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“I Wanted to Touch You With the Smell”: Ernesto Neto’s Immersive, Cross-Sensory Installations

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2



(<https://perfumepolytechnic.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/bird-island-ngv4.jpg>).

Ernesto Neto's work "The Island Bird", recently acquired by the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne

The making of fine fragrance to wear on the body is just one artistic expression or outcome of engaging with the sense of smell creatively. Scent can also be used in other artistic contexts, including in the work of olfactory artists who exhibit in galleries, or multi-disciplinary artists who make scent an important element of their work. I have a strong personal interest in this kind of olfactory art. As a composer, knitter, textile jewellery designer and now scent enthusiast, I've recently been considering what kind of outlet or mode of artistic production or presentation might

best suit my own multi-disciplinary skill-set. I'm interested in researching artists who use olfactory elements in their art works because I want to use scent and all my other creative skills in my own kind of multi-disciplinary art practice.

Ernesto Neto is a Brazilian artist who creates large organic sculptural installations out of textiles which are often interactive, calling for audiences to climb into or onto, touch, or smell his works. As an artist Neto wants to engage many different senses, not just the sense of sight, as many more traditional galleries do. He wants to immerse and engage people in his works, not just make them stand there as passive observers, looking at a work of art hanging on a wall.



(https://perfumepolytechnic.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/neto_spices.jpg).

"We stopped just here at the time" (2002), Centre Pompidou. Photo c. Yann Caradec

https://www.flickr.com/photos/la_bretagne_a_paris/8584239764/

(https://www.flickr.com/photos/la_bretagne_a_paris/8584239764/).

I came across Neto's work a few years ago when I was researching the use of knitting and textiles in art. More recently, while researching artists who use scent in their artistic creations, I've come across him again. Bingo! Neto uses many of the modes I wish to work in, so his work a great place for me to start my research.

Seeing Neto's work for the first time a few years ago revived a fond memory of a similar installation I saw as a child, inside the foyer of the Festival Centre in Adelaide. Like Neto's work currently installed at the National Gallery of Victoria (<http://www.littlemelbourne.com.au/to-visit/museums-galleries/the-island-bird-by-ernesto-neto-at-the-ngv-international.html>), *The Island Bird* (2012), the work I saw and interacted with consisted of a series of colourful knitted, netted and knotted platforms, tubes and tunnels that I climbed and played in. I know that this work can't have been created by Neto, as he would have been too young to have made it in the early 1980s (he's 51 now), but I wonder if the artist that *did* create this work influenced him. I look forward to visiting *The Island Bird* in Melbourne next week. I've not heard of this work having any scented components, but if it does, I will report back!

As I've not *yet* experienced any works by Neto, I'd like to share with you this fabulous impression of his work by artist Nicola Anthony:

“Recognized as the most influential contemporary Brazilian artist, Neto lives and works in Rio de Janeiro. Influenced by Brazilian neo-concretism, his practice explores membranes, organic structures and sensory interaction between viewer and artwork. His most iconic installations are sprawling, monstrous, playful sculptures that use pendulous forms of translucent membrane, filled with tactile and sensuous materials such as polished ball bearings, spices and washing powder. Neto’s abstract, architectural pieces filled the Hayward Gallery in 2010. If you visited the space, perhaps like me, you experienced the artwork taking you physically away from the everyday, gradually becoming more aware of your surroundings and your connections with the space, the membranes, the art, the other people in the gallery. Neto’s pungent materials become a further layer of the sculpture, invisibly snaking around the gallery: A scent sculpture, being displaced, conveyed, shaped and eroded by passing viewers. Such experiential artworks mix up our senses. Scent becomes space and movement; sight becomes tactile; minuscule textures become vast visual landscapes and voyages; shapes and forms become palpable pressures, tensions and forces; whilst sounds become punctuations of time. My favourite ‘states of matter’ quote from Ernesto is – “What is silence, is it more solid than a stone?” (Copyright Nicola Anthony, quote sourced from <http://nicolaanthony.squarespace.com/blog/2013/1/4/what-is-silence-is-it-more-solid-than-a-stone.html> (<http://nicolaanthony.squarespace.com/blog/2013/1/4/what-is-silence-is-it-more-solid-than-a-stone.html>))

The full article is well worth a read and there are some amazing photos of Neto’s work. You can find the article [here](http://nicolaanthony.squarespace.com/blog/2013/1/4/what-is-silence-is-it-more-solid-than-a-stone.html) (<http://nicolaanthony.squarespace.com/blog/2013/1/4/what-is-silence-is-it-more-solid-than-a-stone.html>). I love Nicola Anthony’s way of describing this inter-sensory experience, of the senses literally crossing and getting mixed up.

