Heaven   # Scent

Our sense of smell was the subject of DSR's subtle scenography.

An otherworldly white showcase featuring subtle clouds of fragrance describes Diller Scofidio + Renfro's barely-there design for a perfume exhibition in New York City.

Words **Shonquis Moreno**

The Challenge

It's surely unusual, if not unique, to design an exhibition display around something that is impalpable, invisible and apparent to only one sense. But this is precisely what a recent show mounted by the New York Museum of Arts and Design's Department of Olfactory Art set out to do. Its director, former *New York Times* critic Chandler Burr, sought to demonstrate how the discipline has been historically overlooked and to elevate it to the status of mainstream art. To accomplish this, the museum hired local architects Diller Scofidio + Renfro (DSR) to create a display capable of introducing the complex scientific and artistic process of scent design along with watershed moments in the industry's history, starting with the revolutionary Guerlain fragrance, Jicky, in 1889 – and to do it in an almost naked gallery.

The Solution

DSR illustrated the design process using Trésor as an example. The result was a …
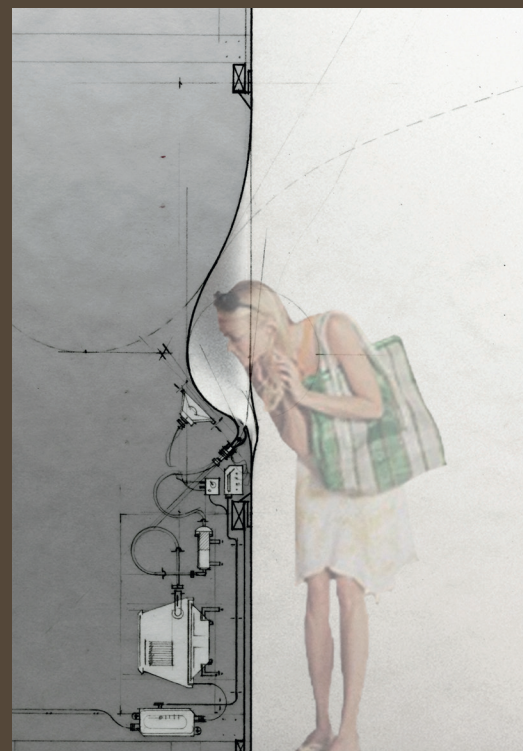
1 DSR made a careful study of mechanisms for the delivery of the fragrances. They used a pump system manufactured by German company Scent Communication, in which an essential oil saturates beads packed into cartridges and a pump distils the fragrance by forcing air over the scented polycarbonate beads.

2 DSR asked how the archetypal white gallery wall could be distorted to make it appropriate for the delivery of scent. The answer lay in sculptural wall depressions. The designers studied the form of the depressions in great detail (air flow, how the niche would receive the visitor's head and so forth).
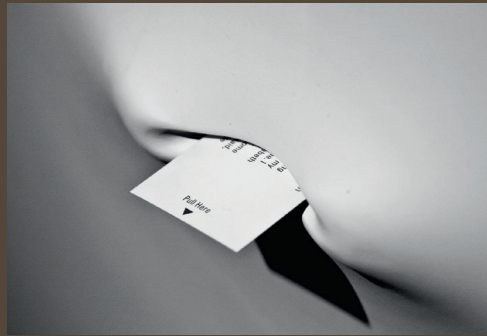
3 To show the design and crafting process, the team used Trésor, applying a technology typically used to dispense lottery tickets or metro cards. Visitors peeled off transparent Discover labels by Arcade (one label on each card) to release the scent.
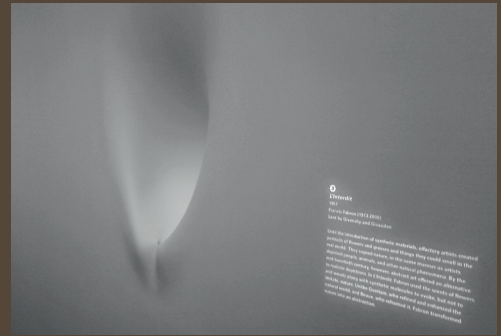
4 'Initially, in the interest of removing visual references, we planned to present the text as an audio component,' says Altman, 'but this proved to be problematic.' Instead, they embedded a rear projection panel in the walls that was imperceptible to visitors, even at close range, so text faded in and out.
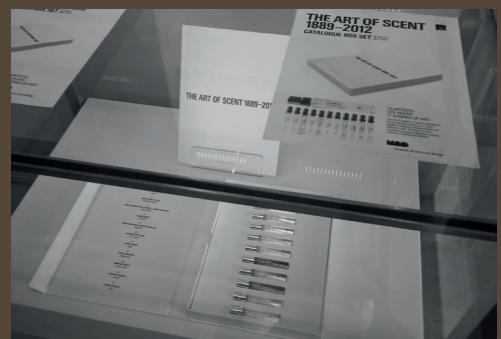

5 Text projected onto the floor guided visitors through the exhibition, without cluttering the space.

6 A glass display presented fragrances with paper strips for testing them.

The only furniture in the exhibition was a glass table, further dematerializing the experience.

7 The DSR team created a display design for something invisible – scent – and made it immersive by eliminating visual indicators. The catalogue was similarly minimalist.

... barely-there 'evolution display' consisting of five wall extrusions automatically dispensing a peel-away fragrance sample that broke the scent down into its five 'mods' or design iterations. The other blank walls of the gallery featured sculptural wall depressions from which scents were exhaled when a visitor placed his head inside. Projected on walls and floor was curatorial text that faded in and out every few minutes, leaving visitors to focus periodically on the sense of smell alone.

The Firm
DSR has a history of producing atmospheric architectural design (to wit: the 2002 Blur Building in Switzerland) and of challenging traditional conventions associated with the display of art, as it did during a 2003 Whitney show, when a drill droned constantly, eating away at a gallery wall over the course of the exhibition. 'We were intrigued by the challenge of bringing a sense into the museum that isn't typically found there,' says project leader Ilana Altman. 'We hoped people walking in would be shocked by the emptiness of the space. Only a closer investigation would reveal its function and its subject.' _

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