

GLADSTONE

Min Park, "Anicka Yi: There Exists Another Evolution, But In This One,"
The Brooklyn Rail, January 30, 2025

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

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Anicka Yi: *There Exists Another Evolution, But In This One*

By Min Park



Installation view: *Anicka Yi: There Exists Another Evolution, But In This One*, Leeum Museum of Art, Seoul, 2024. Courtesy Leeum Museum of Art.

Two curtains separated the galleries of *There Exists Another Evolution, But In This One*, a solo exhibition of Korean-American artist Anicka Yi at the Leeum Museum of Art, her first in Asia. These layers of black curtain failed to contain *Walking on Two Paths at Once (Scent Work)* (2023), an olfactory piece created in collaboration with Parisian perfumer Barnabé

Fillion. As the title suggests, the scent is at once familiar and strange, blending marine, animalic, metallic, floral, and umami notes with hints of gasoline and petrichor. Despite the instinctive urge to hold one's breath, the invasive scent seeps through and gently nudges at our curiosity.

The curtains opened to reveal an amalgam of references from the non-human world—machines, algae, viruses, fungi—that raises questions around notions and the politics of containment. Yi's works in various forms of transition—decaying, evolving, fermenting, and learning—challenge the monumentality of a single artwork, combining the organic and synthetic to generate strange hybridity, and incorporating gut microbiomes to resist ideas of individuated senses of being. The unexpected syntheses found throughout the artist's practice reconstitute the viewer's access to reality back onto the feeling body while revealing what the artist describes as the "biopolitics of the senses." Yi's pieces are immediate and sensuous; they destabilize the distinctions between species, the organic and synthetic, and the self and other.

*There Exists
Another
Evolution, But In
This One*
Leeum Museum
of Art
September 5–
December 29,
2024
Seoul



Installation view: Anicka Yi: *There Exists Another Evolution, But In This One*, Leeum Museum of Art, Seoul, 2024. Courtesy Leeum Museum of Art.

In *Feeling is a Skill* (2015), three pieces of kombucha leather drape over a stainless-steel stand. Like laundry drying on a clothesline, the weathered material wraps around the metal structure, signaling decay and even violence. Upon closer examination, however, I observed a single droplet of liquid hanging at the bottom corner of one of the strips. I imagined reaching out to touch it. At a glance, the leather hangs lifelessly, swaying ever so slightly as the viewers pass by. Yet, despite the apparent sense of decay, the slight sheen and vein-like translucency imbue the sculpture with an uncanny vitality. The strategic indeterminacy of Yi's materiality heightens the viewer's sensorial experience.

Made from symbiotic cultures of bacteria and yeast, the kombucha leather is just one example of Yi's embrace of unusual, often perishable, materials. In *Le Pain Symbiotique* (2014), a PVC dome shelters glycerin and resin sculptures, projectors, plinths, and pizza dough. The inflatable structure functions as a laboratory of fermentation for yeast and bacteria, its voluminous form reminiscent of the human digestive system. In this way, Yi

reveals possibilities for multiplicity within any unit, uncovering microcosms of bacteria, mycelium, and other forms of coexistence. Metabolism serves not a productive purpose but rather reminds us of our shared, transitory thingness.



Anicka Yi, *Le Pain Symbiotique*, 2014. PVC dome, projectors, single channel video, glycerin soap, resin, dough, pigmented powder, plastic, Mylar, beads, tempera paint, cellophane, dimensions variable. © Anicka Yi. Courtesy the artist; 47 Canal, New York; and Taipei Fine Arts Museum. Photo: Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

In the main gallery, the “Radiolaria” series evokes movements of autonomic functions—like breathing or a heartbeat. As the undulating fiber-optic forms expanded and contracted, I began to match my breath with the sculptures. The optical fibers hum determinately mechanical yet gentle squeaks with each movement—their rhythmic cadence brings to mind a pulsating, living body. These sculptures harken back to radiolaria, single-celled organisms that first appeared around five hundred million years ago during the Cambrian Period, and still contribute to key biogeochemical cycles: their decay sustains life on Earth through the carbon and oxygen cycle. As Walter Benjamin wrote in “On the Concept of History,” we are “touched by the same breath of air which was among that which came before.”

Yi’s artistic biospheres invoke curiosity despite the varying levels of discomfort one may experience. They are at once daunting and seductive. Yi invites her viewers simply to exist with these creatures of the in-between, while deconstructing boundaries between categories and the ideas around self-contained bodies. The leaky, pungent, and ephemeral qualities of these works suggest that transitory existence is an inevitable part of collective evolution.

As I headed out, I revisited *Feeling is a Skill*. Yi renders skin as a porous, connective tissue—not something that protects us from the world, but rather something that connects us to it. I came to understand my desire to touch: the eyes failed to register the indeterminacy of the synthetic materials—which are dry and wet, rigid and flexible, organic and synthetic—and so I sought the intelligence of my other senses. As the title suggests: feeling is a skill.

Min Park is a Programs Associate at the *Brooklyn Rail*.