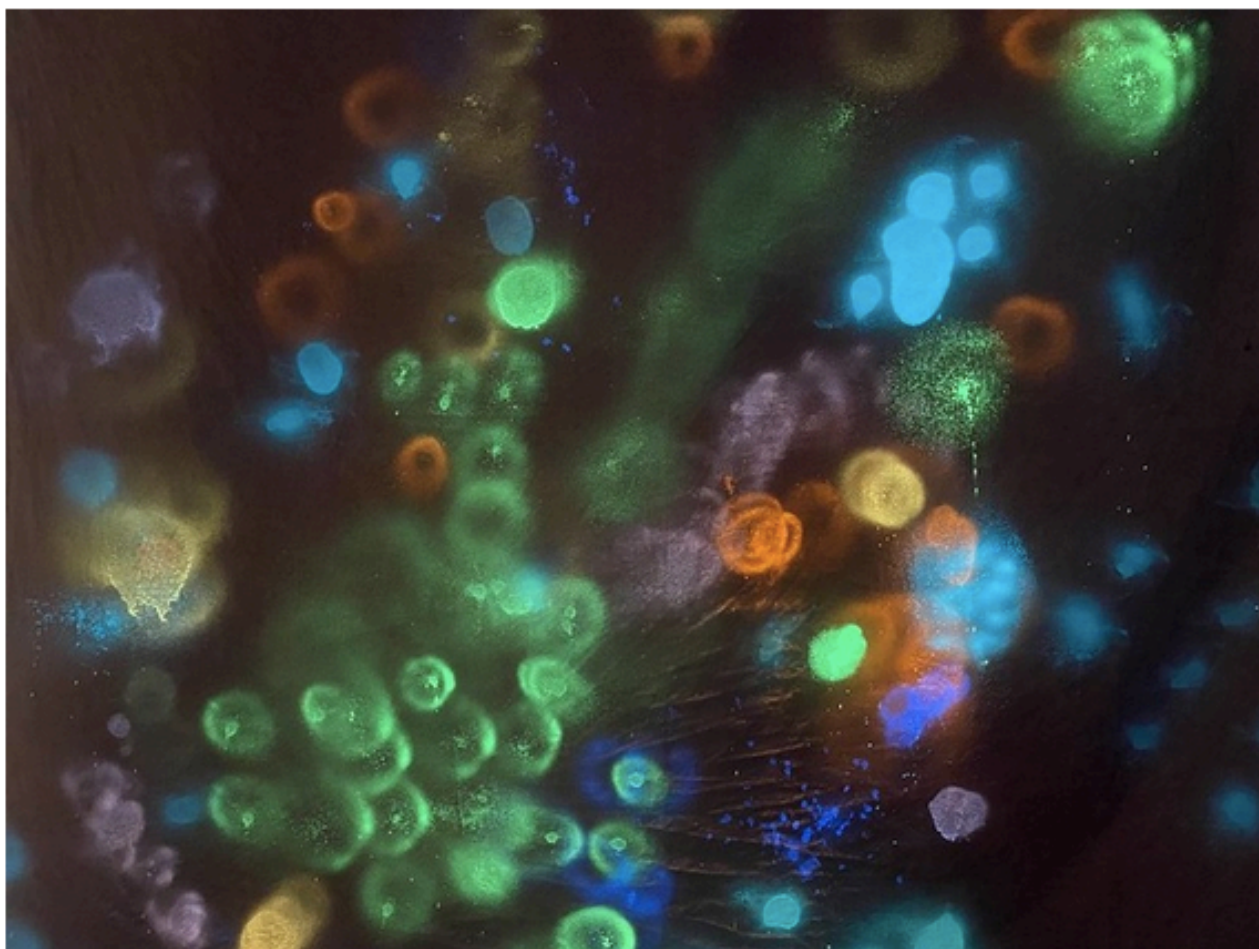


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## Eva Díaz at the World Perfumery Congress

July 05, 2022 • Miami



Spritzes from Maki Ueda's "viral parfum" as seen under a black light. Photo: Maki Ueda.

