



## Perfume: a sensory journey through contemporary scent

Laura Eliza Enriquez

To cite this article: Laura Eliza Enriquez (2018) Perfume: a sensory journey through contemporary scent, *The Senses and Society*, 13:1, 126-130, DOI: [10.1080/17458927.2017.1411086](https://doi.org/10.1080/17458927.2017.1411086)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17458927.2017.1411086>



Published online: 06 Mar 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 173



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## EXHIBITION REVIEW

**Perfume: a sensory journey through contemporary scent**, curated by Claire Catterall and Lizzie Ostrom, London, Somerset House, June 21–September 23, 2017.

*Perfume: A Sensory Journey through Contemporary Scent* seeks to release perfume from its bottle and to create a physical space for olfactory reflection. Presenting unconventional fragrances within an interactive space, the exhibition challenges the audience's expectations and preconceptions on what constitutes perfume, and questions the place of smell in artistic practice. Organized into ten rooms (with a foreword and an epilog), every room is consecrated to the display of a different perfume by a different artist. The curation by Claire Catterall and smell connoisseur and preacher Lizzie Ostrom (aka Odette Toilette) presents each perfume as an independent unit of perception and a multi-sensory elaboration of the concept it embodies.

Despite its deep esthetic dimension, and fashion industry's long and close relationship with the arts, commercial perfume is often considered just a luxury object intended to evoke and seduce. The creativity of perfume was emphasized in *The Art of Scent 1889–2012* (2013), curated by Chandler Burr, who drew comparisons between mass-produced, prêt-à-porter fragrances and major movements in the history of art. Somerset House's *Perfume* builds upon such an argument. However, while *The Art of Scent* centered on iconography and the connoisseurship of scent, these themes are only briefly presented in *Perfume's* prolog (Figure 1). Far from reiterating standard aromas, *Perfume* prioritizes alternative bouquets that use smell to represent concepts beyond the rhetorics of lifestyle and seduction; and embodies an object that overcomes the esthetics of the fruity, floral, and oriental.

For example, the installation set up for *Comme des Garçons 2 (CDG2)* by Mark Buxton invites the “viewer” to approach a large container of minute black drops, grab one of the bigger pebbles, and inspire (Figure 2). The clear and tangible space allocating Buxton's creation for Rei Kawakubo's fashion house aims at setting up the ideal conditions for a rich multi-sensory experience; at the same time it evokes the artist's original commission “to create the smell of a swimming pool of ink” (2017, 47). In that sense, the presence of *CDG2* in *Perfume* exemplifies the exhibition's overall argument. First, by treating the perfumer as creator, and through a brief that calls for a great level of invention, the status of artist is acknowledged. Second, with its dry metallic notes and dark accords of Chinese ink and smoke, *CDG2* does not offer a conventional depiction of masculinity, but rather the representation of an idea — the black pool. And lastly, there stands out perhaps the bravest aspect in this and the rest of the ten rooms. The big container in the center of the room, and the glossy dark spheres allocating fragrance, do not only sharply and originally solve a curatorial and conceptual issue, but they mostly enable the viewer to do something that would normally be strictly forbidden – to sense. The audience is finally allowed to stand close, very close, to the displayed object; they can touch, smell, and think.

While the status of perfumer as artist may be more easily acceptable for distinguished members of the fashion industry, *Perfume* extends this condition to outsiders. For instance, while the sensory journey does star luxury label perfumers, like Buxton and Daniela Andrier's work for *Comme des Garçons (CDG2)* and Prada Olfactories (*Purple Rain*), respectively; it also welcomes experimental houses, such as Escentric Molecules (*Molecule 01*), État Libre d'Orange (*Sécrétions Magnifiques*) and Xyrena (*Dark Ride*); as well as independent, self-trained artists, like David Seth Moltz (*El Cosmico*). By presenting such a diverse group in equality of terms, *Perfume* becomes an



**Figure 1.** *Perfume: A Sensory Journey Through Contemporary Scent* (2017), installation view of “Prolog.” Photo: Peter MacDiarmid, courtesy of Somerset House.



**Figure 2.** Mark Buxton, *Comme des Garçons 2* (1999), installation view of scent with metallic effect, floral accord, smoky ink accord, bitter green in *Perfume: A Sensory Journey Through Contemporary Scent*. Photo: Peter MacDiarmid, courtesy of Somerset House.

act of political resistance, questioning the position and value of what is offered to the senses, regardless of its origin and nature.

