

Haegue Yang "Honesty Printed on Modesty"
STPI

Raw, Unsentimental Dignity
By H.G. Masters

"We shall never get a rose to understand that five times seven are thirty-five, and there is no use in talking to an oak about fluctuations in the price of stocks. Hence we say that the oak and the rose are unintelligent"

– Samuel Butler, *Erewhon*, 1872.

a.

Maybe when you were younger, you made a potato print. Maybe it was your first piece of art, or your third, after you learned to color in between the lines and to make finger paintings. Maybe you gave your print to your parents and they taped it on the refrigerator, where it stayed for years.

b.

Haegue Yang hates potatoes. The fourth-largest food crop in the world, potatoes in all their varieties have a round, lumpen shape, no matter which way you slice them.

Mini eggplants, lotus, mushrooms, shanghai greens, okra, peas, marrow squash, corn—now these are distinctive vegetables. Each one is unique—uniquely (de)formed. These are vegetables to slice into different shapes, to cover in ink and press into paper to produce dancing duos, dynamic spirals and textured rows, or to disperse over paper along with noodles and rice and bathed in colorful fields of vegetable dyes.

In one the many new series of prints Yang made in her time at STPI, made through the *décalcomanie* process, we see the jagged green edges of sections of pressed marrow squash, dyed with natural dyes from the vegetable itself, arranged in rows, going up and down in size—a movement that in various interpretations could be likened to ascending and descending a musical scale, a cinematic zooming in and out, or figures gliding in formation across a stage—all roughly contained within the edges of a rectangle.

Similar kinds of motion are at work in the *Vegetable Print - Violet Eggplant #1* (2012) series, the two split halves of a mini-eggplant, printed in a deep red ink on 16 sheets. The two halves perform a duet, a spinning partnership, as if each print were a single cell in a stop-motion animation. Yang choreographs movement elsewhere, with the anise seeds that are embossed in a radiating spiral *Spice Print - Anise Spiral* and in a star-bust from the center of *Natural Spice Print - Anise Star Natural* (both 2012) created by the natural pigment secreted from the majestic spice. Yang takes simple, basic ingredients—one aspect of the "modesty" in the show's title—and makes them into something demurely pleasing, as flat and abstract forms take on dynamic motion.

This is home-cooking as art-making, arts-and-craft projects as riffs on the hermetic, perfection of abstraction, as the humble and homely insinuate themselves into a high-modernist lexicon. The boxes and shapes of 20th-century modernists have been occupied with the humorous, and strangely humane, imperfections and weakness of vegetables and spices.

c.

From the *Slow Food Manifesto*, signed in 1989, in Paris—a sentimental progressive movement if there ever was one;

"This century [the 20th], which was born and raised under the sign of industrial civilization, first invented the car and then modeled its lifestyle on it. Speed has enchained us, we are all prey to the same virus: "Fast Life," which has overturned our traditional habits, is even attacking us in our own homes and subjecting us to eating in "Fast Food" restaurants. But *Homo sapiens* must regain his wisdom and free himself from this speed that may make him an endangered species."

(Note that *Homo sapiens* is considered male.)

d.

Cooks toil at home. Chefs work in restaurants. Both prepare food, but only chefs are considered professionals, much less revered as masters of their trade or even as artists. Yet, spend any time with chefs and they will tell you—in fact, it's a well-worn cliché—that the best food they've ever tasted was their mothers' or grandmothers'.

This formulation harks back to what is perhaps an anachronistic formulation about professional trades: that men are celebrated in the workplace for what women have long done at home. This gendered segregation delineates the divide between the people we call cooks and those we call chefs, between dress-makers and fashion designers, craft-makers and artists.

Although many professionalized workplaces are increasingly egalitarian—at least in gender terms—old hierarchies endure in the forms of labor undertaken. The vestiges of the old order lie embedded in the traditions, techniques and material of making things.

The demi-glaze of a French-trained chef is a highly augmented gravy; the haute-couture wedding dress is handmade not by one great-grandmother but by 40 skilled seamstresses; the marmalade or chili paste at the table is not your aunt's but the co-production of engineers, chemists and agriculturalists—and that is not even to mention those who package, haul and ship these products around the world.

Patriarchy's legacy is industrialization, moving labor out of the home permanently—in fact, in entirely destroying the idea of the home as an autonomous sphere of ingenuity and received know-how—and returning itself in the form of consumer products. Generations of noodle makers have been transformed into supermarket shoppers; yesterday's dress-stitchers are today's outlet-mall bargain hunters.

e.

