

HOUSTON

## Anicka Yi *Karmic Debt*

Museum of Fine  
Arts, Houston

ANICKA YI, *Each Branch of Coral Holds Up the Light of the Moon*, 2024, still image of single-channel video: 16 min 4 sec. Copyright the artist and Artists Rights Society, New York. Courtesy the artist; Gladstone Gallery, New York/Brussels/Seoul.

Anicka Yi has a knack for the otherworldly. Whether through scentscapes or animatronic sculptures that restructure our relationship to the world, she continually crafts environments that unsettle the linguistic distinctions between the natural and artificial. In “Karmic Debt,” her recent solo show at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, undulating machinic sculptures from Yi’s *Radiolaria* series (2023–24) were showcased alongside a generative video projection. For this two-part exhibition, the artist continued to address urgent technological and scientific concerns about artificial intelligence (AI) as well as the Capitalocene, proposing debt less as a transactional concept figured in negation and more as a geopoetics grounded in existential exchange between human and nonhuman entities. Through these sumptuous works, she asked: What do we owe the world? What do we owe each other?

Even before entering the dimly lit exhibition space, visitors heard the slow, sonorous gongs and chimes from the soundtrack of Yi’s large-scale single-channel video, *Each Branch of Coral Holds Up the Light of the Moon* (2024), which invited both trepidation and curiosity. The sensorial quality of the work and its accompanying floor seating oriented the show as a meditative, ritual procession, obliging faculties that prefigure and exceed mere language and sight. For 16 minutes, moving images of radiant, seemingly

oceanic creatures flash across the screen, digitally manifested by a software trained on more than a decade of Yi’s artistic output. The software, dubbed Emptiness, was developed by Yi and her studio team and is apparently both an algorithm and a conceptual framework inspired by Buddhist thought. This techno-spiritual relationship was reflected in the visual phenomena in the video (and the overarching theme of the exhibition), which is rendered and characterized by ideas of interdependent existence, dependent origination, and impermanence in its computational dynamism. In a way, this work allowed us to witness a self-sustaining, post-anthropocentric ecosystem governed by traits and rules not unlike those that enable emergent life on Earth—or elsewhere, for that matter. Interestingly, these avatars are allegedly meant to continue replicating within a set of 11 emotional and behavioral parameters long after the artist’s death. What these parameters are remains uncertain, and equally so whether or not these beguiling forms will develop beyond their creator’s intentions.

On the other side of the room hung five neatly arranged *Radiolaria* sculptures made up of LEDs, polymethyl methacrylate optical fiber, and various metals and motors, forming the second part of the show. As they elegantly hover in breath-like motion, these luminous, life-like

“biologized machines,” as Yi calls them, seemingly reify the confluence of AI and organic matter with their translucent, exoskeletal structures and slowly contracting mechanical tentacles. A low-lying, black platform underneath them resembled a semi-circular birthing pool—though waterless, Yi included it to suggest an infinite sea from which her ostensibly sentient contraptions could rise. Considering that these fiber-optic creatures are based on unicellular marine organisms from the Cambrian period over 500 million years ago, their presence pointed to and linked the possible spatiotemporal architectonics and sensorium of prehistory with a riveting, brave new world.

At once exhilarating and somber, the works in “Karmic Debt” were striking precisely because they exist both within and at the edge of language and imagination. To walk through the exhibition was to be confronted with mortality and the speculative psychogeographies of the post-posthuman, that which can and cannot be envisioned or defined simply through the lexicon of science fiction. The affective exorbitance of the viewing experience conferred onto visitors an uncanny sense of something realer than real, more than life itself. Fittingly, this excessiveness relates back to Yi’s instigation of multispecies assemblages informed by a world-ecology within the fraught history of capitalism and ever-growing environmental crises. Now, what if the *Radiolaria* could replicate in the same generative capacity as the avatars in the video—wouldn’t that be something?

MARK  
PIETERSON