That leads visitors to the core of the exhibition: the compositional, representational, and esthetic challenging value of this and the other nine perfumes. *Sécrétions Magnifiques*, by Antoine Lie, is displayed in a bedroom with dim lights; it is stored in small containers wrapped in cloth, and spread all around the bedsheets – white, visually speckless, yet stained with the dripping smell of milk, blood, and sex. In the background, a constant boiling sound can be heard (Figure 3). Lie fuses azurone, methane, and cumin oil to concoct *Sécrétions Magnifiques*'s distinctive smell of body fluids. Evoking the stench of a profane shroud, this perfume incites, as intended, either the development of a defying taste for the unpleasant, or repulsion.

Other perfumers play it more safely (although not entirely) in what it comes to the esthetic aspect of their creations, yet not in the conceptual. The clearest example of this creative audacity is provided by Geza Schoen's *Molecule 01*, a true case of olfactory concrete art. Composed purely of Iso E Super, a common element of perfumery and household products, the essence of *Molecule 01* stays simple and transparent. It reveals the often denied synthetic nature of perfume, stating that form is content. Schoen ventures, as the rest of the perfumers do to various degrees, to experiment with original chemical combinations, producing unconceivable accords, put together at the service of olfactory sensation and conceptualization.

Focusing on the cognitive implications of perception, *Perfume* relies heavily on a set of curatorial elements, designed and set up to assist the audience explore and expand the limits of smell. The first and best of these choices is the arrangement of an interactive space, which serves as synesthetic support for a culturally impaired society in terms of olfaction. Hence, when subjects recline on the divan installed for Andrier's *Purple Rain*, and inspire the scent of oblivion, they will accomplish more than just breathe in and move on (Figure 4). Instead, they will stop and sink in



**Figure 3.** Antoine Lie, *Sécrétions Magnifiques* (2006), installation view of scent with milk, blood, sweat, semen, saliva in *Perfume: A Sensory Journey Through Contemporary Scent*. Photo: Peter MacDiarmid, courtesy of Somerset House.





**Figure 4.** Daniela Andrier, *Purple Rain* (2015), installation view of scent with purple iris, iris roots, sensual iris in *Perfume: A Sensory Journey Through Contemporary Scent*. Photo: Peter MacDiarmid, courtesy of Somerset House.



**Figure 5.** *Perfume: A Sensory Journey Through Contemporary Scent* (2017), installation view of “The Lab.” Photo: Peter MacDiarmid, courtesy of Somerset House.

the depths of sensory experience, use it to bring out the perfume's essence, and finally, grasp its meaning – one that would otherwise remain obscure.

Second, well aware of the general illiteracy in the language of smell, from the beginning of the journey the audience is provided with pencil and paper so that they can write down their impressions of each of the ten perfumes, helping answer the big question: "what does it smell like?". By enabling the audience to think and put names to their experiences, *Perfume* helps unblock olfactory constructs and promote the way that leads to reflection.

Finally, the questionable decision to display the chemical composition of each of the olfactory objects is intimately related with an intellectual concern and an esthetic responsibility for the cultivation of informed sensation and judgment. The brief workshop added to the end of the show supports this choice. In *Perfume's* laboratory, the sentient subject can "taste" every singular note composing the accords in performance (Figure 5). Vetiver Haiti, Texas cedar, ebanol, frankincense, Iso E Super, sulfurol, azurone, musk: either isolated, or in infinite varied combinations, the smeller is now able to identify, analyze, reidentify, test, infer, and create. Making an experience closer to wine tasting than to regular exhibition viewing, the deconstructive exercise proves itself effective in fostering the operation stimulated throughout the entire journey: inquiry.

Seducing visitors to step closer, lean down, touch, smell, investigate, analyze, and judge, *Perfume: A Sensory Journey through Contemporary Scent* succeeds in rethinking, and re-evaluating the nature and value of perfume, as well as the role of the sense of smell as an active mechanism of cognition and artistic practice. Awakening noses from the slumbers of branded scent, this journey challenges traditional views about the definition of perfume, its place in the arts, and how to approach it. Lastly, *Perfume's* ultimate achievement is to provide a unique space for experiencing, and mostly thinking smell.

### Notes on contributor

**Laura Eliza Enriquez** works on sensory experience, early modern painting from the Low Countries, and the concept of taste. Her publications include poetry and philosophy essays on political and bioethical issues.

### Reference

Buxton, Mark. 2017. "Comme de Garçon 2." In *Perfume: A Sensory Journal Through Contemporary Scent*, 45–51. London: Somerset House Trust.

Laura Eliza Enriquez

 [lelienriquez@gmail.com](mailto:lelienriquez@gmail.com)

© 2018 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17458927.2017.1411086>

