

Fragrance viewpoint

Cinematic Coffret

Fragrance envelope pushes Christophe Laudamiel and Christoph Hornetz translate a new film into 15 essences

By Michelle Krell Kydd

There is much talk in the perfume industry regarding the abundance of lackluster fragrance releases. Although this is much to the consternation of all, it's no wonder; after the terrorist attacks in September 2001, the issue of safety has become acutely prevalent in our culture, almost to the point of pathology. Stock prices along with fragrance sales took a nose dive following the deplorable acts of al-Qaida—and so did a healthy sense of creative risk.

In a world where fear-based stories achieve front-page status more quickly than stories of hope and kindness, there is a need for the artistry and incomparable beauty of fine fragrance, right here, right now and more than ever. In the fall of 2006, perfume was demonized at airports as a potential tool of terrorism. (Ironically, and this detail bears attention, the cradle of fragrance history resides in the Middle East, where many of the world's finest raw materials are cultivated.) While the effects of this chapter in history were being written, Christophe Laudamiel's career at IFF was beginning to take flight.

The Story of a Perfume Project

Laudamiel came to IFF in 2000 from Procter & Gamble, as a chemist/perfumer who migrated from functional to fine fragrance creation. In 2003, both he and perfumer Carlos Benaim were recognized at the ASP Perfumer's Choice Awards for their work on Ralph Lauren Polo *Blue for Men*, which had also won a FiFi Award that same year. Hard work continued to pay off in wins for Laudamiel, but something else was brewing. Laudamiel's fascination with Patrick Süskind's novel, *Perfume: the Story of a Murderer*, was inspiring late-night creation sessions, long after mods from big clients were tweaked and tuned, and the watchmen at IFF were doing their midnight rounds.



Christophe Laudamiel

Photo courtesy of Hajime Watanabe

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IFF has always been ahead of the curve when it comes to supporting and stimulating their perfumers' talents, and Laudamiel was an avid participant in the "Visionaire Scent" (2003) and "Visionaire Taste" (2005) projects. In addition, he was co-creator of "Iconosms," an exhibition with photographer L.E. Badessi. "Iconosms," which combined visuals with scent, made gallery appearances in Florida and New

York, as well as Belgium. Laudamiel's side projects, along with a growing number of fine fragrance wins, were populating Google search pages like spring dandelions and fragrance bloggers were buzzing with respect and admiration for his work.

In 2005, Christophe Laudamiel and Christoph Hornetz of IFF, collectively known as the duo *Les Christophs*, completed their *Perfume* project. That same year, Constantin Film was wrapping up production of the film version of *Perfume* with German director Tom Tykwer (of *Run Lola Run* fame). The timing was right. IFF's Nicolas Mirzayantz, group president of fragrances, agreed to share the *Les Christophs*' project with Vera Strübi, president of Thierry Mugler Parfums.

Mugler had ushered the uniquely gourmand *Angel* into the world in 1992, making this new project a great match.

One Story, 15 Scents

Equally talented in niche and fine fragrance creation, Laudamiel is driven by a need to smash boundaries—those imposed by circumstance and those he imposes on himself. Over a six-year-period, utilizing passages of the novel that seemed ripe for olfactive interpretation, Laudamiel took on the roles of product developer and marketer, responsibilities that are often criticized by perfumers who feel frustrated by the restrictions and contradictions inherent in a creative process that is aggressively driven by profit.

The resulting 15 scents, presented in a single coffret, are as follows: *Baby*, *Paris 1738*, *Atelier Grimal*, *Virgin No. 1*, *Boutique Baldini*, *Amor & Psyché*, *Nuit Napolitaine*, *Ermite*, *Salon Rouge*, *Human Existence*, *Absolu Jasmin*, *Sea*, *Noblesse*, *Orgie* and *Aura*.

Virgin No. 1 contains a mouth-watering accord based on the Mirabelle plum and also includes a proprietary molecule that was derived from the headspace of a virgin's lower abdomen by the late scientist Braja Mookerjee (of *Space Rose* fame). Less controversial, but equally compelling is *Aura*. The scent is Strübi's brainchild, and *Les Christophs* created it with all of perfumery's 12 fragrance families in mind.

