

Fragrant Tests

**Curated by
Lemeeze
Davids**



scented
unscented

A4 A4
18 Feb '23 18 Feb '23

lemon leaves
eucalyptus

blumen
citrus
lemon-verbena
petrichor
cedarwood
santal
rose
vanilla
lavender
sage

rose
sage

EXIT

Fragrant Tests is a curatorial prototype exploring aroma in A4's Goods corridor. It serves as both an experiment and a provocation, examining the practicalities of sensory intervention, specifically how scent can be placed and sustained within an exhibition space.

My ongoing research investigates the conceptual links between sensory elements and cultural theory, and asks how engaging senses beyond sight can deepen viewer immersion and evoke cultural memory. Smell, in particular, has a unique ability to transport us to personal associations, making it a potentially useful curatorial tool. In many ways, I was drawn to my own memories while conceptualising this project.

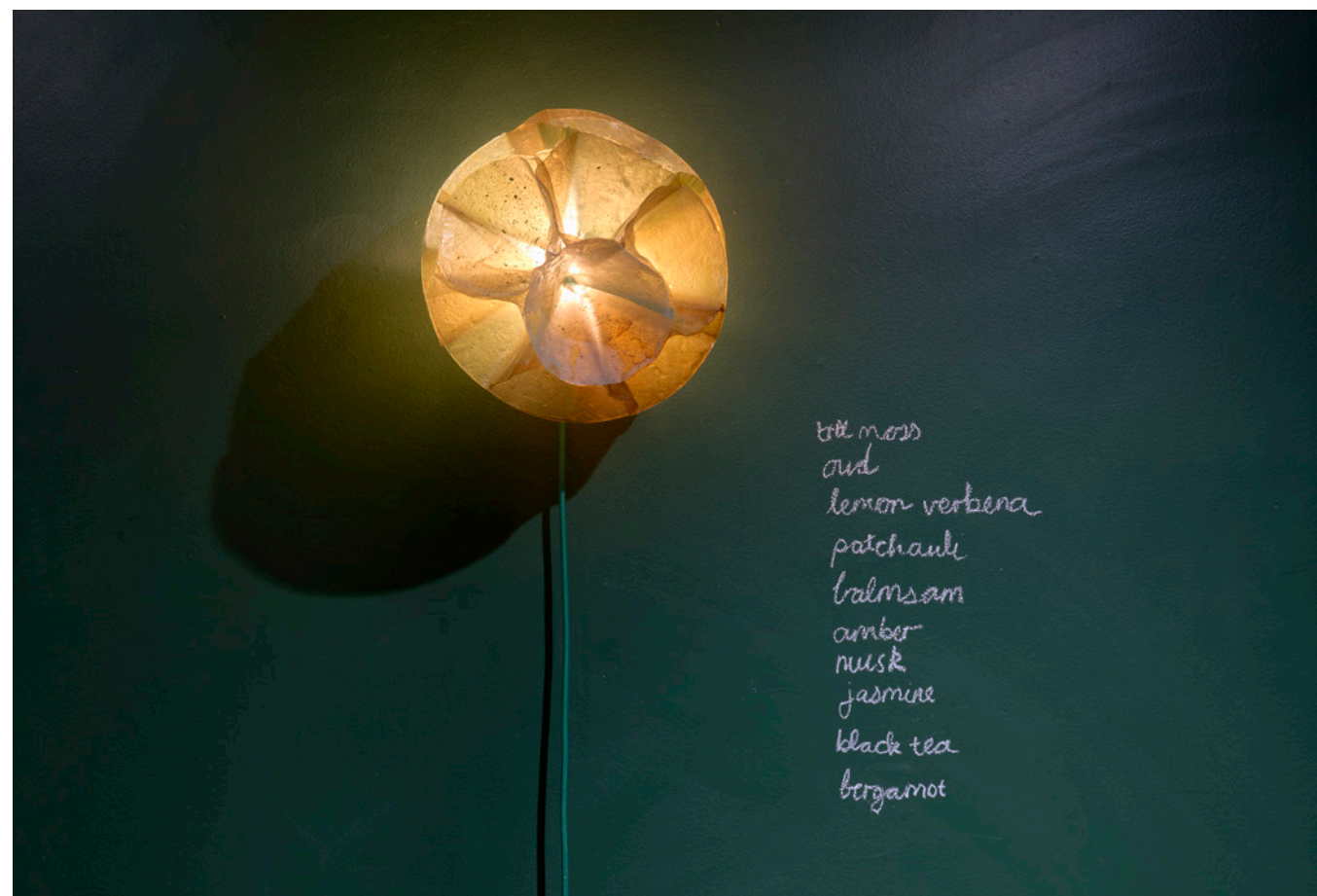
If the visual has long been a site for critical discourse, why has smell remained in the margins? Scent lingers, infiltrates, and resists containment, making it an apt medium for questioning what is allowed to persist and disappear in an exhibition space.