In a 2012 interview with art historian TJ Demos, Yang observes about her own practice: "I can't stop myself from examining the figures and events that seem significant to comprehend the elusive aspects of the colonial circumstances in which we are living today." This "colonial circumstance," for Yang, assumes different appearances these days, "disguised in economic form."

Does this point need further elaboration? If so, consider that it is easier for a shipment of eggplants to arrive in central London from its native India than an Indian citizen. Or that the "aubergine" is today considered a quintessential English garden vegetable.

f.

In one sense, vegetables and spices are natural products. As distinct species they could be said to express the natural variations and ecology suggestive of an anti-humanist, alternative worldview. But we shouldn't be so romantic.

Plants cultivated by humans are subject to the same historical and present economic forces as any other raw commodity. Eggplants came from India to England in the 17th century; tomatoes from Mexico to the Mediterranean, corn from South America to the Midwestern United States and Europe, where it was bred to its generic, homogenous yellow perfection.

As with all plants globally circulated today as commodities, genetic variations and supposed imperfections were long ago bred out of vegetables in the name of standardization and "quality." Now variations and "heritage" characteristics have to be bred back into fruits and vegetables to return quality (namely their original taste and nutrition) and aesthetic variety—and also to stave off the collapse of whole agricultural industries that created these highly unnatural, disease-prone, energy-consuming agricultural products.

Vegetables are plants on which we have forcibly imposed our will, a kingdom where our own purported ingenuity is now linked to our, and their, mutual future survival or demise. Where plants are our potential redemption, they are also a symbol of our hubris and failures of stewardship.

g.

Several lines from the radical pamphlet, *Animal Liberation and Social Revolution: a vegan perspective on anarchism or an anarchist perspective on veganism*, written by Brian A. Dominick (Critical Mess Media, Syracuse, 1997):¹

“The radical, literally speaking, is one who seeks out the root of a problem so that she may strike at it for a solution.”

“At the root of oppression, contends the radical, is alienation.”

“The role of the revolutionist is simple: make your life into a model of the alternative, revolutionary society you envision.”

“Male dominance in the form of patriarchy and speciesism [has been] brought about by anthropocentrism.

“Feminism and veganism have much in common.”

“People would not be able to live the way they do—ie, at the expense and suffering of animals—were they to understand the real effects of such consumption.”

“The national and global distribution of food is a political tool.”

“Only a perspective and lifestyle based on true compassion can destroy the oppressive constructs of present society and begin anew in creating desirable relationships and realities.”

“The only thing we can learn from animals is how to live in a sane and sound relationship with our environment.”

h.

Even more precious and rare than vegetables are spices—that ancient commodity that came to define “the East” in numerous cultural stereotypes and whose value is inexorably linked to the history of Asia’s trade and eventual colonialization by European powers. Looking at Yang’s “Spice Sheets” (2012) series, we see that the spices still reveal the network of global trading links to Singapore.

At Yang’s direction, a range of spices were procured from a market in Singapore and are incorporated into paper pulp, on the surface of which the packaging information is screen-printed. Clove powder, we learn, is “Net WT. 35g / Sheet” and “Produce of India,” whereas ginger powder is “55g / Sheet,” “freshly ground” and a “product of Pakistan”—and accordingly its packaging is written partially in Urdu.

The Garam Masala found in Singapore is a product of the United Kingdom, yet its packaging is written in German, French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, and Arabic. Cinnamon and cardamom come from Malaysia; the ochre-yellow tumeric powder and cardamom from India. Licorice root powder, its label in Chinese and English, with a warning that it is “for cooking purposes only” come from the Chinese-English colony Hong Kong. Root of Tuber Fleeceflower, with Chinese characters, lists no point of origin.

Like the quasi-natural products they are, the prints will age, and change color over time, as oxygen takes its effect on the materials, but the markings of this moment, of their commodity-ness will remain.

i.

The honesty of Yang’s work, with its tinges of melancholic fatalism, is often to be found in her unsentimental approach to mass-produced objects, which she frequently gives a spirited reincarnation as quasi-anthropomorphic figures—whether in the “Non-indépliables” (Non-unfoldables” (2006/2009–10), clothes-drying racks tightly outfitted with fabric coverings, or the “Warrior Believer Lover” (2011) series of clothing racks from which dangle lights, and diverse materials including artificial plants, wigs, various kinds of knitted objects, pine cones, stones, venetian blinds.

