

UNFORGETTABLE: ANICKA YI AT KUNSTHALLE BASEL

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Installation view of 'Anicka Yi: 7,070,430K of Digital Spit' at Kunsthalle Basel, on view through August 16, 2015.

For the past few years Anicka Yi has been making preternaturally original and intriguing sculptures that she conjures from materials like bacteria, snails, honey, and tempura-fried flowers. They can be variously inviting, silly, and monstrous (sometimes all those things at once). Her masterful show at Switzerland's Kunsthalle Basel, "7,070,430K of Digital Spit," coinciding with the fair here, represents a new high in a career that has seen many of them lately. It is a summation of the New York-based artist's recent work—past ideas return in new, altered forms, as if grown from elegantly tweaked DNA—and it is also one of the best exhibitions that I have seen this year.

It begins in darkness. Seven low Plexiglas containers—fishtanks, holding pens, miniature gardens?—sit on the floor of an otherwise empty room. They do not look like much from a distance, but get up close. A bright layer of green sits at the bottom of each one—thick ultrasonic gel into which Yi, who is 44 this year, has stuck dozens of metal pins. Paul Thek's meat reliquaries may come to mind, but Yi's work is unsettlingly abstract. It looks almost like a breeding ground for unknown creatures, or the waste products, the remnants, of them. The room establishes ideas that animate Yi's art: proliferating alien growth, abject and fantastical death, and religious or romantic stillness, with the threat (psychic and physical) of invasion from the unseen or immaterial always lurking underneath.

Next up is a narrow hallway, also dimly lit. Petri-dish-shaped stickers laden with what appear to be growths of various kinds line the walls like toxic polka dots. Six slabs, made from Plexiglas or soap and filled with tubes, mesh, and string, are inset into glowing sections of the wall, like stations in a chapel or displays in the window of a luxury-brand store. (These abstractions-by-other-means are new iterations of ideas she took up at Lars Friedrich in Berlin in 2013.) Bacteria spawns in some of them on agar (“the gelatinous remains of boiled algae,” a helpful pamphlet reminds us), Yi introducing aleatoric processes into her work.

Elsewhere, Yi is studiously controlled. She has built a small tiled oven in one room in which a copy of her monograph on scented paper spins above a small flame, placed so that it just very slightly roasts, never catching fire but filling the room with a pleasant but unplaceable smell.

So much of her art underscores the limits of sensory knowledge, the olfactory in particular, as in *The Last Diamond* (all works 2015), two small dryers in the wall (harkening back to a similar arrangement in “Divorce,” her 2014 show at 47 Canal in New York) that you can open to reveal separate smells in their blackened chambers. I got whiffs of smoky frankincense in one, fresh-cut grass and astringent cleaners in the other. (The smells are actually, according to the handout, burning paper and “a specially designed ‘forgetting’ scent” made by Yi called Aliens and Alzheimer’s, respectively.) Similarly elusive, on the visual front, are tan and thin sheets of what looks like fabric or paper or even skin hanging on metal rods. Faintly recalling Martin Boyce or perhaps Eva Hesse, they are “kombucha leather,” made by Yi from that yeast and bacteria.



Installation view with *S.S.S.*, 2015, at center, and detail of *Orbis Mundi Is Yours to Take in Hand*, 2015, on the wall.



Installation view, with *ALZ/AZN*, *Maybe She's Born With It*, and *Lapidary Tea Slave*, all works 2015.

The pièce de résistance, though, is the final room, which contains three enormous mylar balloons that are filled with air by rumbling blowers. Inside each is a towering mound of Yi's trademark fried flowers, set in resin so that they somewhat resemble super-sized Eugene von Bruenchenhein ceramics or marijuana plants or modestly-sized Sterling Rubys come magically to life. Ensnared in their protective chambers, they seem to exist in an entirely separate world—scientific or medical rather than artistic, martian as opposed to terrestrial, and, impossibly, both ancient and sci-fi. They look like they are being readied for some new mysterious project, frightful but alluring.