

frieze

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by Jonathan Griffin

Every day, about US \$1.2 billion worth of cargo flows in and out of the Port of Los Angeles. It is the busiest container port in the United States, seconded by the Port of Long Beach, which directly adjoins it. Amy Yao, whose studio is situated near the ports, has to contend with queues of thundering lorries every time she drives to work. Some of their cargo found its way, circuitously, into her exhibition 'Bay of Smokes', as indeed it probably does into most exhibitions by most artists in the country.

Yao is no Allan Sekula, though, and unlike his *Fish Story* (2002), her explorations of the global shipping trade lead her into fantastical, imaginative and sometimes frightening waters rather than the cold hard ground of realism. Yao seems to think through her body as much as through her intellect. For her exhibition she has covered the gallery floor with an oatmeal coloured thick-pile carpet, as if to signal that all who enter are on unstable, interpretive footing. Ten human brains, cast in varying shades of sickly brown translucent rubber, lie haphazardly on it. Along with scattered casts of rubber femurs and a grey specimen tray (*Support II*, all works 2016), the piece – titled *This City Is Everywhere, This City is Nowhere, no. 1 and no. 2* – evokes a macabre science experiment, abruptly abandoned.



Amy Yao 'Bay of Smokes', 2016, installation view, Various Small Fires, Los Angeles. Foreground: *Doppelgänger*, 2016. All images courtesy Various Small Fires, LA



Amy Yao, *Support II*, 2016

At the centre of the space, a large mound of rice – several sackloads worth at least – blends unappetisingly with the similarly coloured carpet. Something seems not right about the rice; Yao mixed real rice with fake rice, in reference to a news story that surfaced last year about poisonous synthetic plastic grains that had been detected in certain brands of Chinese rice. Yao went further, mixing long, rice-sized freshwater and plastic pearls (almost invisibly) in with the rice. Together with Yao's rubber body parts, the piece (called *Doppelgänger*) engenders complicated, contradictory thoughts about prostheses and contamination, about medical care and surgical intervention, about the body's ability to accept or reject foreign bodies irrespective of whether they might be helpful (a new hip) or harmful (plastic food), and finally about the global disparities of value and cost.

Like a port, a gallery is a place where new objects are brought in, held temporarily for assessment, and shipped out again. In 'Bay of Smokes', this dynamic of movement, absorption and emission is ever-present. Two central vacuum inlets, affixed to the wall like electrical sockets, are gunked up with a black resin containing grains of rice and pearls, both real and fake. At the back of the gallery, a foreboding beige box with a digital display, a handle and various buttons is plugged into an electrical outlet. The machine – a collaboration between Yao and Sean Raspet – discharges a custom scent based on the artists' shared childhood memory of a certain scratch-and-sniff sticker. At the opening, a rumour circulated that the pervasive smell was that of synthetic human cadavers, not improbable given the exhibition's mordant tone. Afterwards, the gallery posted a sign to put visitors' minds at ease.

In the yard behind the gallery, every few minutes a livelier emission takes place: a foam machine, tucked inside a black plastic barrel, spews out huge piles of white froth – an equally ambivalent analogue to the mountain of tainted rice indoors. Lest any viewers mistake the cheery cartoon cat spray-painted on the barrel for a signifier of light-hearted merrymaking, the piece is titled *Fried Feet*.



Amy Yao, *Phantom Surfers*, 2016



Amy Yao, *Maxi No.1*, 2016

Yao has a gift for catapulting her viewers between uncertain laughter and skin-crawling revulsion. A bucket of oil sourced from a meat-themed restaurant called Animal has several shiny plastic Easter eggs floating in it; titled *Phantom Surfers*, it is even more disgusting when you notice that the oil is corroding the chrome-look paint on the eggs. (Eggs, pearls, rubber bones: the show is full of foreign bodies.) A vase of improbably lurid flowers on the gallery desk – a collaboration between Yao and Felisa Funes – turns out to be real, fast-withering flowers dyed blue and turquoise. Opposite, another collaboration, this time with Pentti Monkkonen, includes deathless plastic flowers stuffed into the open door of a model Hanjin shipping container. Yao seems to make no judgment about which is preferable: everlasting faux-life or chemically ameliorated mortality. The choice, anyway, is not ours to make. Yao shows that we already live with them both.



Amy Yao, *Fried Feet*, 2016



Amy Yao, *Save up to 70 percent*, 2016