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Meeson Pae Yang

Doris Salcedo

Nari Ward

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On the Cover: Meeson Pae Yang, *Geodes* (detail), 2010. Silicone, cement, reflections, mirrored Plexiglas, and mylar, 10 x 35 x 6 ft. Photo: Gene Ogami, courtesy the artist.



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MYTHS OF FANTASTICAL LIFE

A Conversation with

Meeson Pae Yang

BY MICHAËL AMY



COURTESY THE ARTIST

Submerge, 2012. Urethane, Plexiglas,
and reflections, 12 x 45 x 95 in.





Above and detail: *Disperson*, 2008. Preserved moss, silicone, and acrylic, 10 x 52 x 12 ft.

to my brother's illness. I was looking at Kiki Smith and Eva Hesse, who still influences my thinking.

After UCLA, I took a class at a local community college because I felt that I needed to improve my technical skills. I took a sculpture class at El Camino College, where Professor Russell McMillin gave me the opportunity to show work in an outdoor display case. It was just a rectangular box of glass and stainless steel with fluorescent lighting; it looked terribly clinical, but it led to my first site-responsive installation. I planned a piece featuring individual elements that came together to form a larger unit.

MA: Does this approach to making sculpture come from Eva Hesse?

MPY: It does. Forms are serially repeated in Hesse's work, and she explored the transparency and delicacy of materials. I was intrigued by her use of industrial materials that become organic, like living tissue.

MA: Hesse also used tubes. Do the tubes and suspended bags in *Index* go back to your brother's illness?

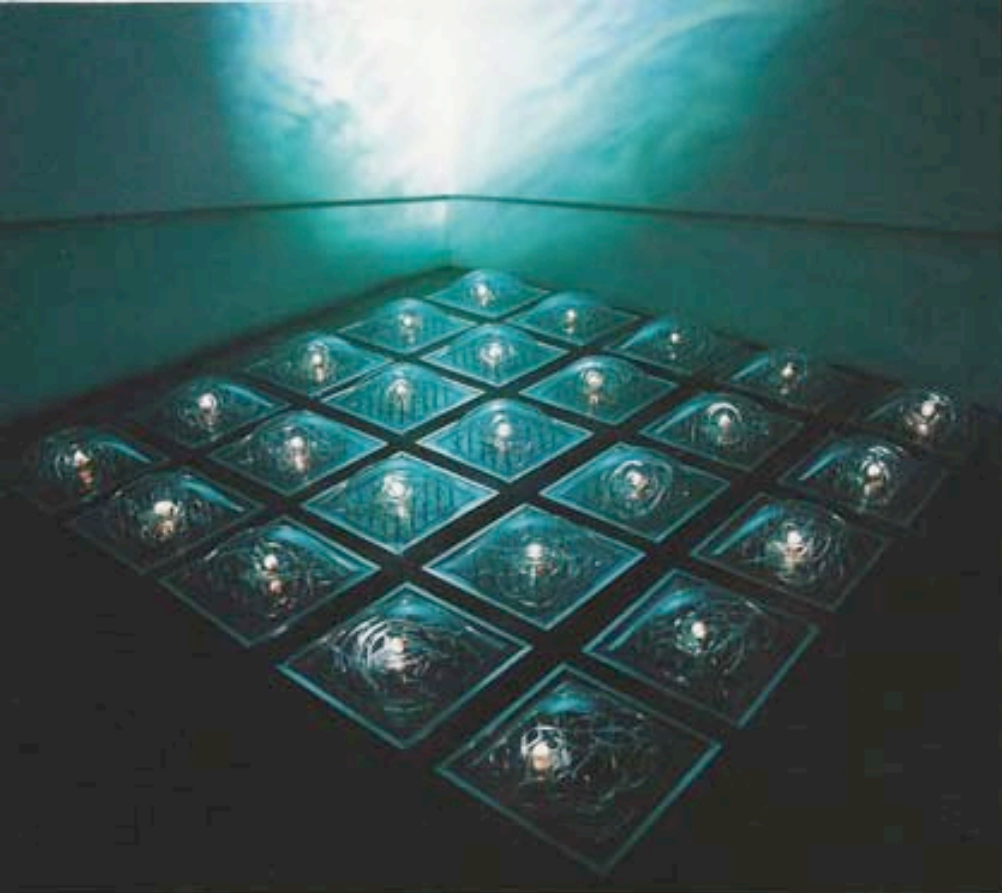
MPY: I had never been inside a hospital before. Once my brother became ill, I was exposed to tubes, probes, needles, and IV bags—my brother's illness has a definite relationship to *Index*. I still use a lot of tubes, but they no longer literally translate medical devices. Instead, they represent movement, transportation, and connections between points in space. I find the translucency of the tubes, and how they filter light, mesmerizing. They link a beginning and an end. They also