All places have specific smells – hospitals, churches, libraries – yet art spaces are usually odour-free. Through Fragrant Tests, I am interested in challenging this convention by testing display strategies that integrate scent more subtly and meaningfully.

This presentation consists of five tests:

- 1 — Sensorial artworks/practices
- 2 — Performance lecture (forthcoming)
- 3 — Scent diffusers
- 4 — Plant material
- 5 — Scented printed matter

Test 1: Sensorial artworks/ practices



Georgia Munnik's *Strangling Fruit* acts as a holder and diffuser of a handmade perfume. Titled Phenotype 13, the perfume has notes of tree moss, lemon verbena tinctures, white musk, jasmine, and patchouli, amongst other ingredients, which were sourced and synthesised by the artist.

The invitation to smell is inherent in the artwork, and Munnik is deeply engaged in the science of perfumery as a core technical aspect of her practice. Recently in residence at a perfume house in Cape Town, she spent time learning about chemical processes and working with specialised knowledge, allowing her to refine her ingredients.

In this test, the scent, its application, and its presentation are conceived by the artist, and the curator plays a more facilitative role, ensuring the conditions for sensory engagement rather than directly shaping the olfactory experience.

Test 2: Performance lecture (forthcoming)

Aroma is challenging to anchor to a specific space or regulate in intensity. A visitor might choose not to look at something, but it is much more difficult to avoid a smell. Because of this, the curator has the responsibility to ensure that the experience is controlled to the desired degree, whether it's meant to be atmospheric or deliberately intense and immersive.

One method which might be useful in this case is dedicating sensory encounters to exhibition programming. For example, Andrew Putter's *20 Smells: an introduction to the world of the nose* was first hosted as part of the Bowling Club collective in 2007. The work, which explored key ingredients in perfumery, was likened to a wine-tasting. A group of invited guests were given a kit of 20 scents to experience through a performance lecture.

For *Fragrant Tests*, Putter revisits this work. Rather than repeating it, however, he has created a forthcoming, smaller work for A4 to be realised as a potential module for a larger reimagining of *20 Smells*, centering on indole – a chemical that hovers tantalisingly between the living and the dead, linking decay and bloom.

Test 3: Scent diffusers



For this test, I saturated one cedar wood block with atchar oil and one ceramic disc with mandarin oil to evaluate the radius of the aroma and how long the smell lasted.

In this, I was inspired by Jody Brand's presentation at her Three Bones residency in October 2024. She had created a series of sculptural pieces she positioned as 'flags', 'portals' or 'windows', made from curtain lace collaged with other textiles and then stained with spices and oil. Eight large jars of atchar (spiced pickled vegetables), made by Brand, sat on the window sill of her residency studio. It was difficult to tell if the sweet-ish, spicy smell that filled the room was coming from the artwork, the jars, or just lingering in the air as a ghost of previous dye processes. The aroma subtly connected the artworks to an additional but ambiguous layer of information related to atchar and its socio-cultural significance.

