in quarantine tents through which we struggle to find sight lines—another way Yi forces us to decide how far our curiosity will take us into the infectious realm of her work.

Throughout her career, Yi has used smell and tactility to close the distance between audience and art. Her previous projects have involved tempura-fried flowers ("such a base form of achieving flavor," she has noted about the process of deep-frying), canvases made of scented soap, and odors locked within



“You Can Call Me F” installation view, 2015. Photo: Jason Mandella

industrial-strength dryers that we’re encouraged to open and stick our heads into. She has said that she pursues the “ways in which art-making can be pushed toward an expanded notion of the sensorial.”

Yi also lures viewers into participation—nay, complicity. A press release for “Divorce,” the show in which the dryers made an appearance, said, “Smelling is a form of cannibalism.” Indeed, in “You Can Call Me F,” simply by entering the gallery, we’re put in the position of consumer—not by buying, but by breathing. And, alternately, we’re consumed: a wafting scent invades personal space in ways that a two-dimensional pencil drawing never could.

Yi worked with a synthetic biologist and scent analysts to create the bacteria and the scent. More evidence of their process—lab notebooks, say, or photographs of the bacteria as they were cultivated—could have bolstered her medical framework. Laid out under a spotlight and protected by a clear case, the petri billboard looks lurid but familiar—perhaps a result of its inspiration, a viral marketing poster for the movie *Contagion*.

The show could have been more intrusive, too. How about making the perfume more jarringly unpleasant, leaving a fetid pool of coagulated women’s products and cough syrup uncovered, or forcing us to walk past an atomizer spraying malodorous vapors? Doing so could have forced us to engage more directly with the show’s overarching queries about women, bodies, and containment: How far are we willing to push ourselves in the face of a threat of infection? To what degree have we been taught to see women as unclean, their bodies as sites of contagion? And why, long after the abandonment of miasmatic theory, do we quietly insist on ostracizing them? The concept of feminist fumes—of something inherently noxious to a complacent, patriarchal crowd—is a strong one. Yi wouldn’t have been smug to take it a step further.

But her removed, clinical take on gendered invasion is a triumph of subtlety. It dares us to forget why the smell, the bacteria, the bowls of liquid, are there—dares us, in other words, to forget the threat. It speaks to a fear of the insurgent unknown, and to what we lose when we succumb to that fear. Like the sulfurous whiff of natural gas that alerts us to a possible leak, we disregard it at our own risk.

“You Can Call Me F” is at The Kitchen until April 11.

Jane Yong Kim is an editor at Al Jazeera America.