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Gunpowder, grass, jasmine, pine, pollution, and patchouli are some of the odors wafting around galleries, museums, and studios these days as artists incorporate scent into the esthetic experience by Barbara Pollack :

A visitor stepping into Koo Jeong A's installation for the Dia Art Foundation at the Hispanic Society of America may be overwhelmed by an unexpected assault on the senses. Like a cedar closet, the almost empty gallery has its own distinct aroma, in this case an olfactory artwork, entitled *Before the Rain*, which is meant to capture the atmosphere of an Asian city on a steamy day. Over a three-month period, the Korean artist worked with perfumer Bruno Jovanovic of International Flavors & Fragrances, a leading company in the design of synthetic scents, who distilled her memories and impressions into an amalgam of smells—dry woods, minerals, fern, musk, tars, and lichens—to summon the sensation the artist remembered.

"I was compelled to create a scent that evokes the almost violent atmospheric tension that exists before a thunderous rainstorm," says Jovanovic, who views the piece as a true collaboration. "The whole work was about dissecting the entire experience and then re-creating it in a nebulous form."

The philosopher Immanuel Kant believed that the sense of sight is superior to all the other senses. A number of artists today, like Koo Jeong A, would disagree with him. They are incorporating the sense of smell into the esthetic experience. Smoke and pollution, as well as patchouli and pine, have become part of their palettes. Although scent is a fragile and ephemeral medium, it is making an impact in museum shows and at symposia as a new trend in art.

"Working with the sense of smell is probably the hardest material, because it is very subjective and it changes from person to person," says Yasmin Raymond, curator at Dia, who oversaw the development of *Before the Rain*. "Koo Jeong A had a very specific concept about this smell,

but she had to find a way of articulating through language what that was to a perfumer, who conceived the chemical composition. It was really the hardest thing I had ever done as a curator."

Contrasting this collaboration with the more traditional artist-fabricator relationship, Raymond explains, "Usually you are working with things you can see and touch. In this case, we were working solely with language, and a very subjective language at that."

A number of other recent projects have asked museum and gallery visitors to use their noses as well as their eyes. Shown two years ago at the New Museum in New York, Haegue Yang's *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements—Voice and Wind* incorporates Venetian blinds, electric fans, and scent atomizers to create the sensation of entering various unspecified locations. Made originally for the Korean Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2009, the installation offers an intimate and subjective experience, with each visitor free to interpret the odors.



[Smell You Later: Peter De Cuper's 'The Forest' is a Scented Sculpture](#)



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