

Exhibit | Amy Yao : Bay Of Smokes

by Alicia Eler Mar 2nd, 2016

In *Bay Of Smokes*, an exhibition showing at Various Small Fires in Los Angeles, artist Amy Yao's visual landscape of semiotics and symbols plays with concepts of environmental contamination. To demonstrate these concepts, she plucks materials and objects from their normal settings, and arranges them in the gallery proper. Every piece in the show is self-contained, occupying a controlled space. The show is at times too dry to pique interest, but some of the humor therein makes this worth checking out.



Amy Yao, "Twins" (2016).

Viewers are quickly drawn to "Doppelgängers" (2016), the giant pile of rice, PVC rice and resins located in the middle of the large gallery. Visually, it is reminiscent of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), a mobile installation of 175 pounds of candy, which was the ideal weight of Gonzalez-Torres' lover Ross who died of an AIDS-related illness in 1991. Viewers were encouraged to take a piece of candy from the installation. This isn't the case with Amy Yao's piece, which does not want to be touched, smoothed, or approached; instead, viewers are reminded of how visually similar fake and real rice could be, and when mixed together we start to wonder what types of other non-organic materials we're consuming. It all looks the same, and none of it should be consumed.



Amy Yao, "Home is Where You Are Happy, No. 2" (2016)

In "Intercontinental Drift" (2016), an arrangement of fake flowers is installed into the wall, which is then covered by Plexiglas. This work is a subtle reference to the continental drift, a concept (replaced by plate tectonic theory) that suggests continents drift away from each other over time. In Yao's rendition, she wonders what the drift would be like were it taking place intercontinentally, reframing the conversation all together.

This is further accentuated by the fact that the artist had to physically saw *into* the gallery wall — a literal fusion of the space for art and the art itself. This piece also offers a physicality through actual participation by the artist, which gives the work a stronger sense of presence.

Similarly, in her piece "Home is Where You Are Happy. No. 2" (2016), the artist hangs a lead blanket over a chromed towel bar — a subtle gesture toward discussing the terror of lead poisoning in one's home. Her funniest piece is "Self-portrait" (2016), which is the artist as a delightful glitter-covered metal spider perched on a chunk of charcoal. If Yao is a spider wandering the domestic sphere, we're going to have to assume that she sees all of its environmental contaminations on a micro-level.



Amy Yao, "Self-portrait" (2016).

Every piece in this show is so tidily arranged that at times this show feels too calculated. This sort of coldness makes the work somewhat unapproachable, or even vacant. For example, in the piece "Twins" (2016), viewers see a fake sign in the shape of a "Share The Road" or "Person Walking Across the Street" sign, in which we see a burned out tree behind a white fish that is laying on a small black ramp. I caught myself thinking about the three-eyed fish that lives in the pond destroyed by run-off from the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant in *The Simpsons*, and I LOL-ed to myself. If this is the state of our environment, Yao's show is a bumper-of-a-reminder to those who care. But for those who don't think constantly about climate change, it all just comes across as a thoughtful joke.

All images courtesy of the artist and Various Small Fires.