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Chandler Burr's Hyper-Natural Exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria

Posted on [October 6, 2014](#) by [FeministConfessional](#)



(<https://perfumepolytechnic.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/p1100758.jpg>)

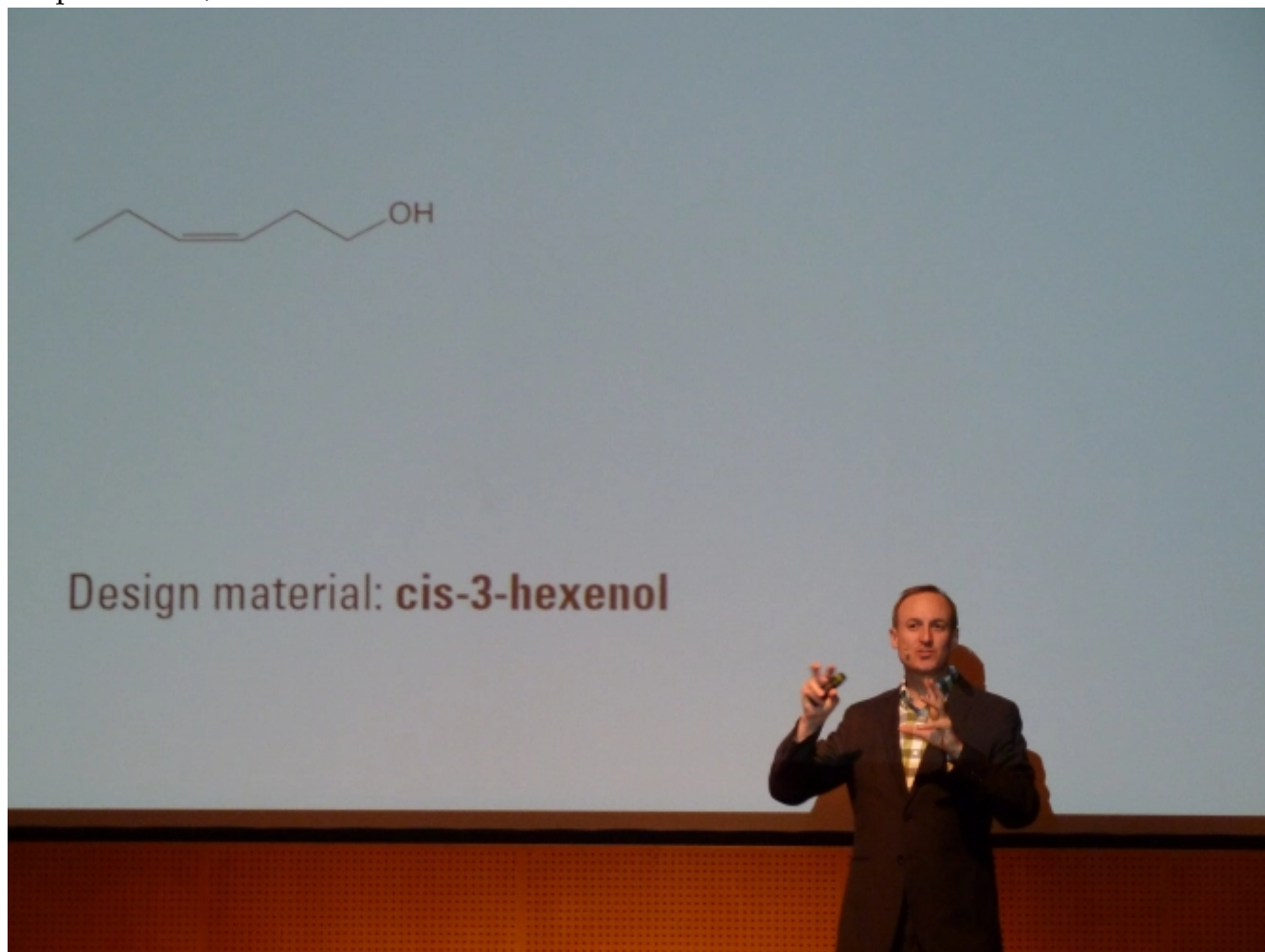
Chandler Burr's Hyper-Natural exhibition in the garden at the National Gallery of Victoria

Chandler Burr's scent exhibition *Hyper-Natural: Scent from Design to Art* opened recently at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV). I attended the Keynote Address given by Burr on the evening of Wednesday, 24th September. Burr and co-curator Ewan McEoin introduced us to the key concepts behind the exhibition, and Burr spoke at length about his own philosophy of scent-based art and design, interspersed with discussion of the materials and fragrances that are on display in *Hyper-Natural*. The talk was somewhat free-form and very high-energy. Burr riffed without notes or script, pacing up and down the stage with a headset microphone on, interrupting his address periodically to introduce to the audience, one-by-one, the seven synthetic scent molecules and related Guerlain fragrances from the exhibition. Each fragrance in the exhibition uses one of these scent molecules, some of which are nature-identical, which means that they are intended to mimic a natural smell, such as sandalwood or vanilla, while some are new smells entirely, devoid of intentional reference to existing smells.

