

Nothing to Sniff At

By Jeffrey M. Barnes

Review of “The Art of Scent,” an exhibit at The Museum of Arts & Design, Columbus Circle, New York City, November 20, 2012 to February 24, 2013.

The Museum of Arts and Design in New York City (MAD) opened its first (and possibly *the* first) exhibit devoted to “The Art of Scent,” on November 20. With it Chandler Burr, MAD’s recently appointed “Curator of Olfactory Art,” confronted some formidable challenges. One was how to translate our experience of this “art,” tied to one of our most primitive and least discussed senses, into an aesthetic language able to communicate the height and breadth of its unique accomplishments. Another was how to translate those unique accomplishments, which are in essence invisible, into something that can be presented effectively in a venue traditionally associated with the visual arts, the museum gallery.

To meet the latter challenge they contacted the MacArthur genius award winning firm of Diller, Scofidio & Renfro (DS&R), whose design accomplishments include the New York City Highline and the recent Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts Redevelopment Project. For DS&R presenting scents in a museum context posed the additional challenge of creating an experience sufficiently isolated so that the visitor might savor each scent without distraction—from the other scents or from outside stimuli. Isolation, however, is not conducive to conversation. And conversation was indispensable if the exhibit was to achieve Burr’s goal of helping to translate our experience of the “olfactory art” into an aesthetic language. DS&R addressed these conflicting requirements by creating two separate but adjoining spaces for the exhibit. The first is a gallery in which the scents (presented without the commercial distraction of their bottles, or of anything else for that matter) are exhibited;

the second is a salon in which conversation is encouraged and facilitated by staff trained for the purpose.

The gallery part of the exhibit follows the development, refinement and use of synthetics in the evolution of “scent.”(Although the exhibit is comprised exclusively of them, Burr eschews the word “perfume” in favor of “scent,” evidently because of the former’s commercial associations. This is despite the fact that Burr’s curatorial credentials are presumably based on the two excellent books he has written on the subject and his role as perfume reviewer for the *New York Times* from 2006 to 2010).^{*} The exhibit’s dates, spanning the period from 1898 to 2010, are significant. Although humans have been concocting scents for thousands of years it was only in the late nineteenth century that synthetically engineered materials were created. By adding a deeper element of intentionality, it is generally agreed in the industry that these synthetics changed the perfumer’s “art” from a simple blending of natural essences to one that might truly deserve the name.

In the gallery, as if at an office water-fountain, one bends forward and down into a concavity in the wall to sample each scent. A fine jet of scent, presumably motion-activated, is then delivered almost directly into one’s nostrils. Text appears beside each work, projected in light on the wall. The language of these paragraph-long descriptions, according to MAD’s brochure, “explores the creative synergy between materials and processes among the artistic disciplines” and “situates olfactory art within the larger context of the visual arts.” The descriptions that accompany each work then reflect certain developments in the visual arts, particularly painting, during the same period.

Like its turn of the century counterparts in the fine arts (recall Renoir’s Impressionism or Seurat’s Pointillism), *Jicky*, the 1898 work of Aimé Guerlain, “refined and enhanced” the natural world through the addition of the newly devised synthetics. Francis Fabron’s 1957 *L’interdit*, which was designed to evoke nature without imitating it, reflects the development of “abstract art” during the same period as “an alternative to realistic depictions” of nature. 1992’s *L’Eau d’Issey*, designed for Issey Miyake by Jacques Cavallier, is considered a “breakthrough minimalist work.” Estee Lauder’s *pleasures*, designed by the team of Buzantian and Morillas in 1995 was the product of a new extraction method intended to capture scent as it occurs naturally in the atmosphere without distorting it with high-

^{*} Burr, Chandler, *The Perfect Scent*. New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2007. Burr, Chandler, *The Emperor of Scent*. New York: Random House, 2002.

temperature distillation, and so reflects “hyper-realism in olfactory art.” Coming full circle in a sense, the last work exhibited is Daniela Andrier’s 2010 *Untitled*. *Untitled* rejects the artificial world, returning to nature, but now depicts its raw violence rather than romanticizing it as had been done in prior eras.

This is but a brief survey of the works of art on exhibit and the way in which their descriptions incorporate the aesthetic language of fine art. The gallery, like some modern, minimalist chapel with twelve Le Corbusieresque fonts of scent, is a novelty that both surprises and delights. But does it exhibit the works of art to their greatest advantage?

A perfume, by design, is intended to develop and progress from its top notes, which dissipate rapidly with the body’s heat, to its heart notes, which are often deeper and more sustained, and then finally to its base notes, which are deeper still and generally account for a perfume’s longevity. Often the heart and base notes are not even perceptible until one has worn the scent on warm skin for at least 30 to 45 minutes, giving the top notes time to evaporate with the alcohol (that is its fixative). By this time the deeper notes have had a chance to warm up and “mellow” to the pleasing state that attracts rather than repels. This is what is described in the industry as a perfume’s pyramidal *structure*: each set of “notes” unfolds over ever-increasing lengths of time in space. In this respect the olfactory art’s affinities with both music and architecture are unmistakable. I wondered whether these aspects of the experience of scent might be lost in the gallery with its isolated, instantaneous and necessarily short-lived, air-borne delivery system.

