

carla

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“Amy Yao at Various Small Fires”
by Aaron Horst

An acrid, semi-industrial scent greets the viewer of Amy Yao’s Bay of Smokes, currently showing at Various Small Fires. Those of us intrepid enough to fight, or reckless enough to ignore, our sense of alarm (what a brave lot we are) are quickly placated by a placard on the gallery wall indicating the scent to be neither harmful nor random. And so we proceed into Yao’s milieu of carpet, lead blankets, and polyurethane casts in the shape of brains and femurs.

Yao’s work here continuously riffs on the infectious and permeating force of the anti-natural. Everywhere is the everyday of science gone awry: slow molds, chemical burns, the commingling of rice, pearls and their plastic Doppelgangers (2016). The mood, and the moves creating it, are both sinister and didactic, curiosity-piquing and overly

partial. Bones and brains pile up in corners; are we smelling the remainder of burned-away flesh, or are the piles Yao’s rushed attempt to sew the body back within her opposing poles of corrosion and sterility?

The statement asserting the harmlessness of Yao’s (and collaborator Sean Raspet’s) manufactured scent doesn’t totally soothe in the aftermath of recent stories, like that of the poisoned water supply in Flint, Michigan. That the smell disturbs at all brings to mind the thiols added to natural gas after the New London school explosion of 1937; a sensory warning of something amiss. Yao’s work speaks to the continued unease we have with the products of science. The promise of better living is an increasingly slippery one.

Amy Yao: Bay of Smokes runs January 23-March 5, 2016 at Various Small Fires (812 N Highland Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90038)



Amy Yao, Fried Feet (2016). Foam machine, barrel, soap, spray paint, 54 x 38 x 24 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Various Small Fires.