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14-18 minutes

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Embodied Knowledge: Ani Liu Interviewed by Hallie McNeill

Exploring the connections between art and science.



Ani Liu, *A.I. Toys (MEGA HAUL RANDOM AND MIXED SURPRISE ULTRA RARE UNBOXING COMPILATION!!!)*, 2022, machine learning algorithm, screens, electronics, 3-D printed toys. Research team: Ryan Thorpe, Andrea Li, Michelle Lim, Jenny Zhang. Photo by Brad Farwell. Courtesy of Cuchifritos Gallery.

Ani Liu is a research-based artist working at the intersection of art and science. Ani and I met a few years ago at a Women’s Sculptor Group gathering in Bushwick where I was also introduced to her practice. We started a conversation mid-pandemic, attempting to capture where her practice was and how it would translate into her **current exhibition** at Cuchifritos in the Lower East Side. As for many artists, life imitates art, and art imitates life. In Ani’s case, some of her most intimate data, that of childbirth and child-rearing, have become quite literally the material for her practice and this show.

—Hallie McNeill

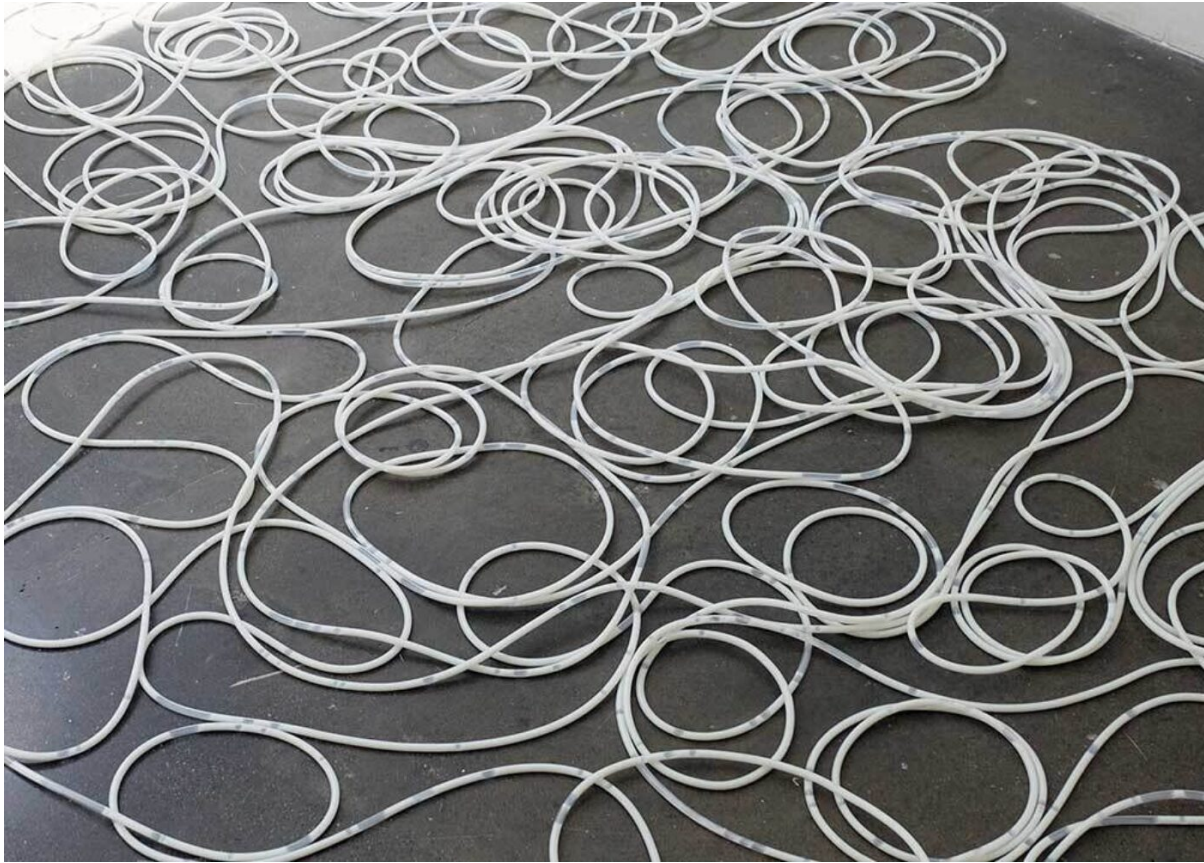
Hallie McNeill I’d like to begin with a simple question: How do you start translating an idea or a question into a project?

