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HOW I SOLVED IT: TRANSFORMING IDEAS INTO SMELLS

By Anicka Yi May 9, 2017

Growing up in a Korean-American household, I was immersed in pungent kitchen aromas. The smell of fermenting kimchi and *doenjang* seemed to sink into our furniture, clothing, and hair. As a child, I often felt ashamed of my family's olfactory world. I wanted to smell American, which I imagined would involve becoming perfectly odorless. But shame works in mysterious ways: the strongest odors disgusted but also excited me, eliciting a tingling response.

I started trying to develop my sense of smell, picking up or imagining the aromas of supposedly scentless places. I remember watching "2001: A Space Odyssey," and thinking that the time-travel scene, where the protagonist meets his older self in a glowing, white-tiled holodeck, would have benefitted from an olfactory dimension. To me, the smell would resemble that of time itself, something like onionskin paper. But we don't often attribute an odor to outer space, just as we don't attribute one to, say, the White House. Conventionally, space and power are not thought of as having aromas.

About ten years ago, when I was making art but not exhibiting it, and working part time as a bookkeeper, I realized that I could manufacture my own scents, deliberately provoking that disgusted, tingling response. I started making tinctures in my kitchen, almost trembling as I infused everything from Szechuan peppercorns to chocolate in 120-proof grain alcohol. My favorites were the musty root and herb infusions—ginseng, dried mushroom, celery seeds. I still have many of these tinctures, stored in my studio closet.

How do we imagine that immigrants, or foreigners, smell? Do we think of the interiors of taxicabs, or Chinese takeout, or feet? As a child, these questions horrified me, but as an artist I have learned that there is power in finding the fascination that lurks in that feeling. How about the smell of women? For one recent work, I cultivated bacterial samples from a hundred female friends and acquaintances, creating a piquant smell that permeated the gallery.

I have also tried manufacturing scents that are simply pleasing to me. After making various tinctures, I began working with a friend, the architect Maggie Peng, to create a series of perfumes based on living women. The first was inspired by Fusako Shigenobu, the founder and former leader of the now defunct Japanese Red Army, who went into exile in Lebanon, in the nineteen-seventies, and is now imprisoned in Japan. Lebanon is home to some of the oldest cedar trees, so there are notes of cedar in the fragrance, as well as yuzu fruit, shiso leaf, and black pepper.

For my current show, at the Guggenheim, I wanted to create a hybrid scent of an Asian-American woman and a carpenter ant. Ants fascinate me, with their matriarchy, industry, and powerful sense of smell, which they use to recognize the caste of other colony members. I brought the idea to several collaborators, including the perfumer Barnabé Fillion, who helped create a base for the Asian-American part of the fragrance (vegetal and floral, with notes of cedar, hay, cumin, and cellophane), and for the ant (citrusy and meaty). The forensic scientist Kenneth Furton identified the compounds found in human sweat and ant tissue, which the artist Sean Raspet translated into a second set of scents.

I combined these elements in a final fragrance, called “Immigrant Caucus,” which is sweaty and herbacious until the garlicky note of the ant kicks in. In the Guggenheim installation, canisters release the scent as visitors step into the main gallery. People have described it as delicate, but they also seem unsure of how to talk about it. Most of us are not accustomed to having detailed discussions about smells, and they may also feel uncomfortable commenting on what they are told is the scent of an Asian-American woman.

In the gallery, a diorama holds a colony of twenty thousand live ants, who are also exposed to “Immigrant Caucus.” At times, groups of them have appeared confused by the scent, seeming to interrogate a single ant as though they were prosecutors cross-examining a witness. What do they make of the invisible stranger in their midst?