In his work *Anthropodino* (2009), Neto encloses 1650 pounds (approximately 750 kilograms) of spices in pendulous, dangling “limbs” that hang down from the ceiling of the tulle structure. The spices used include cloves, cumin and ginger. In another section of the work, a tent-like structure is full of lavender-filled pillows that you can lie down on. Neto says of the work in the following video: “I wanted to touch you with the smell...” He goes on to say the he wants his sculptural works to be touched, because touching artworks (and people also, particularly strangers) is something that’s not normally done, and he wants his audience to interact and physically connect with his works. To Ernesto Neto touch isn’t just sexual, rather, “touch is love”, touch is connection.

Artist Ernesto Neto Wants To Get Inside Your Nose



Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson and Phyllis Wattis have also written about some of Neto's earlier works that use scent:

In early works such as Piff, Paff, Poff, Puff; Piff Piff; and Puff Puff, which comprised his 1997 exhibition at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery in New York, Neto filled small Lycra sacks with colorful and aromatic substances such as chili powder and coriander. The sacks were dropped on the floor in strategic arrangements to form abstract compositions of color, form, and scent. The intensity arose from the powerful mix of scents and the evocative palette. The aroma of the installation greeted visitors upon the opening of the elevator and increased as they rounded the corners and neared the gallery. As in many of Neto's works, the viewer was drawn in through a sense not traditionally associated with art: smell. By giving equal importance to smell and touch, Neto's works challenge the traditional primacy of vision in 20th-century art. (Source: <http://bampfa.berkeley.edu/exhibition/190> (<http://bampfa.berkeley.edu/exhibition/190>))



(<https://perfumepolytechnic.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/puf1.jpg>)

One of Ernesto Neto's earlier works. Source: <https://textosac.wordpress.com/2012/06/27/la-experiencia-estetica-ante-el-arte-contemporaneo/puf-2/> (<https://textosac.wordpress.com/2012/06/27/la-experiencia-estetica-ante-el-arte-contemporaneo/puf-2/>)

I love the cross-disciplinary nature of Neto's works and how, in these earlier works, the spices created the scent, colour *and* form of the piece, and also lured visitors towards the works with their exotic aromas. What an amazing and clever use of olfaction in art.

I can't wait to see and climb inside *The Island Bird* at the NGV next week. *The Island Bird* is currently on display at NGV International, 180 St Kilda Road Melbourne, until the 19th April 2015. You can find it on the third floor.

Further Reading

If you'd like to read more about Ernesto Neto's work, I recommend the following resources, as well as the two articles quoted in my post above:

Blogger Evan Namerow [reviews *Anthropodino* on *Dancing Perfectly Free*](http://dancingperfectlyfree.com/2009/05/26/ernesto-neto-anthropodino/) (<http://dancingperfectlyfree.com/2009/05/26/ernesto-neto-anthropodino/>).

In 2014, the Guggenheim Bilbao exhibited a retrospective of Neto's works. You can [read more about the exhibited works here](http://ernestoneto.guggenheim-bilbao.es/en/) (<http://ernestoneto.guggenheim-bilbao.es/en/>).

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2 thoughts on ““I Wanted to Touch You With the Smell”: Ernesto Neto’s Immersive, Cross-Sensory Installations”

1. Pingback: [Ernesto Neto’s The Island Bird at the National Gallery of Victoria: Photo Essay | Perfume Polytechnic](#)
2. Pingback: [In Sight: Multi-sensory Inception, Production and Reception Relative to Art – insight blog today](#)

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