Echoing the encounter here, I thought about supplementary sources of aroma that were separate from the artwork but still emitting scent to contextualise it: like the jars of atchar in a window. Aroma is introduced into the space intentionally, but the decision does not solely rest on the artist's work.

Test 4: Plant Material



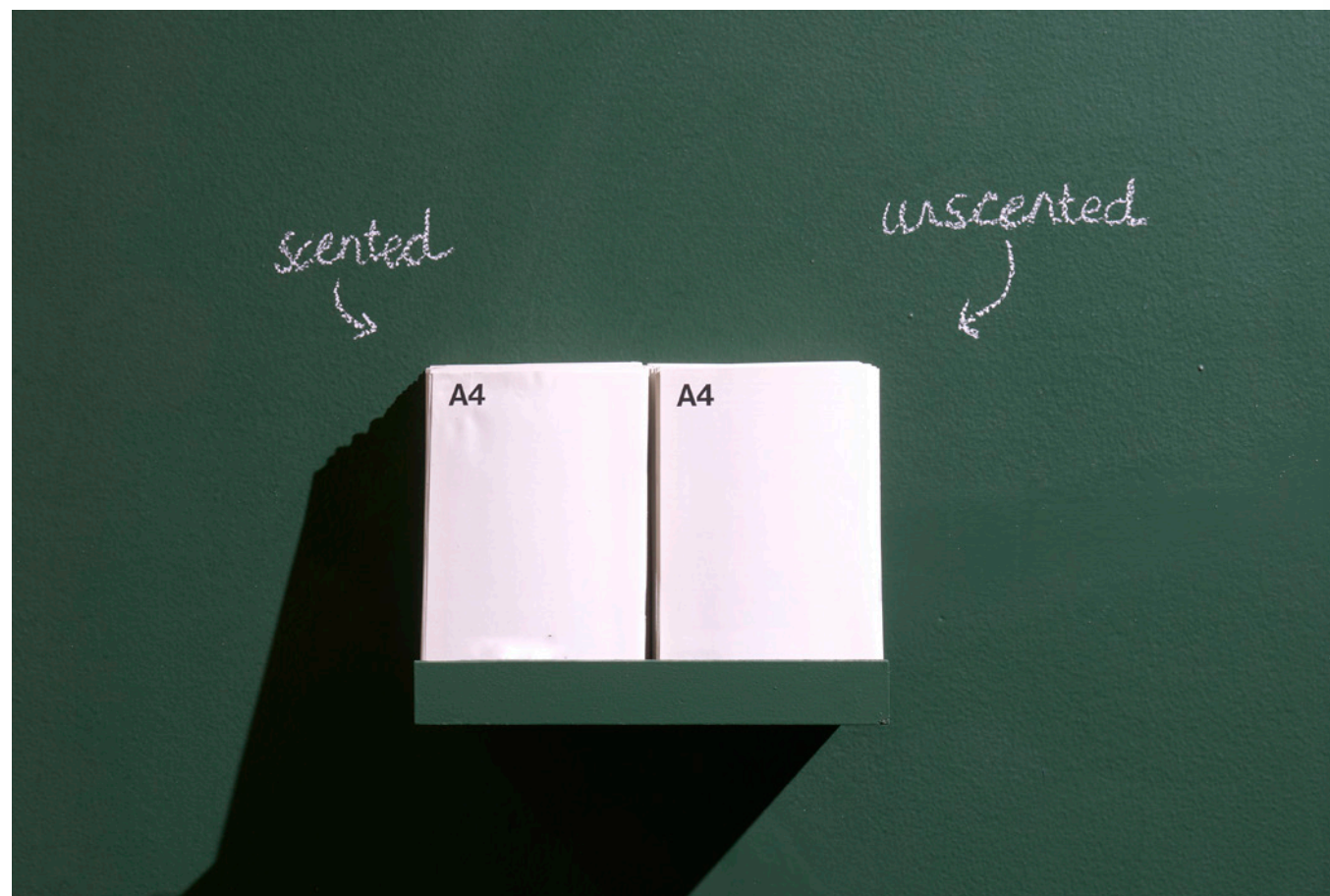
For this test, I was interested in how a curator can use plants as a way to introduce scent. Incorporating plants encourages careful consideration as they can be highly visual elements and must be carefully selected to align with the overall design.

