

Niche stories

Sculpting Scent

Shaping Room's Nobi Shioya gives some of the world's top perfumers wide berth in creating unique scents

“I often say that I don't care about fragrances,” says Shaping Room founder Nobi Shioya, “but I care very much about smell.”

Shioya—a surfer, sculptor, blogger (<http://whatwedoisecret.org>) and fragrance entrepreneur—has launched a number of novel scents over the last few years, capturing the intangible nuances of love, sex and surfing (not all at once) in a bottle. And he's done it by marshalling the talents of some of the world's leading perfumers, including Christophe Laudamiel, Sophia Grojsman and Alberto Morillas. Taking a cue from his fine art background, Shioya has deconstructed the conventional wisdom of perfume creation, collaborating with these noses in an intuitive, patient process that sits in stark contrast with today's ever more harried mainstream fragrance business.

Creative Process: Capturing the Ethereal

“Smell is so much tied to my memories, so it affects my inspiration, and all aspects of my creations,” says Shioya, who came to fragrance through the incorporation of specially scented candles in his sculptural installations. This is not a man who has much interest in pretty-smelling flowers. For Shioya, scent is less about banal pleasure and more about strong emotional connections. He doesn't so much have favorite smells as “smells that have been bothering me,” such as urine (“because of a certain childhood experience”), the various smells of women, and dead bugs (“they

have very peculiar smells”). He also finds inspiration in raw materials such as Galaxolide (IFF). “Some synthetic materials amaze me,” he says.

These haunting scents have led Shioya along an olfactive path that has spanned sculpture and stand-alone fine fragrances. For his first scent, the surf-themed *Jet-Scent*, Shioya started from a very specific concept. “I had two accords from Alberto Morillas—one was a ‘sperm’ note and one was a salty note. I asked that he mix those two accords together and then create a scent that is reminiscent of surfing, waves, things like that.”

And because the brief required such pinpoint accuracy, Shioya says Morillas “probably ended up creating nearly 100 mods.” This sculptor, who until he began working with fragrance knew next to nothing of perfumery and perfumers, says, “I didn't say much [during consultations]; he brought [the mods] in, I smelled and made short comments, saying whether I liked them or not, [then] he gave his opinion, [and] I told him to push in certain directions.”

“I'm still very illiterate or ignorant [when it comes to fragrance language],” Shioya admits. “I still don't use industry terms like civet or lavender. I have a strange way of describing scents. I often put them into a volume or form; I use hands and try to make shapes. I learned that perfumers often do drawings to describe or think about their scents.”

But while Shioya eschews a traditional fragrance vocabulary, his partner (in life and fragrance) Veronique Ferval, director of fragrance development at IFF, contributes her more formal expertise. (She has also given Shioya access to noses that might otherwise have been out of reach for a niche fragrance house.) This unique alliance balances artistic



ambiguity with more exacting fragrance evaluation. “It seems that all the perfumers who I’ve worked with understand what I’m saying,” says Shioya, but adds, laughing, “Veronique is always doing follow-up with more specific targets.”

Perfumer Relationships

“There is always a very clear but simple concept [for my fragrances],” says Shioya. “The rest, I think perfumers have a lot of freedom.”

When Shioya began working with perfumers, he was a little taken aback. He’d had exposure to musicians, fine artists and designers, who he characterizes as incredibly free, demonstrative, selfish and strange. “I’m so used to those types of people,” Shioya says, “but when I first met perfumers like Alberto Morillas or Thierry Wasser—from the outside they were dressed very well, wearing nice Hermes ties, very classical [European] types; but once I started to speak with them, their personalities were more striking than any other artists that I knew. The perfumers that I worked with for *S-Perfume* or my art exhibits were mostly very strong characters. What was striking for me was the very traditional exterior with very unique interiors.”

Shioya’s respect for his collaborators is strikingly unique and personal. Of the creators of his scents, he says, “I feel like I’m making portraits of them. My biggest interest lies in the personality of a perfumer.”

Constraints and Creativity

“Because the industry is rigid in structure and secretive in nature,” says Shioya, “I think there is plenty of room to explore inside. Being secretive is itself something that attracts me. A challenge for me to break it a bit.”

Yet, for the founder of a niche fragrance house, Shioya isn’t as opposed to big business and high pressure as one might expect. “I guess niche projects could give [perfumers] a chance to be freer and express themselves more strongly, but I’m not sure that it’s best. When the project is bigger, the pressure is bigger is well, and then I suppose in a way [perfumers] have more of a challenge—I have always believed that creators need some sort of challenge.”

Still, even Shioya sees shrinking project cycles as a serious threat to creativity on larger projects. But the fragrance industry’s creativity issues might lie closer to home. “Perfumers aren’t aggressive enough,” he says. “They often worry about team work or being too selfish, which is a little bit strange for me, because sculptors and painters are very selfish and they don’t care what other people think.”

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