Ani Liu The incubation process often starts with an emotion seeded from life. Many of the works in the Cuchifritos show began as sketches and journal entries from the postpartum periods after I gave birth to my daughter and then my son. In those first sleep-deprived weeks with a newborn, I tried to read articles on everything from breastfeeding to sleep training; it was a search between data-driven answers and an ancient, intuitive knowledge through my body.

HM Everything *is* data, but it’s very specifically your experience and your data, which adds a layer of intimacy and vulnerability to what could otherwise be dry “research.”

AL Shortly after my daughter was born, our doctor asked us to record how often and how much she was eating as well as the frequency of her wet and dirty diapers. In the early postpartum haze, I remember downloading an app and dutifully recording every feed and diaper change. A month later, I was shocked by the data portrait: both by how little continuous sleep I had and by the sheer amount of labor that went into caring for a newborn. We live in a societal myth that one’s work, through its economic value, is how a person’s worth is measured. Motherhood has made me really reflect on how the historic devaluation of “women’s” work has been another form of capitalist, biopolitical control. The work of motherhood is very real and essential to the well-being of the child, the family, the economy, the society. I think we started to see some of this through the childcare crisis brought on by the pandemic. To create a conversation around the very real labor of child-rearing and to advocate for

postpartum parental leave policies were some of the reasons I wanted to embody in a sculpture the data portrait of the first weeks post-birth.



Detail of Ani Liu, *Untitled (Feeding Through Space and Time)*, 2022, food-grade tubing, liquid pump, air pump, microcontroller, synthetic milk. Technical consultants: William Liu, Julian Goldman. Courtesy of the artist.

HM How did this lead to exploring breast milk as a sculptural material?

AL When I started translating the data into the sculpture, I made some material decisions. I immediately started looking into the material culture of child-rearing that surrounded me. Given that the chart graphed feeds and diaper changes, I intuitively wanted to incorporate breastmilk, formula, and diapers. I wanted to capture the intensity of the labor as well as the intimacy and the tenderness.

HM It's a complicated relationship with such an intimate piece of technology.

AL Since giving birth with no maternity leave, I've spent a lot of time with my breast pumps. Among the many places I've pumped: on the train, in various closets, in transportation stations, in restaurants, in parking lots, in bathrooms, and in my studio. Every month I create approximately 5.85 gallons of breast milk with my body, which is the volume shown circulating between the vitrine

and tubes. In the beginning, the feeling of my baby's suckle and his cute face caused me to let down. These days, the mechanical rhythmic sound of my pump triggers the reflex. In my practice, I have long been interested in the relationship between technology and the body, but my relationship with my pump really cemented the cyborg identity for me. I feel a certain intimacy with my pump; and in a way, it allows my body to feed through space and time.

I'm grateful for its invention as it allows me to be away from my baby for long stretches while maintaining my supply. In a way, it liberates me to pursue things beyond my motherhood. At the same time, I feel the double edge of this freedom and the expectation to perform the labor of feeding invisibly on top of all the other forms of labor and employment I perform. My calendar is filled with half-hour blocks reserved to pump and clean the parts. My bag has been heavy with it, and I am constantly taking note of the random crevices in public spaces that would function as a lactation space in a pinch. This is a long-winded way to say that I've been pumping for almost eight months now, and this sculpture came out of my experiences with it.



Installation view of *Ani Liu: Ecologies of Care*, 2022. Cuchifritos Gallery, New York. Photo by Brad Farwell. Courtesy of Cuchifritos Gallery.

HM To bring up a very different material language, I think it would be interesting to talk about the framing of gender norms and how you've been exploring that through *A.I. Toys* (2020–21).

AL *A.I. Toys* was a continuation of the material investigation of parenthood. After I had a child, suddenly my whole environment was filled with the artifacts of raising a child: diapers, onesies, bottles, and toys. I was grateful to receive a lot of hand-me-downs from friends and family, but I was struck by how color coded and gendered these objects were because I happened to birth a little human with two X chromosomes.

