

ARTFORUM

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Amy Yao

VARIOUS SMALL FIRES

The viewer's initial impression of Amy Yao's "Bay of Smokes," primarily installed in Various Small Fires's sun-drenched main gallery (carpeted in a cream hue for the occasion), was one of blinding white light. This was not to last. Once one's eyes adjusted, one noticed ready-made and crafted objects of various hues, each vaguely befouled or compromised, positioned on the tufted carpet and installed on the gallery walls. Brightly colored plastic flowers, crammed into a drywall recess, were trapped behind Plexiglas; a vacuum fixture encrusted with resin and activated charcoal (the sort used in both holistic and Western medicine to absorb toxins and slow the effects of poison) was mounted to the wall; umber, peach-tone, and black-streaked cast-polyurethane brains and femurs were strewn across the gallery floor. The room's most prominent feature, which immediately invited closer scrutiny, was a three-and-a-half-foot-tall mound of rice, the grains of which mirrored the carpet's fibers. The mound, titled *Doppelgängers* (all works 2016), was revealed in the show's checklist to comprise both actual rice and grains cast from resin, as well as real and ersatz pearls—a reference to the 2011 scandal involving indigestible "rice" made from sweet-potato flour and industrial synthetic resin that purportedly had been produced in the Chinese city of Taiyuan.

Yao's disparate readymades—including a foam machine, a Halloween-decoration spider, and a white plastic traffic barrier—were perplexing. Many of the works on view required a bit of post-visit research before their references would congeal, leading one to wonder if "Google search engine" ought to have been on the show's checklist. Her use of color, however, was explicit and pointed, enticing and repulsing in equal measure. In *Phantom Surfers*, installed in a side gallery to the left of the main space, gleaming plastic eggs bobbed in



Amy Yao,
Doppelgängers, 2016,
 rice, PVC, polyester
 resin, epoxy resin,
 freshwater pearls,
 plastic, 42 × 88 × 94".

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a viscous brown liquid identified as "peanut oil from Animal Restaurant." Yao's interest in this much-hyped, high-end Los Angeles establishment, whose offal-heavy menu (of the twenty-eight dinner options currently offered, all but four foreground animal products) helped spur the recent nose-to-tail restaurant trend, remains unclear. But her rancid assemblage served as a reminder of the waste endemic to the production of restaurant food, even in a chophouse that salvages the "ugly" cuts.

Yao's past work has mined industrial by-products and the detritus of production, but her previous installations of appropriated prefab materials had a certain impish Dada glee. This latest show, however, was somehow both more oblique in its references and more damning in its effect. "Bay of Smokes" takes its title from the name given to nearby San Pedro Bay by sixteenth-century Spanish explorers in search of a Northwest Passage. While the smoke of the sailors' observation is guessed to be from brushfires lit by Tongva locals, in this context it called to mind factory smokestacks. The sculptures, made from the disposable surfeit of mass production, conjured the environmental contamination wrought by the factories that support it—most blatantly in *Home Is Where You Are Happy, Nos. 1 and 2*, which featured lead blankets hanging from wall-mounted towel racks. The neurotoxic metal has widely contaminated soil and drinking water—an issue that has garnered national attention of late, as press coverage of the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, highlighted the state government's seeming indifference to the damaged health of Flint's predominantly black citizens. By contrast, relatively little national attention has been paid to the contamination (mentioned in the show's press release) affecting the predominantly working-class Mexican American population of Boyle Heights, a Los Angeles neighborhood twenty minutes from Various Small Fires. Over several decades, a battery-recycling plant exposed residents to lead in the form of toxic dust, which settled in the soil and adhered to buildings, and whose removal now requires the largest environmental cleanup the state of California has ever attempted.

We are all surrounded by waste, but our proximity to it is largely determined by our socioeconomic status. The crises in Flint and Boyle Heights are just two current examples from a long history of companies "disposing" of harmful industrial by-products by recirculating them—in one way or another—within marginalized communities. Like used peanut oil, this spoiled matter can't be easily disposed of, only moved out of the sight of paying customers.

—Cat Kron