

Artist Anicka Yi's Scents and Sensibilities

MAY 5, 2017 12:18 PM

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2016 Hugo Boss Prize winner Anicka Yi, Photo: David Heald

“I like a dirty scalp,” Anicka Yi recently told an interviewer when asked about her favorite smell. “I like the abject smells. It makes me feel alive. I like the volume of it, when you have to sort of flinch.”

“I love the oils,” she continued with enthusiasm. “I love all the information that it tells me about a person, whether it’s about their diet or their cosmetic products. I love bodily smells.”

She’s something of an expert. Over her decade-long career, the New York–based artist has become known for immersive installations incorporating unconventional materials and based on fictional scenarios that investigate the intersection of technology, biology, and the senses—in

particular, smell. Her stated goal is to reorder the senses, moving away from the pervasive Western dominance of the visual, and rebuilding humanity's lost sense of empathy through privileging the non-visual (smell, taste, touch).

Her medium of choice is often perishable substances: tempura-fried flowers, recalled powdered milk, potato chips, Girl Scout cookies, leather made from kombucha, snail excretions.

"Sometimes the wall text that hangs beside her work reads more like an alien shopping list than an informational label," wrote *The New York Times* earlier this year.

Born in 1971 in Seoul, Yi grew up fascinated by smells. The aroma of Korean food filled the family's kitchen in Southern California, where they landed after emigrating when she was 2. Yi finds those early smell memories painful, evoking a cultural schism between she and her sisters, who were "staunchly American," and their immigrant parents. "[Korean food] is very pungent and it's not for everyone," she said. "I was always very uncomfortable having friends come over. I knew very well from an early age how much smell relates to these power relations of vulnerability and insecurity and embarrassment."

A few weeks ago she debuted a compelling new exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, "Life Is Cheap," the result of her winning last year's Hugo Boss Prize for contemporary artists. Previous winners include Tacita Dean, Paul Chan, and Matthew Barney, whose work has been compared to Yi's for its incursion on the senses.

"It's rare to find work that's equally compelling on a conceptual and formal level, and that doesn't look like anything else out there," said Katherine Brinson, curator of contemporary art at the Guggenheim. "Anicka's incredibly rigorous research process [she collaborated with a large team of biologists and chemists on this exhibition and consulted with even more specialists, from the San Diego Zoo to diorama experts at the Natural History Museum] is all in the service of conjuring experiences that have a disarming immediacy."

Visitors enter "Life Is Cheap" through a hallway infused with a scent called Immigrant Caucus, which is a combination of chemical compounds from Asian-American women and carpenter ants, developed in consultation with French perfume designer Barnabé Fillion. "It's got some really nice hay notes, a bit of coriander, a bit of cumin," she said. "Definitely some garlicky, cabbage-y notes—that's what these ants smell like." The idea is that, after being drenched in this hybrid essence, visitors can experience the installation with a new, cross-species perspective.

The two other artworks in the exhibition tantalizingly hint at the living systems beyond their glass windows (one reviewer compared them to "otherworldly shop-window displays"). While Yi's focus is on smell, she also deftly composes striking visual compositions—almost unwittingly. "A lot of the tactile textures that I'm attracted to have quite a visual presence," she says. In fact,

Yi's lush 3-D film *The Flavor Genome*, about a "flavor chemist" seeking a mythical flower in the Amazon, is widely regarded as a highlight of this year's Whitney Biennial.

Force Majeure is lined with watercolor-like refrigerated panels afflicted with blooming bacteria strains taken from sites in Manhattan's Chinatown and Koreatown. With objects that are reminiscent of picture frames and lamps, the tableau vaguely evokes an IKEA display in the midst of a chicken pox outbreak.

The second diorama, *Lifestyle Wars*, looks to be a mirrored motherboard-cum-server room, with a network of white tubes winding across the walls. Only upon closer approach does the chilling fact materialize that there are (oh, can it be?) hundreds of ants scuttling over the pathways: a silent, industrious infestation. Ants are of interest to Yi because of their clear division of labor and matriarchal society, not to mention they are creatures whose behavior depends on smell. (The ants also echo the coordination and diligence that went into constructing the exhibition itself.) This colony is exposed to the same scent that greeted visitors at the entrance, thus connecting ant and human in experience.

The Guggenheim was tasked with figuring out not only how to build a room-size refrigerator in the gallery but also how to construct a secure environment for the ants. “Under regular circumstances, live ants and cultivated bacteria are the kinds of things a museum might try to avoid having in its galleries,” said Susan Thompson, assistant curator at the museum. “But that is the power of Yi’s work: She foregrounds the very things that tend to make people uncomfortable so that we confront that discomfort and question it.”

The exhibition hints at today’s political climate; she began work on it around the time of last year’s presidential election. “I knew that I wanted to address issues of tolerance, inclusivity, and empathy, and all of these qualities that were desperately needed at a time when our new administration was seemingly incredibly intolerant.”

Sometimes people become preoccupied with the novelty of Yi’s materials and stop there, Thompson notes, without fully considering the social and political resonances of the work. “Yi is not drawn to work with scent because it is an uncommon medium, but rather because she is interested in the way in which our senses have been socially and culturally conditioned,” she says. “Similarly, her work in bacteria is not meant to showcase the wonders of science, but rather invites us to question our instinct to reject the things we deem foreign and unruly. These materials are merely entry points for considering the biases and anxieties that pervade our society.”

Her intellectual and sociopolitical interest in the olfactive aside, Yi admits to being a passionate admirer and promiscuous wearer of fragrances, with Serge Lutens’s *Ambre Sultan* (“deep, rich, and resinous”) and *Comme des Garçons’s Carnation* (“a very plastic, almost inflatable flower smell”) among her favorites on a long, rotating roster. “I used to be a purist and think I shouldn’t wear anything so I can keep my nose clean and more receptive to odors,” she said. “But there are lots of odors that commingle all around us. To think that you’re only getting one scent per experience is a little ridiculous.”