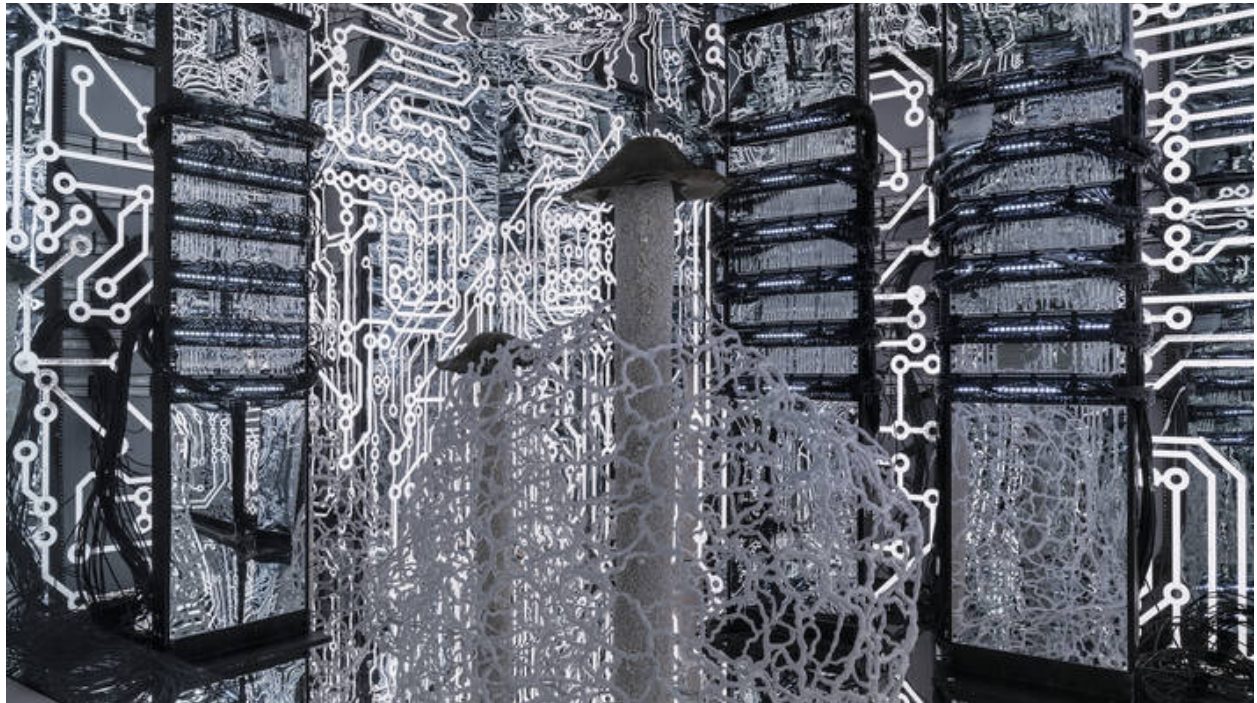


Review: “The Hugo Boss Prize 2016: Anicka Yi, Life Is Cheap”

By Howard Halle

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During a recent interview in these pages, artist Anicka Yi coined an adjective to describe the way contemporary society privileges sight above all the other senses: *ocularcentric*. What's telling about the term is how it parallels another neologism: *phallogocentric*. This is no accident, as Yi sees an evident male bias in the way culture exalts the eye above the ear, the mouth and especially the nose. “We assign associations around smell that are often filtered negatively by gender, ethnicity and age,” she told Time Out New York, discussing her focus on fragrance that literally wafts through this show marking Yi as the recipient of the Guggenheim Museum’s annual Hugo Boss Prize.

The notion of examining sensory input through the prism of sex isn’t exactly new, and neither is artistic appreciation for those abject bodily by-products that so fascinate and horrify us. What distinguishes Yi’s approach, though, is the way she wraps her art in an aura of clinical chic. Her efforts—which have involved frying flowers in tempura batter, injecting snails with oxytocin and fermenting kombucha into leather—have the look of lab experiments conducted on a fashion-forward off-world colony. Chilly sci-fi atmospherics pervade her work, and though I’d normally find that off-putting, it makes total sense for an artist interested in how we use technology to estrange ourselves from our bodies—and how that could lead to our salvation or doom. (Yi never suggests which.)

Three pieces here take up the fifth-floor gallery. At the entrance, Yi has set up a steel holding-pen containing a trio of stainless-steel canisters on the floor. They resemble the equipment used by household exterminators, but instead of insecticide, the canisters emit a subtle scent derived from carpenter ants and Asian-American women. It drifts inside the gallery, where two large glass-covered vitrines face off across the room. One features various bacteria, harvested in Manhattan's Chinatown and Koreatown, blooming across tiles made of agar, the substance used in petri dishes. The other vitrine is a combination of a cybernetic ant farm and a Kusama Infinity Room, in which mirrored panels etched with circuit-board patterns reflect one another as an ant colony crawls around inside them like so many ones and zeroes ticking through the internet.



Anicka Yi, Force Majeure, 2017, detail
David Heald, © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York

Yi, who is self-taught, uses teams of biologists to make her work, underscoring its experimental nature. But Yi also injects a bit of identity politics into the proceedings by anchoring her methods in people and things (Asian-American women and neighborhoods) that could be seen as surrogates for her own background. Ultimately, though, Yi interrogates the whole human condition. Bacteria, ants—they could all be interpreted as metaphors for our true nature: an atomized state, born of elemental molecules cooked in the furnaces of stars, then dispersed after death by tiny agents of decay.