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ARTSY

At Anicka Yi's New Guggenheim Show, the Art Smells (and Crawls)

ARTSY EDITORIAL
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Anicka Yi, Force Majeure, 2017 (detail). Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, New York. Photo by David Heald. © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. Courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

A typical sculptural installation by Anicka Yi might include honey, taxidermy, fake fur, electronics, contact lenses, flowers, or desiccated shrimp. With her latest exhibition, "Life is Cheap," opening tomorrow at the Guggenheim, the New York-based artist does not disappoint those who have long admired her fantastically diverse exploration of materials, both living and otherwise.
The show is the outcome of Yi having snagged the 2016 Hugo Boss Art Prize, which comes with $100,000 and a splashy solo at the museum. Previous winners of the Hugo Boss accolade have

used the funds to do things like publish erotic fiction or wallpaper a gallery with dollar bills, so perhaps Yi's outing here—which incorporates live bacteria, an ant farm, and a custom fragrance—is not so strange.

Visitors to "Life is Cheap" first encounter Immigrant Caucus: a trio of insecticide canisters, one of which is steamily emitting an aroma concocted by Yi in collaboration with perfume designer

Barnabé Fillion, among others. The scent is meant to conjure two very distinct beings in tandem: Asian-American women, and ants.

Portrait of Anicka Yi. Photo by Deavid Heald. Courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

"It took about an hour to gather each sweat sample," Yi explains of the (human) data-collection process involved. "It was a bit of a commitment."

The resulting odor might best be described as enigmatically neutral. As the show's co-curator Susan Thompson explained during press remarks, the fragrance of Immigrant Caucus is meant to act as a kind of sneaky drug, one that catalyzes a viewer's "ant-human perspective."

That insectile point of view is helpful when approaching Lifestyle Wars, a room-sized sculpture that intermingles computer equipment, enormous fake mushrooms, mirrored panels, and thousands of live ants, which methodically amble through a series of tunnels built into the piece's walls.

Yi enlisted three Columbia Ph.D. assistants to help her on the show in general, and with the ants in particular. One of them, M. Hunter Giese, explained the obstacles involved in "trying to get the conditions right for the ants to be happy." (His demeanor charmingly suggested the sort of person who actually considers, and actively works toward, ant-happiness.)

This particular species, Giese says, hails from the desert of southern Utah, so they're rather hardy. After the run of the exhibition they'll be donated to local schools or laboratories—the law prohibits returning the ants to their original home, since that would run the risk of introducing foreign diseases to the native ecosystem.

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Why ants, exactly? Partly it's because of Yi's fondness for how they organize their fiercely matriarchal communities. "Male ants become drones," she says. "Their sole purpose is to inseminate and then, shortly after…to die."

Does Yi see a possible model for humans to emulate there, I wondered? "It's working for the ants!" she laughs. "I've jokingly said to some of my straight, white, male friends—in light of our dastardly times—'Why don't you guys just sit out a few generations and see how it goes? We can handle things!' I'd be interested in exploring those options."

The final work in the show is Force Majeure, for which Yi has constructed a large room behind glass, somewhere between a bathhouse and a hospital clinic. The space's walls and floor are covered in white tiles that have been turned into a breeding ground for various bacteria, which—fed on agar and allowed to sprawl and evolve—turn each tile into unpredictable abstract paintings. Each berry-bright smear or stain has its own gross allure.
"We sequenced the bacteria, and selected certain ones for their aesthetic quality," Yi says. "As our nutritional biologist would tell you, each bacteria has a color, and that color has a function. There's a reason for that purple in a purple bacteria."
The bacteria also has a smell, which some people found hard to take during the planning stages. "Any intrusive, threatening smell—it really destabilizes people and creates a very hostile, tense environment," Yi says. "That's the hardest part: dealing with people's prejudice and intolerance for what they consider foul odors."

When the piece is snug behind glass, everyday museumgoers don't have to deal with the olfactory elements, and can simply appreciate the changing bacterial patterns. The unnerving visual payoff is well worth the laborious process that Yi went through to wrangle the germs,

swabbing surfaces in New York's Chinatown and Koreatown. The two most fertile locations, if you're wondering: "Toilet handles and door handles."

"Life is Cheap" points to an increasing weird-science interdisciplinarity in the art world, a space where artists don't think twice about making work with spiders (as Pierre Huyghe once did) or filling an otherwise empty gallery with the odor of dollar bills (Mike Bouchet at Marlborough Chelsea, now Marlborough Contemporary, earlier this year).
Yi is also something of a kindred spirit of Ajay Kurian, her gallerymate at New York's 47 Canal, known for densely funky bric-a-brac sculptures that may involve reindeer moss, ostrich eggs, or turtle shells.

For Yi, it's not simply about exploiting uncommon materials that might ooze, crawl, breed, or die. The biological or scientific aspects "have to reinforce the narrative, the conceptual conceit of the show," she stresses.

In the case of "Life is Cheap," that means "dealing with ethnicity and layers of identity, around other senses that are not ocular," Yi says. And while some may simply delight in the oddness of sweat-perfume or ants running wild in a museum, Yi has higher ambitions.
"The original intent," she says, "was a pretty aggressive treatment of intolerance and conditioned perception."

—Scott Indrisek