



Jaimie Baron on the 'Orchestration' of Scent

MARCH 11, 2022



Peter de Cupere, *Olfaabet*, 2021. 3D-printed resin and plastic, scent

For those interested in expanding their perceptual experience, *Living with Scents*, guest curated by Elisabetta Pisu and Clara Muller for the Museum of Craft and Design, should not be missed.

Of the five senses that give us information about our world, smell is the one most people contemplate least. Yet, it is so fundamental to how we respond to our environment that the prospect of anosmia – losing one's sense of smell, frequently associated with COVID-19 – is a deeply unnerving prospect. (And, as the curators note, it has been linked to profound feelings of isolation and not being fully alive.) We are *always* smelling, every time we inhale, yet we have an extremely limited vocabulary for scent, which makes it difficult to talk or write about. In *A History of the Senses*, Diane Ackerman writes, "Smells are our dearest kin, but we cannot remember their names." Just because we do not have words for the possibly *millions* of distinct scents our brains can perceive and identify, however, does not mean that they are not fundamental to our experience of being in the world. In fact, smell is key to the nuances of taste. Without it, we can only experience sweet, salty, sour, bitter, or umami. Given that much of modern olfaction has been about *eliminating* certain smells – the curators refer to it as the "western deodorizing crusade" – it is exciting to see so much artistic energy devoted to exploring and expanding this complex and fascinating aspect of living.



Ariane Shirvani, *Aura* scent vase, 2019. Porcelain

Notably, this show is not about the art of scent-making or scented products; rather, it is about the many ways designers harness, combine, and orchestrate smells. Although there are a few things we are invited to sniff, there are no cloying clouds of perfume (my idea of olfactory torture); instead, the gallery provides little bags of coffee beans as a nasal palette cleanser in case you encounter unpleasant or offensive odors. In other words, the show is primarily designed to be viewed, not smelled. The exhibition divides into five parts, with pieces by more than 40 international designers on display.

The works in "Ways of Sensing" teach us how to *attend* to smell. The curators note that smelling is a capacity that one develops through sustained, intentional use. Meaning, we can learn to use our noses *better*, a quest these works seek to assist while simultaneously engaging our visual curiosity with stunning forms. A central premise here is that smell takes *time*. Most perfumes are multifaceted;

that is, they are divided into top, middle, and base notes, which offer themselves to our noses in succession, rather than all at once. The beautiful containers in this section encourage us to be deliberate in the act of smelling, teaching us to distinguish between olfactory notes, just as we do with musical ones. The shape of each vessel determines precisely *how* we encounter a smell, with the objects' particular contours decomposing scents into their component parts. For instance, Ariane Shirvani's *Aura Scent Vase* (2019), is, at first glance, a mysterious object: a white porcelain vase with a curved neck ending in a small trumpet bell. Its purpose is to slowly allow volatile scent molecules to separate and rise in ascending order according to molecular weight, from lightest to heaviest. This kind of olfactory choreography transforms smell into time-based art.

The pieces in "Nose Meets the Eye" are concerned with the relation between nose and eye, scent and visual design. These low-tech diffusers are crafted from natural, often repurposed materials including natural sponge and "agromaterials" as well as wood, porcelain, glass, brass and stone. Wendy Chua and Gustavo Maggio's *AURA I* (2020) and Studio Outofstock's *Aura Tropicale* (2015) are made from reused industrial ceramics that look like coral. Mimicking nature's visual patterns, they channel nature's tendencies to absorb and/or diffuse scent molecules.