reference veins running through leaves and our bodies, networks, freeways, and industry—a constant flow. *Index* marks a definite turning point in my work, with death and decay transformed into the potential for life. It references how nature uses systems to ensure reproduction and growth.

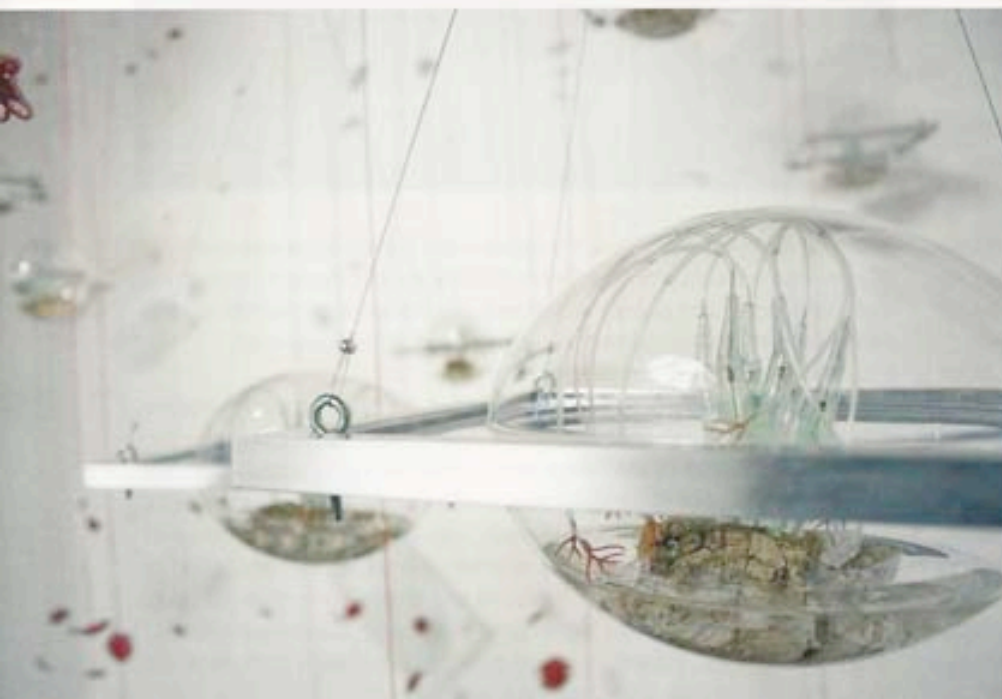
MA: How did you decide on the title?

MPY: An index is a structured sequence that groups scattered concepts together succinctly and illuminates an author's message. It provides a synthesized access point to the information contained within a text. A system of this sort allows you to establish relationships between different concepts by breaking data down into parts. In *Index*, I examined the basic structure of life, namely the cell, as a container of information. Cells come together to form a living organism and are organized and separated by their function, just as words and ideas come together to form text and are organized and sorted by the index. Indexing is about drawing connections from disparate parts; it's about smaller units creating a whole.



Above: *Entity*, 2006. Video projection, stereo sound, thermoformed Plexiglas, LEDs, aluminum, vinyl tubing, and sucrose gel beads, 10 x 15 x 15 ft. Below: *Biomes*, 2009. Cork bark, thermoformed Plexiglas, aluminum, laser-cut polystyrene, and vinyl tubing, 9 x 8 x 5 ft.

Index made me discover what I was doing, what my practice related to, and what I was interested in. My previous work was about processing the past, experimenting with materials, and constructing things. Before *Index*, I was mostly interested in the body and its fragility. I was making tumor-like formations by twisting, bandaging, and burning foam and latex. With *Index*, I entered new territory.