The concept is culled from the story's protagonist, Grenouille, a talented but twisted perfumer who lacks a personal scent and seeks to create one that will grant him acceptance in a human world he abhors. *Aura* is a stand-alone in the *Perfume* coffret and can be used in combination with any fragrance in the kit or on the market. The nature of *Aura* is catalytic; it is meant to enhance the wearer's scent of choice by adding a personal signature that is neither neutral nor aggressive in character. (For a full olfactory run-through of the coffret, see **Story in a Bottle**, on Page 28.)

The concept of a layering fragrance is not new, but for Strübi to even consider a fragrance that can be sold as an accessory to competitive brands shows marketing smarts. Most importantly, it honors the art of fine fragrance by encouraging intelligent discussion at-counter, something that is all too rare stateside. This fact is not lost on Laudamiel, who describes the process of creating *Aura* as "... laborious, but worth the effort." When asked about the creative process behind the creation of the *Perfume* coffret, Laudamiel responds with thoughtful, modest and sometimes cutting commentary.

Michelle Krell Kydd: One does not generally see perfume products that are the brainchild of a perfumer being actualized, from a marketing standpoint. What are some of the reasons that this concept took off?

Christophe Laudamiel: Because working on our own came first. Had we waited to have budgets approved, a sponsor, authorizations, artistic criticism, etc., nothing would have taken off. Some people don't move before everything is defined.

We moved the way we wanted to, guided by our own strict discipline.

This was followed by convincing our entourage and reaching agreement between the right people at IFF, Constantin Film and Thierry Mugler. An important fact here is that work and discipline can speak for you, though not always fast enough. I also believe in the principle of immanent justice.

MKK: Do you think that more "perfumer-created" marketing concepts are possible in the future? What do you think it would take to get things moving in this direction?

CL: Perfumer-created concepts exist, but they are usually based on odors and raw materials. I do believe the future will reveal more of these concepts in general. The balance between idea and realization is a hard one to achieve, and realization is the most difficult as it is much harder to realize things than to just have ideas. Everybody has ideas, even crazy ones, but how do you realize these into something that is tangible, credible or concrete, and have the knowledge and the will to materialize them as well? Striking the balance between reality and fantasy is a real challenge.

Also, it is not so much the "brief concept" that has to change. You can have very free briefs or very strict briefs; it depends more on the way you are prepared and educated to select things. Education is absolutely

needed, from kindergarten through post-doctorate. In any other form of art or design we accept the fact that the more the public knows or sees, the more it drives up business in awareness, passion and financial results. It does not mean you have to give away all of your secrets, or say what you are preparing, but once something is public, it should be much more open to explanation.

MKK: What motivated you to take this on? You had to do this in what little spare time is afforded to most perfumers.

CL: Inner drive was the motivating factor. It's hard to explain. I don't know where it comes from. I have always had this flame in me to go the extra mile, whether it was at school, at sports, in dance or at work. It is this sensation, which can kill you with its weight, a sensation of feeling bad or even ridiculous when you know you can do something better, like having an idea and not being able to sleep until you can show yourself that you can do it.

MKK: Most consumers are accustomed to creating their own environments with fragrance as opposed to having a time in history captured and presented to them. How does the association between literature and fine fragrance help make the sensory experience of the *Perfume* coffret more inviting to a consumer?

CL: Consumers are more at ease and more familiar with literature than with fragrances. Once again, it's all a matter of education. The goal is to use the former to make them understand the latter. Of course here, a perfumer cannot find the odor of those (historical) places by searching the (fragrance house) archives. One cannot go and copy some known schemes in perfumery—it is a much more difficult enterprise. As it says in the book and in the movie, the only things we don't have left from our history are the scents. You have writings in literature and in speeches, and you have old sheet music for the performance of music and singing. You do have a few perfume formulae, but many materials are not produced the same way or produced at all any longer ... and there is no trace of the smell of the places or the people at that particular time. Forget about finding traces of the smell of Paris in 1738. You have to recreate this in your mind first. It's a feat that resembles a mental gymnastic of sorts, one that is complex and unpredictable.

MKK: You and Christoph Hornetz had to create some fragrances with rather hideous aspects, in order to be true to the passages in the book that you chose to interpret. What is it like, purposely creating a malodor? It is not the ordinary process of making something of beauty, which you are often called to do, so how do you deal with this aspect of counter-intuitiveness as a creator?

CL: All other forms of art and design, if they encompass the whole of life, include horror stories or darker sides. We need to show all of these emotions in perfumery. It was bold for Mugler to accept these emotions and to put money behind some creations that literally stink. This has never been done before in perfumery as far as I know. It makes things real, lively and genuine.

