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“Amy Yao’s art of contamination: Not everything is as perfect as it seems”

by Sharon Mizota

Amy Yao’s curious exhibition at Various Small Fires starts in the gallery’s outdoor courtyard where a black, snail-like device sits atop an oil drum. The gallerist tells me it is a foam-maker, and would I like him to make me some foam?

Of course I say yes, and the device’s drooping black tube springs to life, spewing a torrent of frothy soap bubbles that accumulate on the gravel-like snow. It’s wonderful and ridiculous and just feels wrong, this needless spewing of cleaning product. As it seeps into the ground, I feel a little guilty.

Contamination, however, is Yao’s stated theme, and the rest of the exhibition similarly mixes the industrial and the domestic in unholy ways. Shiny plastic Easter eggs wink grotesquely from a white plastic bucket of murky peanut oil. Artificial flowers burst, lively but not alive, from an opening cut in the drywall.

A nearly 4-foot-tall pyramid of rice, adulterated with fake plastic rice and real and fake pearls, sits in the center of the beige-carpeted main gallery, where you are encouraged to remove your shoes, as if entering someone’s home. A thick gray “towel” hangs nearby on a towel bar; it is made of lead, which might protect you from radiation but is also not a safe material with which to wash your face.

And did I mention that the room is littered with cast rubber brains and bones?

In the rear gallery, a diffuser issues a familiar scent: burning plastic. That must be the smell of plastic rice cooking, or art in the age of cancer.

Various Small Fires, 812 N. Highland Ave., Los Angeles, (310) 426-8040, through March 5. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.vsf.la



“Intercontinental Drift,” 2016, by Amy Yao.
(Veli-Matti Hoikka / Various Small Fires)