MA: *Is your work improvised, or do you begin with one or more drawings based on a fixed idea?*

MPY: I begin work in different ways, but it is always a very organic process. I start with a rough sketch on a Post-It or napkin. Once I have my sketch, I gather materials and combine and rearrange them in different ways. Then, my process becomes very physical, because I need to see the work in three dimensions to verify whether the materials and form make sense. This part involves intuition and metaphor, taking information, systems, and structures from nature and transposing them on to my materials. Oftentimes, a word will trigger something, which will lead me to certain associations and guide me toward certain materials. I keep a log of words that set off strong visuals in my mind, and I go back to these words in order to build visual associations. Part of my process involves finding interesting materials. I occasionally stumble on things when walking through Asian markets—all sorts of dried mushrooms, roots, and seeds. I also find materials in tide pools, forests, industrial warehouses, medical supply stores, cosmetic stores, and craft and hobby shops—pretty much anywhere. I start with small experiments or prototypes. I have a box of what I call “do-dads,” which are small sculptures in which I try out materials—somewhat like Eva Hesse’s studio pieces. Once I feel that an idea has jelled, I move forward. The next step seems mechanized, because from this point, I work as though I were standing on an assembly line. I make multiples and variations on these multiples to create an immersive field or environment. I see all of my works as being interconnected. I am creating an ecology or cosmology in which all of the pieces interact and function together.

MA: *Your work does not look back. You use all kinds of new, synthetic materials and sometimes manmade objects, including beach balls. You seem to be abandoning natural forms in favor of artificial forms.*

MPY: I am drawn to synthetic materials because of their refractive and translucent properties—in other words, how they interact with light. Then, regardless of whether the forms I gather are medical devices,



Top left: *Pods*, 2010. Acrylic capsules, vinyl tubing, and silicone, 10 x 10 x 4 ft. Left: Installation view of "Systems," 2006. Above: *Macros pores*, 2010. Ink, mylar, vinyl, acrylic capsules, and sea fan, 10 x 30 x 30 ft.

and opaque, real and fantasy, and order and chaos. For example, *Dispersion* includes dried moss, acrylic seed capsules, and dangling vinyl branches. It reinterprets the methods employed by plants to disperse their seeds. Each seed has its own mechanism for landing, germinating, and reproducing. *Dispersion* offers a fantastical interpretation of spores spreading through thin air. The installation is like a still, a sliver of time freezing the moment when life is released. When viewers walk through, they cause the balls of moss to spin through oscillations in the air.

MA: You also use liquids.

MPY: I use fluids, as well as resin, which resembles frozen fluid. I am drawn to the translucence, light refraction, and visceral aspect of liquids. Like our planet, we are made up of about 70 percent water. Water is integral to all living things. Fluids give rise to the kinds of natural phenomena that attract me. For example, water causes light to bend, which gives us rainbows, mirages, and other altered views. I use plastics and acrylics because they refract light in a similar way.

industrial materials, consumer plastics, or electrical components, I am interested in the sum of their parts. I accumulate plastic spheres, vinyl beach balls, and sheets of thin mylar to form otherworldly environments. I am intrigued by the point where transformation takes place—this can be compared to a field with choreographed dancers, who create a different image with their bodies when they are seen from above. I use different synthetic materials to create biomorphic, geological, or celestial forms. However, I also inject organic materials into my work to create hybrids that bring together micro and macro, hard and soft, transparent



Above and detail: *Traverse*, 2009. Acetate, mylar, ink, acrylic, PVC pipes, cement, and shadows, 12 x 40 x 20 ft.

MA: *Entity* also incorporates light.

MPY: I layer light with materials, video projections, and structures. My work is about a density of images and information, which reflects our data-saturated age. Like the Light and Space artists, I am interested in capturing a multiplicity of views, natural phenomena, and the fleeting sense of life in the natural world through explorations of universals such as light, space, systems, relationships, change, order, and structure.

