

Natasha Stagg, "Eau de New York," *Artforum*, November 2019

# ARTFORUM

FASHION

## EAU DE NEW YORK

Natasha Stagg on Anicka Yi's *Biography*



Anicka Yi's *Biography* fragrances, 2019. From left: Radical Hopelessness, Shigenobu Twilight, Beyond Skin.

**THE WORLDS** of art and fashion depend on myth to qualify their products, the best example being the mythologizing that happens in fragrance branding. There are, of course, the epic ad campaigns. But the fantasy continues in a product's "notes"—of citrus, lily of the valley, burnt sugar—which are more often synthetically produced than concentrates of the real things. Reviews trace triggered memories, describing fragrances in terms of experience—"like fireworks bursting against a black sky," "like a piece of good news you can't remember"—with such adjective constructions as "warm-woody," "soap-

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powder-bright,” and “gasoline-and-violets.” Art reviews, on the other hand, hew to the seemingly stoic language of materials and media (oil paint, canvas, cow’s blood) before rhapsodizing about how an exhibition “deals with” or “explores” or “considers” some generic idea.

Yi’s latest project, *Biography*, is both art and fragrance, and it will be reviewed as each, I imagine. *Biography* presumes to be many things, but mostly it is a collection of three new unisex fragrances, which will be available this month in a limited run alongside colognes by Comme des Garçons at Dover Street Market in New York and Los Angeles, in an installation that incorporates “the microbial, the insect, the industrial, and then the humans all around.”

Each scent is pleasant but complex, as multifaceted as any designer fragrance. (In fact, Yi, who almost attended perfumery school in the early ’00s, created them with French designer perfumer Barnabé Fillion in his lab.) Radical Hopelessness (notes of pink pepper, juniper, cardamom, iris, angelica root, sandalwood, and patchouli) is said to be inspired by the second female pharaoh of Egypt, Hatshepsut, who dressed in male drag to keep her throne. Shigenobu Twilight (notes of cedar, yuzu, shiso leaf, black pepper, thyme, and frankincense) is named after Fusako Shigenobu of the Japanese Red Army, who was exiled to Lebanon and often wore a masculine disguise. Beyond Skin, or “the AI one,” as Yi calls it (notes of suede, myrrh, indole, rose, civet, cumin, cloves, and red seaweed), represents a hypothetical new woman created by engineers. It smells, the artist points out, a bit like burnt plastic. Yi will display the products in a wall-size, latticelike Plexiglas shelving unit that references Japanese shoji dividers and is set against a fleshy, glowing backdrop. The various scents are differentiated by the bugs suspended in the translucent

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resin of their bottles: flies for Radical Hopelessness, ladybugs for Shigenobu Twilight, ants for Beyond Skin.

Yi creates a tableau of today's confused aspirations, the zeitgeist and all its cross-pollinating capacities.

Yi has worked with odor in much of her art, pumping fumes from human samples through galleries. Smells both enticing and repugnant have bubbled from her petri dishes, a contemporary-art Smell-O-Vision. These atmospheres invoke the fallibility of hierarchies—ethnicity, gender, and prestige—reminding us that a person's "natural" odor relies on the healthiness of the food we eat, the trendiness of the soap we use, and access to cleaner sanitation—in other words, our class status. But whereas pheromones are more or less predetermined, preferences are socially constructed. Perfume is in some ways an equalizer, erasing the aroma of a modified microbiome.

Yi was inspired by Rei Kawakubo's Comme des Garçons—an umbrella for hundreds of projects, including the "antiperfume" Odeur 53, which, on its release in 1998, listed its notes as "oxygen, flash of metal, fire energy, washing drying in the wind, mineral carbon, sand dunes, nail polish, cellulose, pure air of the high mountains, ultimate fusion, burnt rubber, and flaming rock." Odeur 53 mimicked the aspirational atmosphere of the present, as opposed to the memories of one's past. It mythologized the synthetic and the everyday, not exalted landscapes untouched by industry.

Yi tends to do something similar with her art. By distilling the essences of average and luxury textures, then suspending them in the sanitized aesthetic

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of 1990s minimalist fashion (which obsessed over the image of lab-created future humans and test-grown melting pots), she creates a tableau of today's confused aspirations, the zeitgeist and all its cross-pollinating capacities. The catalogue for the artist's 2015 show "Anicka Yi: 6,070,430K of Digital Spit" at the MIT List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, lists among the exhibition's materials ice, glass beads, glycerin soap, limestone, organic dog food, desiccant beads, Prada moisturizer, grapefruit peel, a plastic foot massager, a fish-oil capsule, peanuts, pearls, sawdust, live moths, dough, a lamb heart, deer urine, plastic hearts, honey, potato chips, ground-Cheeto dust, snails, oxytocin, moss, olive oil, tile, flowers, flour, epoxy resin, panko flakes, tempura-fried flowers, powdered milk, abolished math, antidepressants, palm-tree essence, shaved sea lice, ground-Teva rubber dust, Korean thermal clay, a steeped Swatch watch, a cell-phone signal jammer, chrome-plated dumbbells, colored contact lenses, Plexiglas, and a cotton turtleneck.

Perfume, one of the most ephemeral of all branding projects, is a true testament to the human race's obsession with building up subjectivity. It represents one of many layers we as people have created to separate ourselves from the others—animals, certain genders, certain classes, the machines—bringing us closer to a more mechanized existence, perhaps. "We're attracted to packaging. We're attracted to narrative," says Anicka Yi in her lab-like Brooklyn studio.

The social-media campaign for *Biography* lists examples of multigendered organisms and performed identities. In so doing, it projects another myth: the fantasy of a purchasable subjectivity. Because embracing a spectrum of artificiality, Yi proposes, is not the future—it's the present.