

Travel and Nesting in the Pacific Northwest

Artist Brian Goeltzenleuchter wants you to mine your childhood for scent

September 12, 2015 September 14, 2015



<https://pioneerperfume.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/brian1.jpg>

<https://pioneerperfume.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/perfume.jpg>) This week I submitted one very smelly piece of writing (<http://www.olfactorymemoirs.com/read-the-archive/2015/9/13/cedarwood>) to Olfactory Memoirs, a participatory art project by San Diego-based post media artist Brian Goeltzenleuchter (<http://www.bgprojects.com/>).



How does it work? Well, you pick a scent from your childhood and then you write a scent memory piece in whatever form you choose. Memoir here is loose — you don't have to adhere to any conventions of the genre. Some of the entries in the existing archive read like stream-of-consciousness (appropriate for scent, no?), some are in poem form, some haiku, others, like mine, feel like essay.

If you want to try your own and are having trouble getting started, Brian and his collaborators have put together this [handy list of writing prompts \(http://www.olfactorymemoirs.com/writing-tutorials\)](http://www.olfactorymemoirs.com/writing-tutorials).

I thought it might be fun to talk to Brian about why he's doing this. Why get strangers mining their past for scent stories?

Brace yourself.

This is one very thoughtful super-sniffer.

In other words, if you share a scent-related memoir with one person this year, let it be him!

Q & A with artist Brian Goeltzenleuchter about the Olfactory Memoir project

Emily: *Can you tell the story about how the Olfactory Memoir project came about?*

Brian: One of my preoccupations as an artist relates to me finding great interest in other people's passions. The stories they tell and consume, the objects they collect, the way they build worlds in which they can lose themselves. Basically, these are all examples of meaning-making engineered by people who make no claim to be "artists." Call it an ethnographic dimension in my work. At first blush, it might appear to be an artistic liability or shortcoming – not desiring to develop an artistic voice of my own. But I love to hear other people tell stories. And I am good at collecting and representing multiple narratives to find connective tissue, discursive meaning, and radical juxtapositions. Olfactory Memoirs came out of this context. The project asks, *What's your earliest scent memory?* It's such an innocuous question. It doesn't have an agenda other than to produce stories. And it has been my experience that stories beget stories. Producing and consuming stories is such a pleasurable way to learn about one another.

So I thought it would be interesting to tie this into my research in olfactory art and transmedia storytelling. [Olfactorymemoirs.com \(http://www.olfactorymemoirs.com/\)](http://www.olfactorymemoirs.com/) was launched as a way to collect and archive scent memories of childhood. Down the road I will begin curating readings from the archive that will be performed in a transmedia environment which overlays conventional storytelling with scent compositions designed to unfold in temporal relation to spoken-word narratives.

Emily: *Why is scent important for your collaborative art projects?*

Brian: Scent is important insofar as it is a grossly underestimated sense; so many of our cultural biases are made painfully apparent through the various ways we have tried to keep the sense of smell at the bottom of a hierarchy of senses that has shaped the way we relate to the sensorium since the Enlightenment.

And yet, I've found that people are more than curious about the sense of smell. It feels like a zeitgeist moment in which we've come to realize that the visual can only tell us so much. Scent is wondrous. It represents, but not in the way an image or a sound represents. The volatile molecules of an odor change over time, which give it a temporal dimension. And, of course, the fact that it is the only sense that directly interfaces with our central system means that it's the only sense in which emotion precedes cognition. For me it has all the elements for an engaging art experience.

Emily: *Why does the project focus on scent and childhood in particular?*

Brian: This project was sponsored by a Creative Catalyst grant for socially engaged artworks. "Social engagement" is a term that makes me bristle a little because it sounds like a euphemism for something more dubious. That, and the fact that it is often used naively by people who have not yet learned that there is no free lunch. With this project, I didn't want to be didactic, nor did I want to preach to the converted. By focusing on childhood, a theme that I earlier referred to as innocuous, I felt it limited the risk of polarizing my audience, while simultaneously increasing the potential for meaningful reflection on diversity. Everyone has been a kid. And most people have memories of childhood that inform the stories they tell. By beginning with the all-inclusive theme of "childhood" I present readers with a range of childhood scenarios designed to resonate in collective memory and expand the complexity and diversity of what it means to "grow up."

Why scent? Because it destabilizes our storytelling routines. You can infer a lot about a person's identity from the way they mine their personal histories for narratives.

It's not uncommon for people to possess and draw from a collection of narratives that in some way attempts to explain who they are as individuals. Most of us have told these kinds of stories so often that they become a little too slick. By asking someone to begin with a scent memory I prevent them from deploying story for tactical purposes. Instead, there is something akin to innocence or an unconscious working-out of things when someone begins with scent.

