

INTERVIEW: Haegue Yang on Spices, Paper, and Materiality



Courtesy Haegue Yang and Singapore Tyler Print Institute

Haegue Yang at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute, in front of her "Spice Moon" series.

by Adeline Chia

Published: November 5, 2013

SINGAPORE — South Korean artist **Haegue Yang** is the latest artist to show at the **Singapore Tyler Print Institute** (STPI), having created more than 100 paper works using the colors and textures of spices and vegetables. Her exhibition, "Honesty Printed on Modesty," explores the significance and materiality of everyday food items, and their connections to wider networks of history and society.

Born in 1971, Yang is exhibited internationally and represented South Korea at the Venice Biennale in 2009. **BLOUIN ARTINFO** speaks to the Berlin-based artist to find out more about her residency in Singapore, the inspiration behind her work, and her upcoming plans.

Why were you drawn to the vegetables and spices in Singapore for your work?

As the title of the exhibition “Honesty Printed on Modesty” suggests, the idea of my STPI exhibition revolves around the modest materiality surrounding us. These materials build up our environment, and are also amazing accumulations of civilizational inventions and conventions.

Once you start to pay attention to those things, there is a power of man-made everyday items which isn't confined only to domestic functions.

One of the items that got my attention in Singapore was the variety of spices here. To me, the integration of food and spice elements in Singapore represents its multi-cultural environment. In my works-on-paper, the spices exemplify (Nobel Prize-winning poet-artist) **Rabindranath Tagore's** notion of the “passive quality” otherwise known as domesticity to us, where we finally perceive the ordinary and less representational as significant and necessary for life.

“Spice Sheets” is a series of 20 pieces as one body of work. Each sheet is printed with the label of a packet that held the spices, showing details such as the spice name, ingredients, weight, and place of origin. I used ginger powder, garam masala, root of tuber fleece flower, mustard powder, just to name a few.



“Spice Sheets,” photo courtesy Haegue Yang, Singapore Tyler Print Institute

“Seasoning Papers” is an ironic take on “Spice Sheet.” Here the various artificial seasonings for instant noodles are indicative of popular dishes from neighboring cultures, such as Korean *kimchi* or Thai tom yum. The seasonings are industrially blended mixes of natural ingredients and chemical flavoring.

Could you describe the process of discovering and selecting these vegetables?

In retrospect, I was reflecting and absorbing Singapore's history and social conditions such as its diverse population and colonial history as a commercial port city of Southeast Asia. I gathered spices from the markets at Little India, where a variety of historical and cultural influences remain.

Then I went to the supermarkets in Chinatown to have a look at vegetables, such as lotus, mushrooms, Shanghai greens, eggplants, okra etc. and also to buy some kitchen knives and other basic local groceries. I also found the variety of instant noodle packages.

Tell us more about the different processes and treatments that you have used with the spices and vegetables in the paper works.

The "decalcomania" series emerged naturally during conventional printing processes. At some point amidst production, my attention was drawn to the by-products of the printing process, including the paper used under felt blankets that cushion the printed sheet as it ran through the press, as well as the "scrap" papers that serve as a backing board for cutting.

The juice of fresh vegetables was pressed and used as a natural dye. The "Cutting Board" prints were derived from the preparation process, namely the cutting of vegetables on scraps of paper, and having the vegetable juice dye their surfaces. The lines in the "Cutting Board" series are simply the vividly stained cuts and open slits, which are evidence of an unpretentious method of production.

Both "Spice Moons" and "Triptych Moon" were created with screen-printing, in which acrylic adhesive was applied onto sandpaper, before applying spices or ingredients of common beverages such coffee, tea and cocoa. The smell and color of each print, which will presumably change over time, are integral to the work.

How would you describe your time at STPI during the residency?

The STPI workshop team is simply fantastic. They were warm, welcoming, productive, and non-compromising. But also I was very privileged to get to know wonderful artists in Singapore, like **Heman Chong** and **Genevieve Chua** who were incredibly generous to share their critical view points as well as their knowledge. Also **Winnie Goh**, a young but very active designer who made an amazing publication for my show at STPI, framing the diversity of my works through a structure of paper stacks in different sizes — what a feat of engineering!

What are your upcoming projects?

I have been super productive this year with many institutional projects and major productions, where I again collected amazing experiences, starting from “Family of Equivocations,” Aubette 1928—Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Strasbourg, France and an annual commissioned piece “Accommodating Epic Dispersion” at Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany.

Concurrent to STPI, I have three solo exhibitions running currently, “Journal of Echomimetic Motions” at **Bergen Kunsthall** in Norway and “Journal of Bouba/kiki” at **Glasgow Sculpture Studios**, Scotland, as well as “Anachronistic Layers of Dispersion” at the **Henry Art Gallery**, Seattle, USA. The exhibitions in Bergen and Glasgow will also produce a book, titled, “Dare to Count Phonemes and Graphemes,” to be launched in December 2013. **Ute Meta Bauer**, a new comer in Singapore (she was named director of the Centre of Contemporary Arts in Gillman Barracks), is contributing an essay!

After this incredible trajectory of institutional collaboration, I might slow down a bit, accept some new challenges of re-staging works, such as “Accommodating Epic Dispersion” in **Pulitzer Gallery** in St. Louise and a group show with other two artists in Houston, USA. Unless I wish to get grounded again in Asia by traveling and having exchanges with artists, art professionals and various cultural producers, instead of by exhibiting my works. It’s very exciting to have more personal encounters and individual exchanges in 2014 and I am much looking forward to these in the next year.

*“Honesty Printed on Modesty” is on at the **Singapore Tyler Print Institute** until November 23.*

Follow @ARTINFO_SEA