



# I'm Here But You've Gone exhibition smells of pandas, pop stars - and an awful lot of sex

A new exhibition has invited artists to produce perfumes on themes ranging from holographic pop stars to panda sex. Christopher Hirst sniffs out the stories behind them

Christopher Hirst

Thursday, 30 April 2015

However accessible art galleries may have become, I'm Here But You've Gone is an exhibition where visitors are expected to be sniffy. Eight up-and-coming London-based artists were invited by Fiorucci Art Trust to utilise the 5,000 fragrances in the "oil library" of Creative Perfumers, a workshop that creates bespoke fragrances.

The show explores the sense that is not only our most undervalued but also our oldest. "Our distant ancestors used smell to detect danger, find food and locate a mate," says Anastasia Brozier of Creative Perfumers.

Certainly, mate-finding inspired the first fragrance I encountered at the exhibition's preview, with the artist Prem Sahib proffering a bottle labelled "Vault", which aimed to capture the atmosphere of the eponymous London gay club. Spearmint, I asked?

"Yes, it's what you get when you're very close to someone. There's also cumin because people get very sweaty, and leather, and a bit of disinfectant because these places are constantly cleaned. I also wanted to get the smell of poppers in there. It's intended to tell a story." And as such, it's a new addition to the traditional smells of London listed in Peter Ackroyd's *London: The Biography*: "Long Acre smelled of onions and Southampton Row of antiseptic." It was chocolate in Hammersmith and fish in the East End.

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But now it's pandas on heat: Mary Ramsden's contribution is intended to evoke the compound the beasts smear around their habitat. And if that doesn't appeal, Ed Fornieles' "Cornucopia" might. None of Creative Perfumers' 5,000 suited his purpose – to achieve the smell of "abundance to breaking point" – so he mixed a cocktail of the market's most popular fragrances, what the trade calls "statistics perfumes". The result is "a family in a bottle", a combination of the four leading sellers to mothers, fathers and teenage daughters and sons that has "a lush, sickly intensity".

Patrizio Di Massimo had a more ambitious task with his "Odour of Sanctity" – to evoke the moment the soul leaves the body – although to my nose, it suggested a visit to the dentist. Magali Reus wanted to create the "moment of newness" you get when opening boxes of products such as computers or tennis shoes (a rubbery whiff dominated for me), while Adham Faramawy continued the glossy theme with "Hyperreal Flower Blossom", which aimed to convey a Japanese vocaloid (hologram pop singer).

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Adam Christensen's "Smell of Intuition" requires visitors to "come close and sniff ... a landscape of sexual encounters". I was hesitant when Rhydian Gwynn Jones of Creative Perfumers uncorked the bottle. "It's like that moment when you see someone and think, 'Am I attracted?' It uses a base note of civet to produce a below-the-belt growl." And even less abashed was Celia Hempton's creation, "Vagina". "It doesn't beat about the bush," admitted Rhydian. "You may get a seaweed smell – wet and salty like a harbour when the sun gets at it."

Concluding the olfactory tour, Rhydian warned, "You may feel a bit exhausted. Perfume can take you places without you realising it." And it's true that our sense of smell is not only more potent but more precise than taste. (In his analysis of the world's greatest wines, for example, the leading authority Robert Parker devotes much more space to the nose than to the palate.)

It's also claimed (in recent Brazilian research) that women have almost 50 per cent more olfactory cells than men. So, back home, I called on my own expert. In a blind test of the eight creations, my wife said that Sahib's gay nightclub was "like a public lavatory", while Magali Reus's smell of newness was "a store full of glossy books". Her response to Celia Hempton's "Vagina"? "It's floral," she said, "like one of those feminine hygiene products." And I didn't wrinkle my nose.

*"I'm Here But You've Gone" is at Fiorucci Art Trust, 10 Sloane Avenue, London SW3, 2-6pm Tuesday-Saturday until 9 May*