

Anicka Yi Is Inventing a New Kind of Conceptual Art

She has used tempura-fried flowers, incorporated smell, and injected live snails with oxytocin.

By ALICE GREGORY
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Anicka Yi, photographed in her New York apartment, where she does a good deal of the experimenting for her art.
Credit Nicholas Calcott

ONE AFTERNOON IN mid-December, the artist Anicka Yi traveled uptown to a Columbia University lab, where for the seventh time in as many weeks she had an appointment with a pair of biologists in preparation for an upcoming solo exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum.

Atop a table in a whiteboard-lined conference room sat a hexagonal mass of agar, a sort of seafood Jell-O. Satisfyingly dense and amber in color, it looked like something that might have been plated as a second course at a molecular gastronomy restaurant. The artist herself wasn't entirely sure what would become of it. A Ph.D. candidate in nutritional biology patiently dislodged the strange matter from a mold with a letter opener and then held it up in the air. It wobbled. "We're going to have gravity issues

here,” Yi said. “I mean, this would be fine if it was for a floor-mounted piece, but on a wall?”

Over the next hour, discussion turned first to how the jellylike substance might be internally reinforced and then to recent developments in 3D-printing technology, the odors emitted from various strains of bacteria and a “guy next door” who has engineered every color of yeast. Yi worried that the research and development stage would drag on endlessly. “I want to start experimenting,” she said.

“We work very similarly,” Yi told me, comparing artists to scientists. “It’s just that we work almost in reverse timelines: Scientists have their hypothesis and then spend the next 20 or 30 years of their career trying to prove it, whereas artists won’t really understand what their hypothesis was until the end of their career.”

As she left the lab, Yi said that she didn’t yet know what the results of the day’s work would be. “The work mutates,” she said. “It mutates a lot.”

YI IS 45 AND, remarkably, has only been working as an artist for 10 years. But in that time she has had a surprisingly full career. Her Guggenheim exhibition is the result of winning the 2016 Hugo Boss Prize, an award that has previously gone to artists such as Tacita Dean and Paul Chan, and she’ll also appear in this year’s Whitney Biennial. She describes her sensibility as “techno-sensual,” and her decade-old practice is both politically charged and emotionally motivated. She can be slyly autobiographical and far-ranging in the subjects of her critique, which include institutional sexism, our cultural obsession with cleanliness and the accepted power structures of the art world itself. Yi uses tools other artists of her generation would largely ignore, particularly science and scent. There are a few reference points for her work — the sensory assault of Matthew Barney, Robert Gober’s eerie domesticity, Darren Bader’s madcap ready-mades — but, for the most part, she is unlike anyone else.

Yi’s art provokes intense desire; one wants to touch it and smell it. Sometimes the wall text that hangs beside her work reads more like an alien shopping list than an informational label. Her materials include everything from aquarium gravel to Girl Scout cookies, and for various installations she has fermented kombucha into leather, tempura-fried flowers and injected live snails with oxytocin. One piece, from 2011, is made of, among other things, recalled powdered milk, antidepressants, palm tree essence, sea lice, a Teva sandal ground to dust and a cellphone signal jammer. In 2015, Yi invited 100 female friends and colleagues to swab their bodies in order to collect bacterial samples; a synthetic biologist from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology then combined the samples, in effect creating “a kind of fictional super-bacteria,” as Yi put it, which she used as paint.

Her art can be described literally in language, but the source of its power is harder to evoke. (“It’s better experienced in person,” said Katherine Brinson, who is curating Yi’s Guggenheim show in late April. “I mean, that’s always the case, but with her it really is.”) When Yi herself attempts to articulate her intention, she begins speaking in precise but broken fragments. From the beginning, she wanted to make work that “completely charged all of [her] senses.” Even in pieces that seem to focus on visual experience, Yi

strives for full-body comprehension. A video she shot in the Amazon rain forest, for instance, was filmed in 3D; it will be shown next month at the Whitney Biennial.

