

# MOMIUS

— A RETURN TO ART CRITICISM —

## GIRLS GONE VIRAL: ANICKA YI'S PATHOLOGICAL FEMINISM

BY CHLOE WYMA • REVIEWS • MARCH 24, 2015



Anicka Yi, "You Can Call Me F" installation view, 2015.

Pathological feminism – the premise informing Anicka Yi's current exhibition at The Kitchen in New York – is perversely seductive. Yi, the show's press release tells us, worked with synthetic biologists to incubate bacteria samples gathered from 100 critics, curators, gallerists, and artists in her professional network, drawing an analogy between "the fear of pathological contagion" and the "enduring patriarchal fear of feminism and the potency of female networks." If the metaphor underpinning Yi's show is a little tidy, her work is messy, obstinately strange, and sometimes impenetrable. Entering The Kitchen's dimly-lit, cavernous second-floor gallery, viewers encounter an enormous illuminated petri dish strewn with microbial flora. Growing colonies of grey and blue mold congeal in all-over painterly abstractions, serving as the background for a culture of bacteria faintly spelling the exhibition's title, *You Can Call Me F*. A queasy, agar-like stench permeates the gallery, a blend of the bacteria's natural putrescence and an antiseptic, nearly undetectable aroma bottled from inside the Gagosian Gallery during the run of last year's Urs Fischer exhibition. This mixture of primordial soup and the immaculate anti-smell of the patriarchal franchised mega-gallery is pumped throughout The Kitchen by scent diffusers hidden in rotating motorcycle helmets. These profane totems are integrated into several of Yi's installations loosely modeled on quarantine tents.

“Everything is about looking – we have such ocular fatigue,” Yi told Artspace’s Karen Rosenberg in a recent interview. “I believe we’ve lost our empathic core because we’ve neglected these other senses, like smell and touch and taste.” In keeping with Yi’s desire to “reorder the senses” and privilege smell over sight, her installations are deliberately hostile to visual comprehension or, for that matter, any kind of mastery. So-called “ecosystems” are cordoned off by large sheets of dingy, semi-transparent plastic decorated with geometric vinyl cutouts that partially occlude one’s view of the provisional-looking sculptural assemblages inside. These bricolages of hair gel, dried shrimp, bottles of mouthwash, jugs of iced tea, seaweed, and neon hula-hoops flit between banality and abjection. In *We are Water* (2015), three athletic socks dangle from the lip of a blender jar nesting inside a metal mixing bowl. Next to it stands one of the aforementioned rotating motorcycle helmets and a giant mason jar filled with a viscerally off-putting brownish liquid termed “tea.” In the spare *12 Synthetic Crayons* (2015), an industrial task lamp illuminates a weird gelatinous stain – a combination of hair gel and acrylic paint – on the gallery floor. *Fontenelle* (2015), with its sheets of bone-colored translucent vegan kombucha leather suspended from the enclosure’s steel armature, slouches towards a kind of austere beauty.

Though they were inspired by the medical quarantine tents of the Ebola crisis and are meant to “evoke the anxious isolation in the aftermath of a pandemic,” Yi’s inscrutable installations resist narrative closure and say precious little about either feminism or disease. They have their moments of askew charm, but don’t quite measure up to this exhibition’s adventurous curatorial proposition. In fact, the best of Yi’s current work isn’t on view in a gallery, but on the cover and between the pages of *Artforum’s* March issue, which includes a portfolio of elegant photographs of her germinating specimens in their circular petri dishes. Scale dissolves; the fulvous globules and dark blue beads of bacteria seem alternately miniscule or galactic.

If the project of postmodernist feminism was to denaturalize the category of “woman” as a patriarchal abstraction, and critique normative representations that over-determine sexual identity, Yi’s reliance on biological metaphor suggests a kind of return to nature. Rather than demystify the body as a cultural construct, Yi grounds her vision of feminist collectivity in the “real” of primordial effluvia. It’s no surprise that this work is gaining recognition a time when much body-oriented feminist art – derided by postmodern “anti-essentialist” feminists for trafficking in uncritical spirituality, reproducing a regressive affinity between women and nature, and offering up the female body to the male gaze – is receiving belated canonization. But rather than nostalgically recuperate the goddess cults of the “second-wave” sixties and seventies, Yi circumvents the old debate between essentialism and constructivism, ditching the former’s mythopoeia while insisting on the material stuff of female bodies, however vaguely, as the site of some kind of radical community.

“Against the humanist and idealist myth of the seamless digital world,” Michelle Kuo writes in this month’s *Artforum*, “– a myth that is inevitably reduced to the visual – Yi’s scents give us something messier and more granular, something discontinuous. They do not remain at the level of symbolic code, of programming language, but revel in matter and hardware.” Perhaps it’s no coincidence that Yi’s moment dovetails with the ascendance of a fashionable “new materialism” in contemporary art theory, epitomized in the work of Graham Harman and particularly in Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*. Situated against the backdrop of impending ecological disaster, Bennett’s influential book attempts to redress continental philosophy’s anthropocentric bias by proposing a kind of “vital materiality” that permeates human and nonhuman bodies. Perhaps offering a corrective to postmodernism’s fixation on language and “performativity,” this vitalist turn risks collapsing into a kind of soggy animism that imbues objects with mystical potency while obfuscating manmade structures of oppression such as capitalism, racism, and patriarchy.

Yi’s feminist atavism answers a certain contemporary desire for “hardware” over software, matter over representation, ecology over discourse analysis. Her work brings feminism into conversation with current theoretical trends, but remains irreducible to them. Although her arcane installations are too embroiled in their post-minimalist formalisms to communicate much beyond their own studied weirdness, Yi’s petri dishes – as a pungent and productive metaphor for solidarity in an era of sanitized corporate feminism – are fertile ground.