



Anicka Yi On Filling The Turbine Hall With Her Sensual Chemistry Experiments

Art, science and the senses collide in the work of Anicka Yi, to unforgettable effect.

By Hayley Maitland
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ANDREW JACOBS

In the past 10 years, Anicka Yi has injected live snails with oxytocin, displayed tempura-fried blossoms inside giant plastic “bubbles”, smeared gallery walls with butter (then allowed it to go rancid), and exhibited a heady concoction made up – among other things – of powdered Teva sandals, antidepressants, palm-tree essence, sea lice and a mobile-phone signal jammer. So, when she uses the word “radical” to describe the Turbine Hall opening in 2000, it carries real weight.

“Not that anyone invited me to be part of the conversation back then, but putting art in what is basically a giant factory – it felt revolutionary to me,” the South Korea-born, America-raised artist says, recalling her first visit to Tate Modern. “Art can really breathe in a space like that.”

Today, she’s perched in the light-filled sitting room of a rented barn in New York’s

Hudson River Valley, mismatched pearl earrings and a pair of tortoiseshell Caddis glasses emphasizing her delicate features. Occasionally, she fields a text from her Bushwick studio – her only fixed address after giving up her home in Long Island City during the pandemic.



Anicka Yi, seen in the October 2021 issue of British *Vogue*, is preparing to unveil her new work in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. ANDREW JACOBS

Some two decades after her first revelatory visit, the 50-year-old conceptual artist will transform Tate Modern's vast central atrium this October for its prestigious Hyundai

Commission. “It’s funny because I’ve always struggled with the identity of ‘artist’, partly because I’ve never fit the conventional definition of one,” she says. “But the level of discretion and gravity around this job – it’s like being anointed.”

Even a passing glance at Yi’s multisensory oeuvre will be enough to convince anyone that she’s well-equipped for the gig. Comprising a genre-defying amalgamation of biology, philosophy and technology, her works are known for their sensual qualities – particularly their tactical deployment of fragrance. Take her 2015 exhibition at The Kitchen in New York, for which she had a hundred female subjects cotton-swab themselves, then tasked an MIT bioengineer with synthesising the DNA collected from their mouths, armpits and vaginas into one bacterium. The finished piece, named *Grabbing at Newer Vegetables* after a line from a John Ashbery poem, consisted of a glowing agar slab on which the bacteria flourished – filling the room with a peculiar, corporal scent that left one male visitor gagging, much to her delight.



The artist’s 2019 “Biologizing the Machine (Tentacular Trouble)”.

“Scent engages a different level of our consciousness, and it reminds us that we’re part of the natural world, which is a source of deep, deep trauma for a lot of people,” she explains of her interest in creating olfactory works. “We’ve been taught to worship cleanliness and odourlessness. Smells remind us that the alleged distinction between humans and animals, plants, fungi and bacteria is a myth.”

The same logic gives her a more philosophical approach to Covid-19 than most. “Of course, there’s no denying the brutality of the pandemic,” she says, “but maybe rather than a hysterical rejection of the virus, there’s a better way forward. Anthropocentrism is a dangerous fallacy, and it’s a self-centred way of approaching life. This is our collective opportunity to zoom out again, and realise we’re part of a symbiotic planetary body.”

Perhaps one reason for Yi’s unique perspective? Her less traditional path. As she would have it, she “came into [the art world] sideways”, quitting a film theory degree at UCLA and eventually working as a bookkeeper for other creatives in downtown Manhattan. It was only at the age of 35 that she started considering how to “externalise a lot of the knotted narratives” that she felt she had been carrying around inside her since birth. “I just had these ideas that I felt I had to pursue, and I would be by myself at like 2am, frantically writing questions on message boards for NYU students about chemistry,” she says with a laugh

A watershed moment came after she won a residency at the MIT Center for Art, Science & Technology in the mid-2010s, but it’s her 2016 Hugo Boss Prize that put her on the fashion world’s radar. For her resulting installation at the Guggenheim, she collaborated with a team of molecular biologists to develop a perfumed artwork, Immigrant Caucus, using compounds lifted from Asian-American women and carpenter ants. A few years later, she made headlines for suspending luminescent chrysalis-shaped pods made out of kelp at the 2019 Venice Biennale, where she also managed to control a patch of Venetian soil’s microbiome using specially developed AI.

What sort of chemistry experiments, then, does she have in store for the Tate? “I’ve essentially built a world in the Turbine Hall,” she enthuses, stressing that she’s been working on the exhibition for nearly two years due to the pandemic. “It’s more than an art project, really. It’s something else altogether.” While the precise nature of the installation has to be kept under wraps, she is clear that it will touch on both the “industrial heritage of London as a city and particularly the Turbine Hall”, as well as being “really charged with the past 18 months of history”.

“Ultimately, nothing looks the same to us now as it did before,” she says. And, for Yi, that can only be a good thing.

Hyundai Commission: Anicka Yi is at Tate Modern, SE1, from 12 October