

OBSERVER

An 'Olfactory Art Installation' From an MIT-Trained Artist
By Casey Quackenbush | 07/30/15 4:21pm



Anicka Yi's *7,070,430K of Digital Spit*. (Photo: Courtesy of Kunsthalle Basel)

How do you feel when you discover an egg has rotted in your fridge? Or when someone eats smelly food at their desk in your office?

Korean-born artist Anicka Yi, 44, seeks to conjure this sort of visceral experience with her artworks. Her materials? Oh, bacteria, honey, and snails injected with oxytocin (it “rouses” them).

Her olfactory art installation, *7,070,430K of Digital Spit*, is currently on display at Kunsthalle Basel gallery in Basel, Switzerland. In the past, Ms. Yi has used smells to evoke memories of death, divorce, and denial. This time in Basel, she’s now channeling the idea of forgetting, with an exhibition-specific scent called *Aliens and Alzheimer’s*, brewed in tandem by the artist and perfumer Barnabé Fillion. The smell is infused in a book that holds transcripts of conversations with Ms. Yi on scent, ethnicity, and symbiotic microorganisms as well as essays from contributing authors.

In the exhibition, the book is spinning from a string, slowly roasting above a flame in a white tiled enclave installed in the wall. As it wafts through the gallery, the smell eventually becomes as transient as the book.

“I’ve always maintained that when you’re on death row,” Ms. Yi told *Interview* magazine, “you should get last scents or last sounds, the same way you get last meals.” Her exhibit is supposed to challenge the way we overlook our sense of smell in favor of taste and sight.

But since a 2014-15 residency at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where Ms. Yi co-taught “The Art and Science of Bacteria,” she’s started to incorporate visual elements into her work as well. She told MIT News that’s she been interested in “aestheticizing bacteria” for a while.

So rather than just focusing on smell, the Basel show now includes pieces like “ALZ/AZN,” a plastic orb housing a fried tempura flowered sculpture, and “Shameplex VII,” where glow-in-the-dark goo floats in black containers. One sense calls on another, creating a sort of synesthetic experience.

“I’m so inspired by what’s happening in food in molecular gastronomy,” she told the paper. “I think the most radical artistic statements are being made in the world of cuisine. That interest translates and seeps into my approach to smell. Even though I don’t work with food, I feel the sensibilities are shared.”

Ms. Yi has also shown her work at The Kitchen and 47 Canal in New York City.

The show runs at Kunsthalle Basel until August 16.