About the exhibition

Scent is a powerful medium with the ability to move us on a psychological and physical level. However, in day-to-day life, we breathe in smells in our proximity often without being aware of their complex significance to us.

Despite scent being inferior in art spaces compared to more conventional artworks, such as paintings or sculptures, it is a material and experience that most people can connect with and feel something about because smell is inseparable from day-to-day living. Unlike with averting our eyes or blocking our ears, we cannot turn off our sense of smell, as it is typically an inevitable part of breathing.

Scented Translations challenges the visual bias of gallery spaces through its focus on the material nature of scent. This exhibition touches on the invisible, yet highly influential relationship scent can have with spaces and ourselves through its bound-by-nothing nature.

This group show is curated by emerging curator Holly Neave and features work by Ōtautahi artists Jen Alexandra, Jo Burzynska, and Steven Junil Park.

About the programme

CoCA's yearly Emerging Curators Programme supports an early-career curator either living in Ōtautahi, or who whakapapa to Waitaha, to curate a group show.

This initiative is supported by CoCA staff and our artist-led Programming Group, and enables a curator to learn new skills, and engage further with the arts community.

CoCA puts out an open call for applications each year. The 2024 and 2025 programmes were made possible with the support of the Christchurch Creative Communities Scheme.

Thanks to a generous Patron, we are able to offer this opportunity again in 2026.

Scented Translations

Holly Neave

When I was a child, at the end of my visits to my paternal grandmother and grandfather's house, they would, without fail, pluck a small branch from their lemon verbena shrub to give to me to enjoy its scent during the car ride home. From doing this every time I visited them, when I smell lemon verbena now it is transformative and sends my conscious back to a time when I was much smaller and had a different relationship with my grandparents. In a compelling yet unintentional way, smelling this deciduous plant reconnects me with them and that moment of my life.

As Constance Classen and David Howes state, scent is a powerful material that has the ability to affect us on a psychological and physical level. However, in day-to-day life, we breathe in smells in our proximity without being fully aware of their significance to us.[1] Scent is a curious medium, especially when situated in a gallery. Unlike more conventional art objects, scent has the ability to grow in size, travel through a space, and potentially be carried outside of the gallery on its audience. Scent is difficult to measure and control, and therefore presents problems for archival systems of preservation. This gives scent a temporality that is threatening to the commodity-orientation of capitalist societies and the archive; the cornerstone of museums.

Conservation practices in museums have developed to acknowledge and attend to the temporality of paintings, where paint moves slowly over time and deterioration is measurable; however, conservation practices have more limited understanding of how to assess and preserve fragrance. Museums act as a bubble for carrying atmosphere, one which is sanitised and set at an exact temperature and humidity for preserving visual, more conventional works. These bubbles do not welcome or accommodate smells, as the loose nature of their materiality could threaten contamination to other taonga in the collection. Therefore, museums tend to avoid collecting fragrances and instead continue in their visually oriented acquisition and preservation pursuits.

In the 2003 UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, performing arts, the skills of traditional crafts persons, and oral traditions are included; however, scent is not. While this Convention lists safeguarding practices that include preservation, protection, and documentation,[2] even how these broad principals might apply to scent is unclear. Preservation, protection, and documentation would be applicable practices for preserving and archiving smell, however, this Convention does not choose to include smell in the materials that these practices

[1] Classen, C. Howes, D. 1994. 'Aroma, The Cultural History of Smell.' *Routledge*. New York. p. 1.
[2] UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. 2003. 'Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage'. UNESCO.

safeguard, reinforcing the narrative that smells are not valued enough to be considered as part of cultural heritage. Despite scent being undervalued, it is a material and experience that most people can connect with and feel something about because smell is inseparable from day-to-day living. Unlike with averting our eyes or blocking our ears, we cannot turn off our sense of smell, as it is typically an inevitable part of breathing. While appreciation for music, painting, or sculpture is entangled with institutions and systems that purport to be able to cultivate this, smell within Eurocentric culture is under-theorised, and might be seen as more accessible. Connoisseurial gatekeeping, perhaps recognising how common smell is, dismisses smell's ability to offer 'high' aesthetic experience, but with this marginalisation there is an opportunity: perhaps scent-based works hold out the possibility of more democratic engagement with artworks.

Fragrances have significant expressive capabilities, from being able to depict other scented things, to conveying warmth, coolness or texture, or being instantly able to communicate material knowledge. Scent's power in this regard allows it to translate an array of aesthetics and emotions, intended by the perfumer or otherwise. When scents are experienced in gallery spaces, they challenge the setting's bias towards visual material, because instead of asking audiences to look, they instead ask that audiences breathe the works into their airways to experience them. This suggests the 'loose' nature of the composition of scent, with their ability to float in the space and even land on gallery visitors, travelling out of the door with them at the end of their visits. The scent is then carried into different settings, which build and complicate its meaning and associations.

Natalia Dudareva and Eran Pichersky discuss the decrease of scent occurring in commercial rose breeding programmes. Traits such as colour, visual aesthetics, and long shelf life have been prioritised, though the continuation of a rose's scent has been disregarded.[3] This is yet another example of visual aesthetics dominating over non-visual ones, feeding the narrative that visual experience is more important than osmic experience. Through doing this, access to important material knowledge, sensory experiences, and memories have the potential to be lost, and alongside them, significant parts of our osmic history. This is detrimental as scent and memory have an inseparable connection, so through choosing to discontinue scents, access to the memories associated with them is also lost. Additionally, if scents are not actively being preserved in archives, then we lose the ability to access smells that the people who came before us were connected to, as well as the scented elements connecting to our whakapapa.

Smell is perhaps undervalued because at times it can be an implied threat to the body. Smells from toxic materials, such as fumes or mould, are examples of the harmful scents people avoid. The uptick in mask wearing and weariness around breathing in bacteria has also risen in recent years, which could give people a mindfulness around what they are letting into their airways. These schools of thought might be a defining factor as to what people consider to be art and what they consider to be every day banal experiences, smell potentially being perceived as one of them. Galleries are not often designed for scent-focussed artworks. Their white walls offer a 'neutral-looking' surface that often acts as a backdrop for paintings and sculptures, however, they do not necessarily provide the optimal setting for experiencing scent. This calls to question, what is an optimal environment to experience scent? Most people encounter this medium in an array of locations and it is difficult to think of where one might not experience it. Even in an archive where scent is extracted out, there might still be a sterile smell in the air. Perhaps if archives and cultural heritage policies recognised the importance of scent preservation, galleries and museums would be designed to accommodate and exhibit smell in ways that foster its experience, giving audiences more opportunity to connect with non-visual forms of art and histories.

[3] Dudareva, N. Pichersky, E. 2006. 'Biology of Floral Scent.' *Taylor & Francis Group. ProQuest Ebook Central*. p. 89.

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