Susana Soares, *BEE'S*, 2007-2009. Blown glass

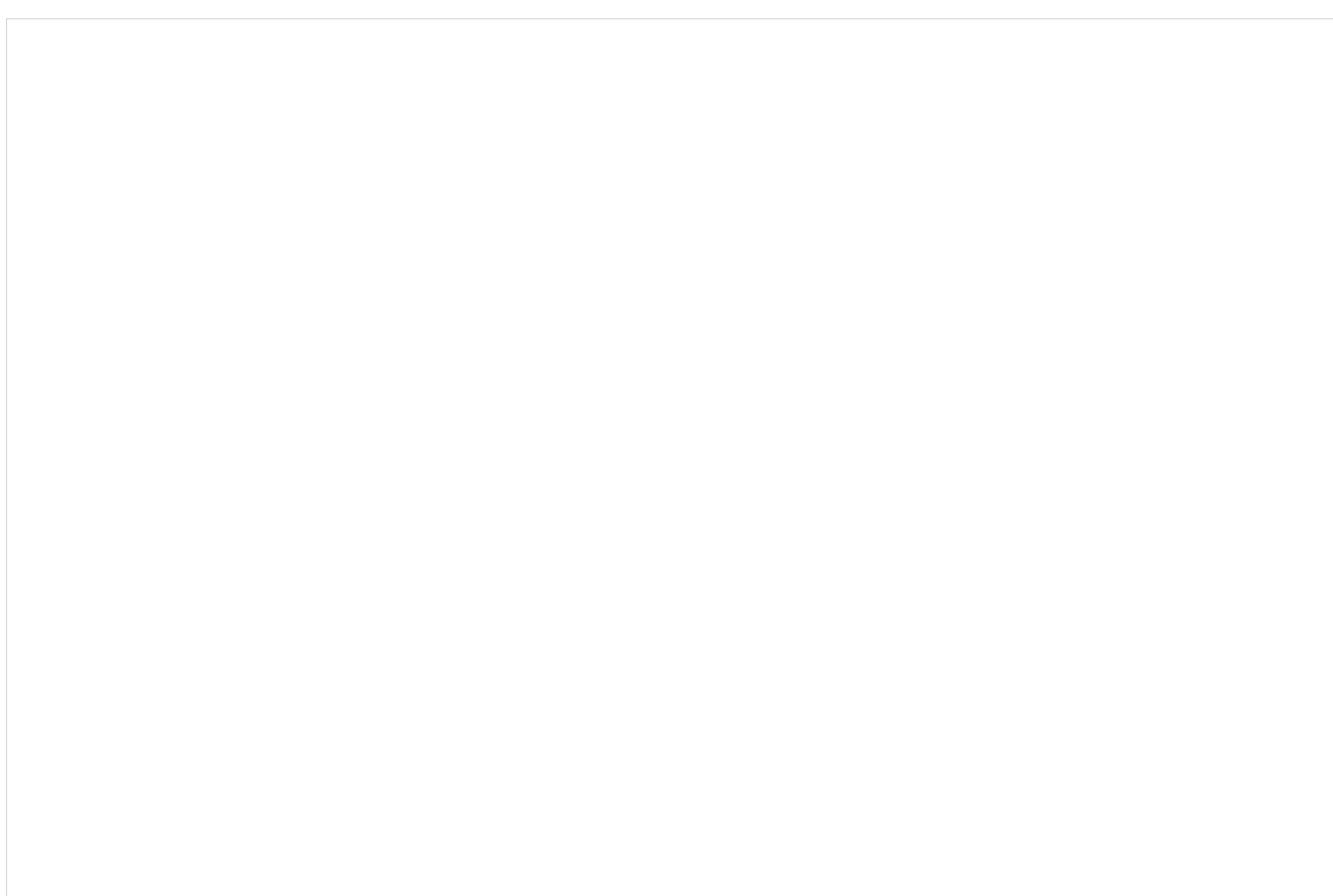
I was worried "The Scent of Care" might include aromatherapy, which connotes for me New Age crystal shops reeking of patchouli. However, the works in this section are not designed to convey soothing smells, but are intended for other, specific purposes. Lizzie Ostom's *Ode* (2011), for instance, is a device designed to release specific food smells to stimulate the appetites of elderly dementia patients, who often lose interest in eating. Susana Soares's *BEE'S* series (2007 – 2009) of clear-glass vessels are made to safely hold bees trained to detect human illnesses. When a person breathes into the vessel, the bees' olfactory reaction becomes a diagnosis. For *Perfume Tools* (2011), Jody Kocken created a series of elegant forms for mixing and then containing perfume inside metal so that people with allergies, who cannot wear perfume directly on their skin, can still have a signature scent in the form of olfactory jewelry.

Scents make us feel differently about the spaces we inhabit, and they can be actively shaped. In "A Scented Art of Living," artists develop olfactory "acoustics" with scents composed of harmonic chords that can reshape our sense of place. Examples include Virginia San Fratello and Ronal Rael's *Emerging Objects Coffee Pot* (2018), a coffee pot and matching cups made from 3D- printed coffee grounds. Liza Witte's *Silhouette Collection* (2010) consists of black soaps carved to resemble perfume bottles, each bearing a different scent and meant to be kept under a glass dome until used.