Often her work involves olfaction, which she sees as a kind of feminist intervention into an industry that privileges the gaze and its historically male connotations. “Smell is the sense that’s most closely associated with women, and I think it’s a mistake to relegate it that way,” she said. “That gendering reflects a long history of misogynist understanding about the mind and the body.” For the same show in which she painted with bacteria, Yi recreated the scent of the Gagosian Gallery, an institution that she considers industry shorthand for blue-chip patriarchy. A 2015 show at Kunsthalle Basel in Switzerland centered on “the scent of forgetting,” a fragrance Yi created in collaboration with a French perfumer and whose design began by imagining the perspective of a fetus in an amniotic sac. The accompanying catalog — a reprinting of Yi’s first monograph — was produced on incense paper infused with the scent. Visitors were encouraged to buy the book and then burn it after reading.

YI WAS BORN in Korea and moved with her family to America when she was 2, first to Alabama and later to Southern California. Her father was a Protestant minister, her mother, who had a penchant for brand-name perfumes, worked for a biomedical corporation. She has three sisters and says there were “ferocious debates around fragrance” in her family. It never occurred to her to go to art school. “I didn’t really want to be an artist,” she told me. “I had a lot of anxieties around it; I felt like it was maybe an illegitimate pursuit.” Despite the amount of hard science that goes into her work, Yi tends to describe her life in psychoanalytic terms: “I think that when one has a petulant, antagonistic relationship to something, it’s usually overcompensating through an insecure desire.”

She spent her early 20s in London, freelancing haphazardly — writing advertising copy and styling fashion shoots. She felt badly about being so unsure of what she wanted to do. In 1996, she reluctantly moved to New York City, where she didn’t know anyone. Through a few work projects — including one for the now-defunct cult magazine *The Face* — she became friends with a group of downtown fashion designers and artists, many of them members of the collective the Bernadette Corporation.

And so, in her mid-30s, Yi began making art. Thankful for not having been “overburdened by art-historical parameters,” she describes her first attempts as purely visceral and productively naïve. “I was just gravitating toward textures,” she recalled. “I wasn’t adhering to what was allowed and what was not allowed.”

She was included in her first group exhibition in 2008, and in 2009 began showing at 179 Canal — now 47 Canal — a small but influential gallery run by two of her good friends, Margaret Lee and Oliver Newton. They gave Yi her first solo show in New York in 2011. Her rise since then has been swift and, in many ways, unique. Her work is anticommercial and often ephemeral. One major piece, featured as part of a trilogy of shows Yi mounted between 2013 and 2014 that dealt with a breakup that she described as a “metaphysically violent vivisection,” featured an ice crystal that slowly melted over the course of the exhibition. The response to her work usually rests somewhere between perplexed and awe-struck. Elena Filipovic, the director of Kunsthalle Basel, first experienced Yi in 2011 at a group show in New York. She recalled walking into the

space and being overcome by a curious installation and its unplaceable smell. “Who has possibly made this strange combination of things?” she thought to herself.

A FEW WEEKS BEFORE I visited the lab, I met Yi for lunch at her home in Long Island City. She greeted me at the door in fur-lined slippers, bluejeans and a black cardigan embroidered elaborately with colorful birds. Like much of her work, the sweater was odd and particular, something that might transfix a young child.

Her apartment, with its hardwood floors, high ceilings and cake-icing-like crown molding, is similarly bewitching. It is flooded with light and filled with plants; there are printouts of petri dishes taped to a wall — studies for a work in progress — but otherwise there is little evidence of the messiness that one expects from art-making.

Yi does a lot of her work here, usually in her office, at least when it doesn’t involve foul-smelling substances. She grimaced when I asked about her studio, which is in Bushwick. “I don’t like going there,” she said. “It’s so ugly, you don’t see anyone over 30, and everyone looks identical.” She groaned about the communal toilet and the “horrifying” industrial noise. “If I spend too much time there, my quality of life just gets really, really low.”

We met four months before the opening of her Guggenheim exhibition, and she was reluctant to talk about what would be in it. It was clear that her hesitation wasn’t so much a performance of privacy or even a commitment to surprise as it was a genuine sense of unknowing. Whatever she told me would almost certainly be untrue within a week or two. She would likely be as surprised by the final work as I would be.

“An artist has to be the perfect contradiction at all times,” she said. “You have to be just insane enough to want to do something that is so punishing and so difficult. But at the same time it takes a very sane person to execute it all.”