A flower is biologically designed to diffuse scent, however, they also release pollen which becomes an allergy trigger for many people. For this reason, I made an arrangement using eucalyptus and lemon leaves, bruising them slightly to release the oils.

I placed this plant material in conversation with Hayden Malan and Cynthia Fan, who were conducting a parallel encounter showing their botanical prints in the A4 Store alongside Goods.

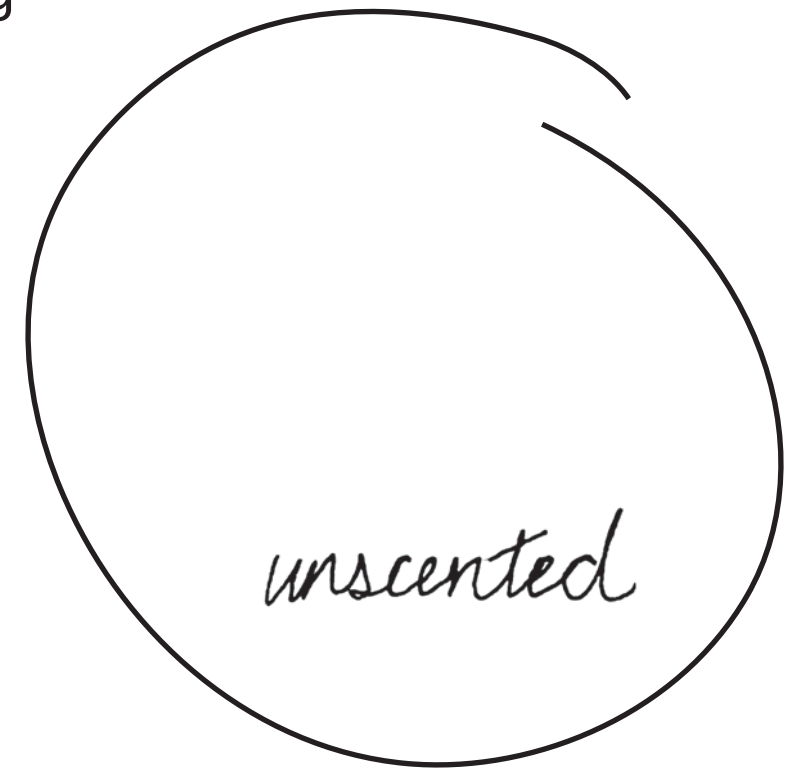
I previously researched plant material for Firelei Báez's *Sueña de la Madrugada* at the South London Gallery, organised as a part of the New Curators program in June 2024. Some questions that emerged in that process: Should the plants be planted, periodically replaced, or allowed to wither naturally? What are the most aromatic plants? How do plants look/smell when they die, and is that aesthetically acceptable? I spent time at flower markets researching appropriate plants and conducting tests on how long they took to die and whether they curled, dried, rotted, or stayed green.

Test 5: Printed Matter



The end corner of this pamphlet is scented with Benzoin oil. Benzoin is resin harvested from the bark of several species of Styrax trees, and has a warm balsamic note reminiscent of vanilla or caramel.

This is a subtle way one might introduce aroma into an exhibition but not the actual space, and allows the visitor to take an aspect of the experience home. One limitation is that some people may not enjoy having scent on their skin, so visitors are able to select the option of taking an unscented pamphlet.



Fragrant Tests – Wayfinder
(2025)

Curator: Lemeze Davids
Text: Lemeze Davids
Design: Ben Johnson
Editor: Sara de Beer
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23 Buitenkant Street, District Six 7925
info@a4arts.org

A4

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