In contrast, Ebram Investments's *Nota Nota* (2018), a generic-looking appliance, allows amateurs to mix their own perfumes as a way of adjusting the olfactory profile of their living space. Regardless of how well this gadget works, its emergence clearly reflects the broader cultural movement toward luxury tailored to individual consumers: in this case, customized smells. Meanwhile, OVR Technology's *ION Scent Device* (2019) is a VR headset linked to a device that releases scents as one moves through a virtual world. Here, the idea is that smell will transform a sonically and visually immersive experience into an olfactory event as well. There are contradictions here. Do we want to personalize our environments through smell? Or do we want to create fantasy odorscapes? Both options seem to be in play.

"Spray it, Don't Say it" concerns how smell communicates between animals (including humans) and across time and space. Many animals, of course, use smell as their primary method of communication. Bipedal humans, our noses far from the ground, evolved to depend more on our eyes and ears. Yet, we still communicate through pheromones even though we are unaware of doing so. Carla Bengtson seeks to link human and insect communication in *Every Word Was Once an Animal/Euglossa* (2018), a perfume based on the compound orchid bees use to attract a mate. Contained in a blown-glass bottle shaped to echo the insect's mating dance, it is part of the artist's *Beyond Human* project, which seeks to facilitate interspecies communication and collaboration. Ani Liu's *Olfactory Time Capsule for Earthly Memories* (2017) involves exquisite, scented jewelry designed to trigger embodied memories for astronauts floating in the olfactory "silence" of outer space.

The most conceptually and technically ambitious piece in this section is Peter de Cupere's *Olfaabet* (2021), a system of 3D-printed, scented polymers that enables blind people to link Braille letters to specific scents, thereby creating what is in essence an olfactory alphabet or olfaabet: a linguistics system that uses the nose as a decoder.



Carla Bengtson, *Every Word Was Once an Animal – Euglossa*, 2016. Hand-blown glass, metal, cloth, alcohol, scents.

While this exhibition gestures toward the historical uses of scent across many cultures, I suspect we are still early in our exploration of smell, at least in terms of developing a genuine human olfactory language. Nonetheless, the olfactorily ignorant among us can begin by studying the words for smell that we *do* have but don't know. "Petrichor," I learned, is the scent of earth when it rains after a dry spell, which releases plant oil and geosmin (look it up!) into the air. We can also *practice* smelling, developing it as a skill. Indeed, beyond my desire to expand my olfactory vocabulary, I am also inspired to participate in the Japanese tradition of kodo, a guessing game of perception and identification that operates like charades for your nose.

Taken collectively, the works in this show chart nothing less than a path toward a new (or perhaps renewed) relation to our most neglected form of perception.

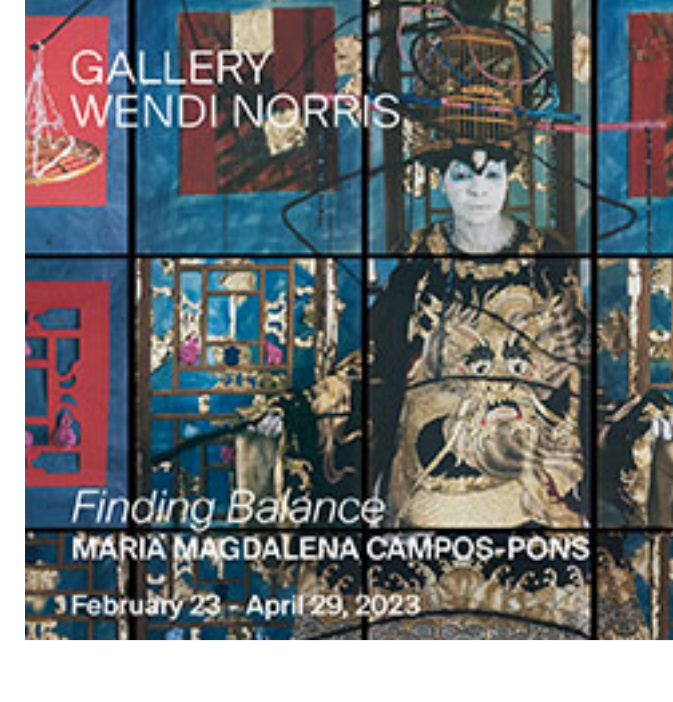
#

"Living with Scents" @ [Museum of Craft and Design](#) through June 5, 2022.

About the author:

Jaimie Baron is a professor of media studies at the University of Alberta and a visiting scholar at UC Berkeley. She is the author of *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of Berkeleys Reuse*, *Misuse: The Ethics of Audiovisual Appropriation in the Digital Era*. She is the director of the Festival of (In)appropriation and co-editor of *Docalogue*.

FILED UNDER: REVIEWS



February 25 to March 29, 2023