Laurent Le Guernec, the “nose” behind Clinique’s *Aromatics Elixer Reserve* who was on hand for the preview, suggested that the stage at which the scent was delivered in the gallery was comparable to the first 15 minutes of its unfolding on the skin. He suggested that if one wanted to experience the full range of a scent’s notes, over a longer period of time, the salon touches provided that opportunity. In the adjoining salon there is a long glass table in which a reservoir of each of the exhibit’s scents is positioned beside a receptacle of touches (the paper strips on which perfume is often sampled in department stores). By carefully dipping the touche into a tiny slot, one can sample the scents at greater length in order to observe the way each develops—but *only* on paper.

This limitation touched on another of my principal concerns with the exhibit. Perhaps the most important ingredient in the history of scent seemed to be missing—the

human body. After all, whether to enhance, augment or disguise the body's natural odors, perfume was designed to be worn on the skin. The issue is addressed explicitly in Burr's 2007 book "The Perfect Scent," in connection with Jean-Claude Ellena's early work for Hermès. There, Burr describes a scene in the Hermès boardroom, when early iterations of Ellena's *Un Jardin sur le Nil* were being tested with Hélène Dubrule, Parfums Hermès's director of marketing.

"It's *strange*. On skin these smell almost the reverse of how they smell on the *touche*," Dubrule said grimly. This was a serious concern, the sort of thing that caused major headaches. In classic perfumery—the great Guerlains, for example, like Aimé Guerlain's *Jicky* of 1898—clients visited the perfumers in their ateliers. Those perfumers designed their creations to be tried on skin, and they were put on skin, on the client's skin, on Guerlain's skin, on Guerlain's assistant's skin, on the skin of the other assistant the first assistant rushed off to find.

Nowhere at MAD's exhibit did I see anyone applying these scents to their skin, nor did I observe any of the exhibit's "facilitators" suggesting such a thing. As presented in DS&R's clever installation, the "art," itself so much a function of and aid to physical attraction, was, for all intents and purposes, disembodied.

On the far wall of the salon is a large flat screen on which are projected the reactions of the exhibit's attendees input from electronic tablets carried by the "facilitators" who wander around inviting visitors to choose a combination of words that best describes their experience of a particular scent. For this purpose they are offered a selection of 50 generic adjectives and nouns chosen by Burr, DS&R and MAD. These include "luxurious," "minimal," "melancholic," "new," "old," "revolting," "money," "factory," "cellar," "oil," "poison," "metal," and "luxury." The combinations selected are intermittently displayed on the large screen and are evidently intended to initiate and foster a conversation about scent by means of which Burr's goal of creating an aesthetic language for olfactory art might be advanced. Of course there is already an extensive language available for discussing perfume, namely the commercial language used to discuss a scent's design, marketing and consumer reception. This language is ultimately targeted to sales, however. With the supplied vocabulary Burr may be looking to develop something broader and better suited to the aesthetic conversation that this exhibit initiates, and that Burr may be expected to further pursue during his tenure at MAD. Nevertheless, if the goal of such a conversation is truly to develop a language, and not simply to impose one on the art form's rapidly growing public,

perhaps this aspect of the exhibit should allow for our extemporaneous word choices as well.[†]

The exhibit also includes interviews with a number of artists, as well as peel and sniff cards that supply a whiff of the various stages that go into creating the work of art to further flesh-out the subject. Whatever its limitations, the solutions to the challenges that such an art form initially posed to the exhibit's architects and curator are ingeniously and delightfully realized, if not yet perfectly suited to capture and communicate the entirety of its nuanced richness in both human and art historical terms. Perhaps this first of what this reviewer hopes are many exhibits dedicated to the olfactory art form at MAD, is something like the unveiling of the architect's model or an opening gala at the ballet or symphony: a taste of something fuller, richer and more thoroughly realized that lies ahead. With Burr's credentials and MAD's commitment there is no reason to expect any less.

"The Art of Scent" is a bold and engaging first attempt worthy of praise that can no more be fully experienced digitally or on paper than its subject. I urge readers and their friends to go, see it, or rather smell it, breathe it in, reflect on its art, its artists and its history, the sum total of which is and has been unavailable as a collection in any reliable form elsewhere until now. Then walk over to the art form's commercial galleries, the perfume counters of Saks, Barney's or Bergdorf's, where you can spray the works of art directly onto your bodies or smell them wafting from the bodies of others moving in and about the dense twenty-first century crush of humanity. Are you surprised and pleased by the way you find yourselves thinking and talking about your experiences of scent, at greater length, using different terms? If so, perhaps the process of translating what previously amounted to a conversation strictly about a commodity to one about the art of scent shall have begun. It is only in, with and on such terms, that this exhibit's success can truly be measured.

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[†] The number of perfume blogs on the Internet may be a revelation to those unaware of the rapidly rising popularity of perfume discourse today. See e.g., *Fragrantica*, *Basenotes*, *Bois de Jasmin*, *Cleopatra's Boudoir*, *Now Smell This*, *The Perfume Posse*, *the Perfumed Court*, *Yesterday's Perfume* . . .