Here is a short snippet from an article Burr wrote in *The Age* prior to the exhibition – it encapsulates some of the concepts behind the exhibition:

In 1969 Jean-Paul Guerlain designed a work entitled Chamade with the synthetic p-Mentha-8-thiol-3-one, which smells like a neon fruit salad of sulfury mango and guava powered by the nuclear radiation of the Fukushima reactor. [Note: Yes, I actually want to say this, and yes, the shock is the point.] It is a shocking material, and it let Guerlain create a work that presented these natural olfactory aspects not as natural but as hyper-natural. Which is why my exhibition, in which you will smell these molecules and these works, is called *Hyper-Natural*.

Text quoted from [this article](http://www.theage.com.au/national/perfume-critic-chandler-burr-brings-his-hypernatural-exhibition-to-the-ngv-20140916-10hmc.html) (<http://www.theage.com.au/national/perfume-critic-chandler-burr-brings-his-hypernatural-exhibition-to-the-ngv-20140916-10hmc.html>) in *The Age*, September 19, 2014.



(<https://perfumepolytechnic.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/p1100752.jpg>)

Burr speaking at the Keynote Address

During Burr's address, a group of volunteers and staff busily dipped perfume blotters (tiny white cardboard strips used to test perfume) into large silver flasks of fragrance and scent molecules that lined the stage in front of Burr and handed them out to the audience. As we sniffed each of the blotters, Burr told us what they were, and interacted with the audience: asking us whether we thought the molecules smelt like something else (natural or otherwise), and if we could identify the Guerlain fragrances. All of this was interspersed with copious amounts of audience chatter and with interesting morsels from Burr about the history of scent, anecdotes about famous perfumers, and opinions and assertions about fragrance and the arts. It was an action-packed, fascinating and lively talk, and was followed by questions from the eager audience and a preview of the exhibition.



(<https://perfumepolytechnic.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/p1100754.jpg>)

Hyper-Natural at night

At night-time, in the garden behind the gallery, on a rainy evening, the exhibition emitted an ethereal, fantastical energy. Mist was pumped out into the air around the garden, which, along with the rain, darkness, and aromas emanating from the installation, created a magical and intriguing atmosphere. The installation consists of seven numbered pods: these are white, minimal, column-shaped sniffing stations, one for each molecule and the corresponding Guerlain fragrance. Information about each molecule and fragrance is inside each pod, with the fragrances and molecules lying in small, circular, liquid pools within. A sheet of tear-off fragrance blotters is provided (with the name of each fragrance and molecule on it) so that you can dip a blotter into each pool and have a sniff. Moving from pod number 1 to number 7 is also a chronological journey, starting with Jicky (1889), and ending with Guerlain's recently released L'Homme Idéal (2014).

The paired synthetic scent molecules and fragrances are as follows:

1. Molecule: coumarin / Fragrance: Jicky (1889)
 2. Molecule: ethyl vanillin / Fragrance: Shalimar (1925)
 3. Molecule: sulfox / Fragrance: Chamade (1969)
 4. Molecule: polysantol / Fragrance: Samsara (1989)
 5. Molecule: cis-3-hexenol / Fragrance: Aqua Allegoria Herba Fresca (1999)
 6. Molecule: methyl cyclopentenolone / Fragrance: La Petite Robe Noire (2009)
 7. Molecule: benzaldehyde / Fragrance: L'Homme Idéal (2014)
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(<https://perfumepolytechnic.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/p1100755.jpg>)

Sniffing station no. 1 – Jicky (1889)

The following day, I got to view the exhibition again, and took part in a short curators' tour with Chandler Burr and Ewan McEoin. The tour was a brief, 30-minute walk around the exhibition, stopping at each station to sniff, with Burr discussing each scent molecule and fragrance as we went along. It was, more or less, a clear and concise re-run of the concepts and information from the Keynote Address the previous night.



(<https://perfumepolytechnic.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/p1100786.jpg>)
Curators' tour



<https://perfumepolytechnic.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/p1100759.jpg>

Hyper-Natural during the day

It was lovely to see the exhibition during the day and to watch members of the public interacting with the materials. Children seemed to love it, and enjoyed running around the garden, using the mist-generators as makeshift hurdles. Hyper-Natural is a fun, interactive and informative exhibition. It's a great introduction to scent, the science and design that goes into it, and its history. Sniff it or miss it!



(<https://perfumepolytechnic.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/p1100764.jpg>)

Hyper-Natural during the day

More details about the exhibition can be found [here](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/whats-on/exhibitions/exhibitions/hyper-natural) (<http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/whats-on/exhibitions/exhibitions/hyper-natural>). Hyper-Natural runs until the 30th November. You can read about some of Chandler Burr's ideas behind Hyper-Natural [in this article](http://www.theage.com.au/national/perfume-critic-chandler-burr-brings-his-hypernatural-exhibition-to-the-ngv-20140916-10hmc.html) (<http://www.theage.com.au/national/perfume-critic-chandler-burr-brings-his-hypernatural-exhibition-to-the-ngv-20140916-10hmc.html>), from *The Age*.

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