¹ Accessed on Aug 1, 2013. <http://zinelibrary.info/files/animalandrevolution.pdf> As a zine, the publication is scanned page by page, meaning that some of the pages are out of order and the page numbers not visible. As such, the quotations here are not ordered as they appear in the zine.

From the prints made for STPI, after the delicateness of the vegetable prints, there is something vulgar about the “Seasoning Sheet” (2012) works, of seeing the logos of the “Chicken Curry” package on top of paper made from the pre-packaged blend, and something mildly disgusting about the flecks of red pepper and herbs from the spice mix of the instant Korean Kimchi Flavored Noodles or Tom Yam Flavor—representing, with a dry irony the “Korean” and “Thai” cuisines, respectively, and utterly stereotypically. They are humorous, if cynical, rejoinders to the purported wholesomeness of the vegetable prints.

Just because Yang doesn’t like potatoes, and grows vegetables in her own Berlin studio, doesn’t mean she wouldn’t eat pre-packaged noodles.

j.

Once, in a casual conversation with Yang, I lamented the placement of a large LED billboard on the roof of a building in the center of a market area here in Istanbul. Her response, with its inflictions of wisdom and stoicism, stayed with me: “Why get upset about it?” she said calmly, “It is only going to get worse.”

k.

While at STPI, Yang continued to make origami-based works, a part of her practice since at least 2004, and a concerted series of works since 2007. Is there an organic connection between origami, and vegetables and spices? In Yang’s case, yes. The origami shapes that she makes, as photographed in the series “Imperfections” (2010), are slightly irregular, each minutely deformed despite the traditional artforms’ insistence on perfection and complexity—much like vegetables themselves, or animals and people.

In “Geometric Trippings” (2013), the geometric forms are captured in motion with spray paint applied around them as they are tipped over, sprayed, tipped over, and sprayed again. They roll around like domesticated creatures. Their traces, their shadows, are all that we get to see of their beautiful forms. Elsewhere, in “Non-Folding – Scenarios of Non-Geometric Folding #3” [confirm title], the crushed origami shapes are adhered to the paper itself. The origami here unavoidably resembles road kill—creatures crushed by the automobile as they move from one partition of the natural or human-made landscape to another.

l.

On the other end of the same anti-sentimentality spectrum, are the “Cutting Board Prints – A Tattoo Performance of Knife on Paper” (2012), made from paper on which the vegetables for other prints were sliced, scored and stained slightly from the vegetables themselves. These are the most simple scraps from the process of making the vegetable prints. They are self-declarations of honesty, of bearing witness to the simple labor—in all of its resonate complexity—of the works Yang made while at STPI. However “marginal” these artworks appear in their refusal to be monumental or transformative as pictures, we as viewers should remember that Yang’s process at large, since the beginning of her career, has refused to participate in the creation of mindless, beautiful spectacles. Whatever dignity of things remains in this world lies squarely in their making and in their history of having been made—somewhere, somehow.

m.

As a coda, I should mention that there is, in fact, a philosophy of vegetables.² One of its most prominent voices lived in the era of Charles Darwin, the Victorian-era philosopher and novelist Samuel Butler, who, writing in his 1872 utopian novel *Erewhon*, returns us to the potato:

“Even a potato in a dark cellar has a certain low cunning about him which serves him in excellent stead. He knows perfectly well what he wants and how to get it. He sees the light coming from the cellar window and sends his shoots crawling straight thereto: they will crawl along the floor and up the wall and out at the cellar window; if there be a little earth anywhere on the journey he will find it and use it for his own ends. What deliberation he may exercise in the matter of his roots when he is planted in the earth is a thing unknown to us, but we can imagine him saying, ‘I will have a tuber here and a tuber there, and I will suck whatsoever advantage I can from all my surroundings. This neighbour I will overshadow, and that I will undermine; and what I can do shall

² For a survey of philosophy’s relationships to plants, see: Christoph Cox, “Thinking Like a Plant” *Cabinet Magazine*, no. 6 (Spring 2002), p. 95–98. Available on the web here: <http://cabinetmagazine.org/issues/6/cox.php>

be the limit of what I will do. He that is stronger and better placed than I shall overcome me, and him that is weaker I will overcome.'

The potato says these things by doing them, which is the best of languages. What is consciousness if this is not consciousness?"³

³ Butler, Samuel. *Erewhon: or, Over the Range* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 200-201.