**A FEW WEEKS AGO**, I mentioned I'd be attending the World Perfumery Congress—WPC—to a colleague.

How very David Foster Wallace of you, he said, teasingly.

It's not a cruise! And I'm taking O Chem!

I was WPC-bound to investigate an often-implicit presupposition in the history of aesthetics and

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reinforced nearly every day in the “fine” arts: that the authority of visual judgment ranks above all in a hierarchy of the senses, with sound as runner-up. I was there to explore how studying a nonvisual experience such as olfaction could help explain the overvaluation of certain experiences in culture (vision and cognition, distance and analysis, for example) and the devaluation of others (smell and sensuality, proximity and the body). To get on the ground with the greater sensorium, to lead a richer, more embodied life beyond the (visual) spectacle!

This year’s WPC drew thousands of people from around the world, not a one with my zeal of the convert. They’d come to these revelations long before me, and, after I batted away their confusion—An art historian? Art critic? What are you doing *here?*—nearly everyone I talked to was near ebullient that this sort of interdisciplinary exchange was happening between a representative of the “fine” arts and those of olfaction. About time.

Traditionally, the WPC is a biennial affair, but due to Covid, this edition marked its return after a four-year hiatus. With about seventy-five booths and two dozen conference sessions, it felt funny to be back at the Miami Beach Convention Center for this much more intimate affair, after my last visit to the site for Art Basel Miami. Unlike an art fair, the protocols of attending WPC are about sitting down and smelling rather than quickly scanning, so committing to a booth could mean a half-hour tour through a small portion of a seller’s catalogue of hundreds of molecules and natural smells. At the end of each session, a unique mosaic of used scent strips was spread on the dealer’s table.





Dipped scent strips. All photos unless noted: Eva Díaz.

WPC attendees are varied: staff perfumers and chemists from what I call Big Scent—multibillion-dollar companies like Givaudan, IFF, Firmenich, Symrise, and the like. These are the flavor and fragrance companies that produce the bulk of the branded perfumes for fashion houses and celebrities, in addition to the smells added to nearly every “functional” product in your home: laundry detergents, soaps, deodorants, even “rimblock,” i.e., toilet cleaner. “The hardest, harshest job,” one perfumer said ruefully. “They always carry an . . .”—he paused, searching for the word in English; nearly all the perfumers I met at this event were French—“*antiseptic scent* to staff meetings.”

Then there are the raw material producers, from farms in Iran or Egypt, who bring vials of precious attars and absolutes in scuffed leather or wood cases, outfitted with dozens of special compartments in which to nestle their costly goods. There are the (mostly) German and Swiss companies that make robots to correctly dose formulas requiring hundreds of molecules; these salesmen (all men) stand before enormous photomurals of sterile factories and keep lonely company with prototypes of their massive machines. No one lingers long at *those* booths, though Maxwell Williams, an artist and board member of the Institute of Art and Olfaction (IAO), told me he’d asked to try out a VR experience that put you in the POV of a dosing robot.

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A ScentCatcher available at the World Perfumery Congress.

There are also, at the WPC, a few star perfumers like Christophe Laudamiel who don't need to work in-house at Big Scent; due to their high profile, they maintain relationships with these firms to get the best materials. And then there are artisans with indie fragrance companies such as Sarah McCartney of 4160 Tuesdays and Paul Kiler of PK Perfumes that do nearly everything in small workshops: composition, compounding, bottling, packaging, and shipping.

Then there are the few people like me, interested in olfaction and its relationship to contemporary art. I linked up with Sean Raspet, an artist who has been making his own aromatic molecules with the help of a team at Hunter College. Luckily he was a good wingman, as he's also employed at the flavor division of a company producing plant-based meats. As we

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hit the booths, he could immediately deflect the “What company are you with?” question with a rundown of his technical accomplishments in bacon and BBQ chemicals. Sean was also slyly shopping around a new molecule he’d made, one with a green, waxy, apple-skin aroma. The chemists were often remarkably receptive to his pitch, despite the fact that their labs produce hundreds of new molecules per year (Molecules are weirdly cheap at the WPC: conferencegoers talk in cost per kilo or even oil drum-sized barrels.)