What made me remember that? And where did those details come from? I haven't thought of that in years. I host writing workshops led by Judy Reeves (<http://judyreeveswriter.com/>), who for decades has been a writing provocateur in the San Diego area. She has so many good prompts that lead writers to arrive at scent memories that reveal a raw portrait of the writer as a child.

Emily: *What have you learned about humans' relationship to scent and childhood from your ongoing project?*

Brian: If I were to rephrase your question to read, "What have you learned about humans' relationship to scent and memory," I would say that scent memories are packed with details. Usually, surprisingly vivid details, such as the pattern of a dress your friend wore thirty years

ago, or a dialog you suddenly remember verbatim, or the ambient sounds that occurred simultaneously with the smell.

This is not terribly linear in the way that written narratives often unfold in a sequential order. Rather, it comes as a collage of sensory details that not only adds a certain authenticity to the narrative, but in the right hands, can allow the author's voice (at that time in childhood) to speak. That is a specifically moving part of reading scent memories of childhood; the author can assume the voice of herself as a child.

But to your question about scent and childhood, I've learned that our attachment to odors are incredibly subjective. I knew that there are cultural biases in smell, but collecting scent memories has taught me that individual bonds or aversions to smells are formed early, and often in unusual ways. One example is an olfactory memoir that was recently submitted to the website about the smell of pickled pig's feet. The feet, which the author claimed smelled like silicone caulking, were an early memory of what he referred to as "the smell of truce" that would occur between he and his abusive father. Hearing his father pop the lid and smell the sour vinegar from the jar told him he could join his dad around the table for a rare bonding moment. Even 40 years after these moments, and although he has never popped a jar of pickled pig's feet as an adult, he still salivates whenever he smells silicone caulking! Apparently the response is automatic.

Emily: *I'm writing a book-length olfactory memoir myself right now and I'm finding that scent is a subject that you have to make sneak up in the writing to be effective. Do you have any thoughts on what writers need to do to use scent effectively in writing or storytelling?*

Brian: I like the phrase "sneaking up." In daily perception smell also sneaks up on us. We see a clean kitchen but smell the burnt toast. We can choose not to look at something but unless we hold our breath we are constantly confronted our olfactory environment. Why should it be any different in the way a reader experiences it on the page? Beyond that, I imagine there are additional challenges, since descriptions are often limited to what something smells like or how a smell makes you feel.

I have this ongoing conversation with a polymath of sorts named Richard Gleaves. Richard has a plan to counter the Anglo-American smell aversion that has limited the way in which we verbally describe smell and the perception of smell. His project would involve perceptual scientists and professional writers. The scientists would delineate the various phenomena and principles of olfaction that people are capable of receiving (as measured by scientific tests), but not necessarily consciously aware of, due to the existing gaps in their language and culture. Once this inventory of perceivable olfactory phenomena is established, the writers would be commissioned to collectively coin new language which artfully defines the perceptual inventory, with the goal of introducing the coined language into common usage. Such coinages would include (but not be limited to) new words, semantic extensions of existing words, and new metaphors. Maybe you two should collaborate!

Emily: *What will happen to all of these olfactory memoirs you are gathering?*

Brian: In addition to the website functioning as a participatory archive, which invites readers to become writers, there is a performance element that is in the works. The performance takes a hybrid form: A literary reading of olfactory memoirs that is choreographed to coincide with an orchestrated delivery of fragrances that I design. Throughout the performance these fragrances play the role of olfactory landscapes (“scent-scapes”) intended to add a sensory dimension to the performance by connecting audiences more deeply to the narrative texts read on stage.

Presently I am working with Dave Ghilarducci, a very talented artist with a deep engineering background. We are designing scent distribution devices that will release trace amounts of fragrance into the audience and then filter them out just as quickly. Dave is working on a keyboard that will essentially allow me to DJ the scents from a computer and disperse them simultaneously to a seated audience. We will do some preliminary test events in a couple of months with major performances expected in 2017.

Emily: Thanks so much, Brian!

If you’d like to contribute an Olfactory Memoir to the project (<http://www.olfactorymemoirs.com/write/>) I’d say retrieve those memories and tackle those scents to paper! If you decide to do it, I’d love it if you’d link to yours in the comments.

Posted in: [Interviews](#), [Smelly People](#) | Tagged: [art](#), [memoir](#), [memoir writing](#), [Olfaction](#), [olfactory memoir](#), [perfume](#), [scent](#), [scent and memory](#)

BLOG AT WORDPRESS.COM. | THE SELA THEME.