This is not counterintuitive to real creators. In perfumery, we have not made the distinction between the concept of beauty and that of the "pleasant;" they are two very different things. Beauty is not a personal choice; it exists beyond human consciousness. Pleasant is a personal choice and often a choice that is very easily made.

MKK: *Aura* is an interesting fragrance and concept, as it is designed to be worn with any existing fragrance on the market. What went into its creation that makes it so different?

CL: I don't know of any other fragrance like this. It's not just a marketing concept.

First of all, it was not built a la Jean Carles, utilizing the traditional top, middle and base approach. It was created as more of an abstract sphere. We didn't want the materials to stick out, so *Aura* possesses a signature, but not a prevalent material. In order to strike a balance between materials that were all strong by nature, to create something assertive, powerful, but yet abstract, the dosage had to be precise and this was a very tedious process. I got a lot of training for this when I was preparing last year's "Iconosms" exhibition in New York.

In addition, we used materials from all odor families to make sure *Aura* could build bridges with any other fragrance on the market. *Aura* was applied in combination with many, many other fragrances—not all of course—but many women's and men's fragrances with a variety of qualities such as fresh, dense, oriental, floral and woody. We explored colognes, older and contemporary ones, cheap ones and quality ones.

MKK: Your curriculum vitae shows that you are a chemist as well as a perfumer. You also reach out on an educational level (universities, talks, etc.) and participate in niche fragrance projects such as "Visionaire." What does participating in these niche projects do for you as a creator? For the public? For your company?

CL: As a creator, this kind of participation keeps the flame burning and unleashes you from yourself. I strongly believe that one way to make perfumery evolve is by drawing in the public. Education and niche projects create a kind of envy, a thirst in the public, which will move large corporations. For IFF, these niche projects create an aura that invites clients to explore possibilities in more commercial projects. Why does the car industry regularly show prototypes that it will never dare to produce? It's for the very same reason—it pushes R&D and it pushes clients and consumers.

MKK: Newness masquerading as innovation is a common problem in our industry, one that cannot be ignored. Why take that risk when taking the established path is less likely to present obstacles?

CL: There are elements of comfort and risk in the perfumery equation. Look at history. Take the Pilgrims, for example. Some stayed on the East Coast and some hated the status quo and were compelled to move on, to discover things. If you hate routine and are bored by easy things, how can you push the envelope without going over the fence to see what it is like?

Choosing risk involves a kind of masochism, but also offers the reward of surpassing yourself, as in sports. In our business there are two types of managers, the ones who pioneer and dare, who put personal things at stake because they are so convinced, and then there are the ones who manage processes that encourage the usual type of growth. We need both kinds of approaches, but the skills that reflect each method of management are different. Risk-takers can always pull back and be more conservative, but those who are more conservative have a harder time going into new territory. This has nothing to do with age, but is a matter of comfort, hence the masochism.

MKK: Other companies were trying to win approval from Constantin Film regarding engagement in product/licensing agreements. Why did your team win?

CL: We won because of personal passion, because of all of the work involved, all of the preparation, ideas and realizations. Both Constantin Film and Vera Strübi (Mugler) were flabbergasted by what Christoph and I presented, and also by our very complete creative and educated backgrounds. This brought trust into the picture.

MKK: What advice would you give to other perfumers who are struggling to create from an authentic place?

CL: First decide what you want to do and then evaluate the kind of person you are, in a very lucid way. Perform your own introspection and work, work and again, work. The process is tedious and painful. Then, if you decide to do so, it is like learning how to swim; first it is very painful, but then after devoting many

hours of practice every single day, you swim like a fish in its element.

MKK: What advice would you give to traditional marketers, in light of the demand Mugler has seen for the *Perfume* coffret?

CL: There is an interested public out there that is hungry for things, and a public that we don't traditionally tap. This project reaches toward an audience whose influence is more enthusiastic, one that perhaps scares or frightens traditional perfume marketers. I'm not sure. What I am sure of is that Christoph Hornetz and I are looking forward to additional opportunities to explore the future of fragrance creation. Look at what happened with the original marketing plan for the coffret. The first batches of coffrets were just about gone as soon as they went on sale, and the creation of a second batch is being discussed. If consumer demand dictates the results, more sets will be available at: www.perfume.thierrymugler.com.

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