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The Artistic Aromas of Anicka Yi

The conceptual artist has taken over Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in London with an odorous work to excite the senses.



Anicka Yi at Tate Modern this month with the "biologized machines" that will float and undulate in the museum starting on Tuesday.
Lauren Fleishman for The New York Times

By Tess Thackara
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Six years ago, the artist Anicka Yi created an exhibition on a theme that now feels eerily prescient: human fears of viral contagion. After an Ebola case was confirmed in New York, unsettling city life and causing months of anxiety, Yi set up tents at The Kitchen arts venue in Manhattan to display petri dishes containing bacteria she had gathered from 100 women.

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For Yi, 50, the germs and microbes that pass between us are key to understanding how humans respond to one another. And the air that we breathe is where much of this molecular exchange takes place.

Now as she takes over Turbine Hall at Tate Modern in London for a solo presentation running from Tuesday through Jan. 16, 2022, Yi has made air her primary material and subject.

When visitors enter the cavernous, industrial hall, they will encounter a series of giant airborne creatures that look like the ethereal cousins of jellyfish and amoeba, brought to life with drone technology and algorithms.

The hall will also be filled with another, less tangible, suggestion of microbial life: an aroma that will change from week to week, conjuring the fragrant history of the Bankside area around the museum, from the Precambrian and late Jurassic eras to the Machine Age. Among the scent profiles Yi has created are those that represent more noxious periods in London history, including the smells of cholera and the bubonic plague.

The ecosystem of Turbine Hall, as Yi has envisioned it, “is the site of all this biological entanglement,” she said in a recent video interview from London, where she was installing the “aerobes,” or “biologized machines,” as she calls them, that float and undulate in the space.

“I want to foreground the idea that air is a sculpture that we inhabit,” she said.

Olfactory experience and overlooked or maligned organisms — like bacteria, algae and amoeba — have long been central components of Yi’s work. The curator Lumi Tan, who worked with Yi on her 2015 exhibition at The Kitchen, remembers seeing an early work by the artist of an image projected onto a block of tofu.

“With the heat of the projection and the tofu being unrefrigerated, you could see the tofu sweating,” Tan said in an interview. “You could smell it.”

“She is fearless about making those things that we don’t like to see on a daily basis,” — like signs of decomposition and contamination — “the center of an exhibition,” she added.

Yi’s work with odors runs the gamut from the emotional to the sociopolitical, illuminating her interest in the way the human nose has been conditioned by outside forces. She has cultivated a smell to represent the experience of forgetting, created an “immigrant” aroma and recreated the scent of a New York showroom owned by the art dealer Larry Gagosian.

“I talk a lot about how power has no odor,” Yi said. “This is why you should not be smelling any odors when you walk into a gallery in Chelsea, or when you walk into a bank,” she added. “These are places of power and sterility, oftentimes associated with the masculine.” Her scents can be read as feminist subversions of the primacy of the visual in art and the Enlightenment’s celebration of the human brain as the seat of all intelligence.

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“I think that smell opens up an incredible, totalizing potential for art,” Yi said. “Smell alters our chemicals. It shapes our desires. It can also make us gravely ill. There is always going to be biological risk, social risk, when we talk about air.”



The floating forms respond to the air in Turbine Hall in unpredictable ways. “I want to foreground the idea that air is a sculpture that we inhabit,” Yi said. Lauren Foishtrom for The New York Times

Yi’s floating forms respond to the air in Turbine Hall in unpredictable ways, with each of the tentacular, bulbous creatures programmed to display its own set of behaviors. Heat sensors installed throughout the space allow them to detect the presence of visitors — and may prompt one or two of them to float down, hovering a few feet over visitors’ heads.

The interest in algorithms is a recent development, but it builds on ideas that run through Yi’s artistic career. In the 2019 Venice Biennale, she presented a series of translucent cocoons made of kelp skins and inhabited by animatronic flies. A complementary installation of hanging vitrines housed soil and bacteria, with artificial intelligence monitoring the bacteria’s behavior, learning from it and adjusting the climate inside.

Yi said she hoped to return machines to nature: She wants them to manifest and represent the intelligence of diverse life-forms, not just human intelligence. And she wants them to learn from embodied experience.

“It seems to me that that’s where we should be heading with our A.I. research,” Yi said, “as opposed to artificial intelligence that is ostensibly pure cognition and disembodied.”

For many of us, the prospect of autonomous machines freely occupying the living world may summon dystopian nightmares, but Yi said she was optimistic: “I want to break the binary that we have with machines that is purely adversarial,” she explained. “Machines are not going away,

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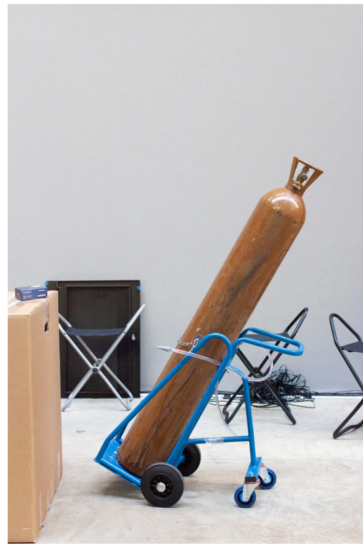
and there is still time for us to shape and develop them in a more gentle and compassionate way.”

It is this attribute that sets Yi apart as an artist, said Barbara Gladstone, her dealer. “I’ve always been interested in those artists who use what’s available in the present: technologically, scientifically, culturally,” she said. “Those artists open doors, and are realists. They are not sentimental about the world that they live in.”

Far from being sentimental about the world, Yi remembered feeling removed from nature as a child in suburban Southern California. But when she found her way to art-making in her 30s — after dabbling in various other careers — it was in large part because of her own biology.

In her youth, Yi experienced persistent and chronic stomach troubles that doctors struggled to diagnose.

“I would almost say that my gut problems launched my art practice,” she said. After moving to New York in the 1990s, following a stint in London, Yi fell in with a circle of artists and began researching microbiology, experimenting with tinctures and making sculptures that expressed her preoccupation with metabolism. One 2010 artwork was of a transparent Longchamps handbag containing a cow’s stomach submerged in hair gel.



The installation's giant airborne creatures are filled with helium and brought to life with drone technology and algorithms. Lauren Fleishman for The New York Times



The shapes resemble ethereal cousins of jellyfish or amoeba. “I want to break the binary that we have with machines that is purely adversarial,” Yi said. Lauren Fleishman for The New York Times

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In the interview, Yi was reluctant to dwell on the details of her past, something she explored in a 2015 exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel in Switzerland. For that show, she created new artworks that referenced old ones, suggesting their evolution over time; an accompanying catalog was ritually burned, emitting a fragrance laced in the paper — the aforementioned scent of forgetting.

“I was obsessed with the future,” Yi recalled of this period. “I had convinced myself that I was brought from the future to compost our present, so that we could transition to the future.”

Indeed, much of Yi’s earlier work seems concerned with metabolizing the world — including her own physical and emotional experiences — into microbial matter. Her past materials have included snail excretions, shaved sea lice and the rubber sole of a Teva sandal ground to dust.

With her Turbine Hall presentation, Yi said she hoped to “decenter the human” and cultivate empathy for nature and machines, creating a sense that we can all coexist in harmony in a perpetual state of exchange and mutual learning.

“The attempts to seal the borders — and I mean that in all senses it might conjure — is symptomatic of our fears and anxieties,” Yi said. Instead, she said, we should let it all flow together. “There is nothing but ceaseless porousness.”