A tendentious two-page ad in WPC’s event program, placed by Laudamiel, got the aromatized classes chattering this year about the fraught relationship between industry, mass production, and art. Laudamiel, well-known for his work on Polo Blue and Abercrombie & Fitch’s Fierce, in addition to scents for his own company, The Zoo, has also worked in museums and art galleries—for example, he created the scent opera *Green Aria* for the New York’s Guggenheim Museum in 2009. Laudamiel, therefore, is uniquely positioned to bridge the worlds of fine fragrance and fine art. Perfumery, unlike the visual arts or music, conceals the identities of its creators as an industry practice, and almost universally hides the formulas. When Tom Ford, Beyoncé, or Prada contracts out to a Big Scent company like IFF or Firmenich to produce a fragrance, this secrecy abets the construction of a fantasy they sell to the consumer. That Celebrity X’s interest in sharing with the public their deep love of, say, jasmine or fig, is an extension of a little tinkering they do with aroma chemicals in their spare time. In reality, Big Scent bids out for these jobs and a perfume formula may involve dozens and dozens of molecules of the gamma-nonalactone, beta damascone, benzyl acetate, ethyl linalool, or phenyl ethyl alcohol varieties, in addition to new, “captive” molecules for exclusive in-house use. Perfumers’ advanced training in chemistry, years of study at academies with further years of internships and apprenticeships are miraculously subsumed in the fragrance commissioner’s personal identity.

The beginnings of a revolution in fine fragrance have begun to take place, however. At times the names of creators have become public knowledge, initially thanks to fragrance blogs that began developing detailed odor profiles of fine fragrances and tracking perfumer’s signatures and output. Now, nearly two decades later, these few “named” perfumers find themselves on two sides of a debate about creative attribution.

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The discussion became heated in one of the conference sessions, when master perfumer Calice Becker of Givaudan, copresident of the International Society of Perfume Creators—and the nose behind Dior’s J’Adore and Hilfiger’s Tommy Girl, two of the best-selling-est perfumes in the world—mixed it up with Laudamiel after he asked why most perfumers were still not receiving credit for their compositions. Rodrigo Flores-Roux, also of Givaudan and author of another crazy-popular scent you might have heard of—Clinique Happy—also piped in to call for greater efforts toward naming creators. Becker parried that authorship recognition would occur “organically” and that a tradition of “gentlemen’s agreements” has prevented perfumers from usurping the fashion brands and celebrity mythmaking. The majority of creators remain ghost perfumers.



A+OA winners Maki Ueda, Ugo Charron, and Christophe Laudamiel. Photo: Minetta Rogers.

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At the final evening's event, the American Society of Perfumers and the Institute for Art and Olfaction presented their awards, which, on the latter's part, specifically seek to remedy this lack of attribution, crediting indie creations as well as experimental, "fine art" projects. Saskia Wilson-Brown, director of the IAO, began the organization over a decade ago as "an art piece," she told me—"what people were calling social practice at the time." Alongside Andreas Keller, who runs the world's only contemporary gallery dedicated to olfactory art—Olfactory Art Keller in Manhattan's Chinatown—the IAO presented artist Maki Ueda an award for "Viral Perfume," a work that invited users to spritz six accords around a gallery. The "juices" were visible occasionally under a black light, a tool traditionally used to hunt out invisible bacteria and viruses. Together, these six scents produce the aroma of white lily, a funeral scent Ueda employs to "mourn and honor the deaths caused by Covid."

According to everyone I talked to at WPC, the pandemic years have encouraged a flowering of interest in scent, and not only due to noble efforts on the part of Big Scent and others to retrain those who have become anosmic—have lost their sense of smell—due to coronavirus. Coming out of lockdown has undoubtedly made people more sensitive to their olfactory capabilities, and to a new understanding about the fascinating vulnerability of what literally *inspiring*, that is, taking the outside in, can mean today.

—Eva Díaz



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Institute of Art and Olfaction founder and director Saskia Wilson-Brown with perfumer and artist Christophe Laudamiel.



Creative perfumer Pierre Bénard, author Eva Díaz, and gallerist Andreas Keller at the Art & Olfaction Awards. Photo: Gus Romero.