In *Entity*, an LED light shines at the center of each pod-like sculpture and becomes the source of life. It is embedded in a cluster of translucent red sucrose gel beads and resin whose structure resembles a dividing cell. A video projected on to this field of pods creates a rhythmic, dream-like landscape of a microscopic universe. Gel-encased LEDs also appear in *Encoding*, which references DNA patterns. I also use mirrored mylar and CNC-engraved mirrors to create ethereal reflections and shadows. In *Geodes*, for instance, the light bounces off thin, turning layers of mylar, which seemingly causes pools of rippling water to form on the walls. A large part of my practice consists in creating such fleeting impressions.

MA: *So, these sculptures refer back to nature.*

MPY: Indeed, though I wouldn't say that nature is the only reference. I am most interested in the liminal state—the in-between state. I am interested in the slippage of information that occurs during the creative process, in what is present and what lies in the future, what is real and what is fantasy.

MA: *Do you see your works as continuing beyond the borders of the gallery?*

MPY: I see them as growing exponentially beyond the space they occupy. Repetition, movement, and rhythm hint at the potential for growth and expansion. I am investigating environments that create visceral, spatial, and perceptual encounters. I also view these works as building on each other in the sense of building an ecosystem of organisms regulated by the kinds of patterns, structures, and systems inherent in nature. Allan Kaprow spoke of the dissolution of the line between art and life, and he noted that "if we bypass art and take nature itself as a model or point of departure, we may be able to devise a different kind of art...out of the sensory stuff of ordinary life."

MA: *We are beginning to act like nature, as we clone bodies, manipulate genes, and construct the human genome.*

MPY: Despite our growing knowledge, there remains a tension between chaos and control. Technology allows us to gather an enormous amount of information and better understand ourselves and our environment. We can prevent and cure certain diseases, create delicious hybrid fruits, construct energy-efficient buildings, view distant galaxies, and so much more. When this information is used in a responsible manner, we benefit. But there is always the fear of a "brave new world." My work does not present a particular position; it is intended as a vehicle for contemplation. I try to introduce whimsy and fantasy. I am, in a sense, creating a mythology of forms.

MA: *What do you mean by that?*

MPY: I use data and imagery drawn from the world of science as my launch pad. Then I filter, layer, reconfigure, and compress that information into something other, which is not a representation but an abstraction that relates to imagination, dreams, universal concepts, narrative, and mythology.

MA: *Do you imagine a narrative?*

MPY: Not a set linear narrative, but a constellation of relationships that engage on multiple or parallel levels. I establish an energetic exchange across objects, images, and space that is transforming, evolving, and expanding. I have always been fascinated by parables, Greek mythology, science fiction, creation stories, fairy tales, alchemy, and fables.

MA: *They are all ways for humanity to explain the environment.*

MPY: Yes, and to explore the boundaries between the self and the outside world. I am interested in the processes that drive people to discover and explore. I was also thinking about 19th-century naturalists, who collected and documented their amazing new discoveries, and about cabinets of curiosities and Mark Dion's work. In a sense, my work explores the sense of wonder and our connection to our environment.

MA: *Is there a possibility of balance between nature and industry?*

MPY: I believe that a delicate balance can be achieved. The field of biomimicry emulates nature's strategies in order to solve modern engineering problems. For the Eastgate Centre in Harare, Zimbabwe, architect Mick Pearce and his team studied the cooling tunnels and chimneys of termite dens. The interior of the den holds a steady, comfortable temperature, even while outside temperatures fluctuate between extremes. Applying these lessons, the Eastgate Centre uses 90 percent less energy than the surrounding buildings.

MA: *You are now venturing into architecture yourself.*

MPY: I am currently working on a large outdoor public art project. *Immersion* will be placed near the new Biomedical Health Sciences Education Building, on the Phoenix Biomedical Campus at the University of Arizona. It consists of three sculptures of abstracted neurons, made of welded steel and covered with epoxy paint, each 15 feet



high and 30 feet wide. Neurons process and transmit cellular signals and serve as connection points in complex networks. *Immersion* creates similar connections, guiding its users into an expanded cellular world.

Michaël Amy is a professor of the history of art at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

Above: *Transmit*, 2012. Mylar, video projection, sound, and shadows, 10 x 20 x 15 ft. **Below:** *Immersion* (conceptual rendering), 2015. Laser-cut and welded steel and epoxy paint, each sculpture: 30 ft. diameter; overall installation: 15 x 120 x 30 ft.