I created *A.I. Toys* to reflect on how gender can be constructed at a young age through something as innocent as playthings. My team and I trained a machine learning model and asked it to invent toys based on what it learned from real, existing toys that had been tagged “girls” and “boys.” That is, we asked a powerful AI—after observing thousands of real-world toys designed for girls and boys—if it could make more toys that would fit in this market? In a way, I was trying to get at the “zeitgeist” of what makes a toy one way or the other.

HM And what were the results like?

AL The toys generated by machine learning have striking differences: girls toys are largely centered on jewelry, domestic chores, dolls, and animals, while boys toys are largely centered on weaponry, electronics, cars, and construction. Having been derived directly from the toys we produce for children in real life, the findings of this project have real-life consequences. The project serves as a reflection of the gendered societal values we place on children through objects of play. Machine learning was used as a tool to hold a mirror up to our current realities.

HM Were you surprised? Or was it more about confirming this feedback loop?

AL As I read through the inventions, I was struck by the sassy, seductive marketing language, which I didn't expect. The results were filled with phrases like, “It's So Me!” and, “Our Generation Surprise!” It made me reflect on the consumerist aspects of toys, such as the thrill of unboxing, the search for identity through objects, the human desire to collect. I wondered, What toys brought comfort, and why? What recent things did you feel compelled to own, and why?

HM As you were deciding what to include in this show, how did you see these two making sense together?

AL The works in the show were made during a time of immense transformation in my own life; and in that way, whatever material rifts that may exist seem consistent with the realities of becoming a mother. I don't like to build boundaries between "natural" and "artificial," especially in the context of reproductive journeys. I made sure to include formula in addition to breast milk because it was part of the spectrum of our feeding reality. In the context of the toys, the AI was chosen to hold a mirror up to behaviors that were already present in our society. Perhaps one of the binding threads that brings these pieces together is the temporal aspect; as my children grew, the influences of their development transitioned, and the explorations of the works reflect continual evolution.



Ani Liu, *A.I. Toys (unboxing mania)*, 2021, machine learning algorithm, 3-D printed toys, holographic vinyl, collector's case. Research team: Ryan Thorpe, Andrea Li, Michelle Lim, Jenny Zhang. Photo by Brad Farwell. Courtesy of Cuchifritos Gallery.

HM I'm curious how you transition from thinking about data and research into the studio side of things? How do you balance the integrity of the information at hand with aesthetic considerations and practical exhibition-related concerns,

like navigating an unknown audience that may not be scientific or data-driven in its interests?

AL I think back to some of my favorite artworks, and I think a particular quality that exists in them that I would love to maintain in my own work is a sense of mystery. This is not to say that the works do not communicate effectively or that I want my own work to be unapproachable. It is just to say that I love art, poetry, and music for the feelings that they evoke and the doors to questions that they seem to open wider. I think this is one of the reasons why the work does not necessarily culminate in a research study, for instance. Art is a form of embodied knowledge that is absorbed sensorially, intellectually, and intuitively. For me, making is a way of thinking, and I hope that the aesthetic quality of the work engages the viewer in that process.

HM I realize your work is not necessarily predicated on a true/false binary, but I wonder: Do you go into projects with, well, not necessarily a hypothesis but expectations? Or is each project open-ended from the start?

AL I find that there are a lot of unexpected common threads between the practice of science and the practice of art, and frequent failure is definitely one of them. In order to gain new knowledge, we set up careful experiments, some of which have to fail in order for us to understand the conditions in which they don't. As an artist, I have been taught from the start to not fear failure, and there is a kind of thrill I experience in the studio the first time I try anything out. I think the part that takes practice is learning to stay resilient after the one thousandth failure in a project, which happens sometimes.

I like this provocation about the hypothesis because I think a lot of artists, myself included, start from a place of intuition. But intuition doesn't just come out of the blue. I also think there is a constant amount of careful observation and absorption of reality that takes place consciously and subconsciously. Our bodies and brains process these inputs and perhaps occasionally output them as an "aha" moment. Maybe researchers don't talk about this, but I think there is a similar level of careful observation that leads to intuitive formations of hypotheses.

Ani Liu: Ecologies of Care is on view at Cuchifritos Gallery + Project Space in New York City until July 30.

Hallie McNeill is an artist and writer. Her exhibition *Your Best Life* is on view at the Yeh Art Gallery, St. John's University, New York, until December 10.

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