

Op-Ed Smells like ... a Westsider: All wet lawn and the sweat of a trophy wife



Meghan Daum

LOS ANGELES TIMES

mdaum@latimescolumnists.com

JULY 2, 2014, 5:31 PM

Last Saturday I approached no fewer than 30 strangers and sniffed them. They sniffed me back. Some thought I smelled nice, though a few gagged.

We were part of an "olfactory public artwork" at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, a one-day installation, "Sillage," by Brian Goeltzenleuchter, a San Diego-based artist who works primarily with scents.

Using surveys in which Angelenos were asked to name smells associated with different areas of the city, Goeltzenleuchter translated the responses into actual bottled fragrances representing 11 regions. On exhibition day, we visitors to the museum were sprayed with fragrances representing our neighborhoods. We then had the awesome experience of greeting one another as though we were dogs. (Though, to be clear, we were sniffing wrists, not butts.)

"Hollywood?" we'd ask, leaning our noses toward wristwatches and radial arteries.

"Downtown? Westside? Valley?"

It was a good thing there were a lot of Westsiders in attendance. The fragrance for that region, whose ingredients included leaf alcohol and oakmoss, was among the more conventionally pleasing options. Goeltzenleuchter described it as "wet lawn gives way to dry air which gives way to the clean sweat of a trophy wife."

My scent, representing East/Northeast L.A., was supposed to smell like Mexican food and orange blossom. Goeltzenleuchter made it with cumin and neroli oil. Another participant told

me that a lot of people think cumin smells like body odor. Perhaps this explained the gagging.

I know what you're thinking: trophy wives on the Westside, Mexican food on the Eastside — way to peddle stereotypes! But let's be honest. Part of the perverse beauty of Los Angeles is that we manage to uphold so many clichés even as we knock them down.

No, not everyone in Santa Monica is a well-heeled, juice-cleansing, Prius-driving yogini, but for better or worse, that is the city's dominant chord. Not everyone in Hollywood emanates the scent of its ZIP Codes as interpreted by Goeltzenleuchter, which is to say "an old lady wearing cheap perfume, a kid sticky with cotton candy and a hipster redolent of sweet tobacco," but one whiff of that combination and suddenly it's unmistakable.

It's often said that L.A. isn't a city as much as it is a bunch of neighborhoods — or, as Dorothy Parker may or may not have put it, "72 suburbs in search of a city." But it's a little richer than that.

L.A. is a constellation of microclimates and microcosms, a library with dozens of special collections. A 20-minute drive can bring a temperature change of 15 degrees. Crossing an intersection can feel like crossing a national border. At the edge of Eagle Rock and Glendale, Tagalog fades to Armenian. On Fairfax Avenue, Orthodox Jews walk through Little Ethiopia on the way to synagogue. All over the city, public buses rumble past people who've lived here their whole lives but never ridden in one. Inside the buses are people who've lived here their whole lives but never had regular access to a car.

Which is why there was something magical about the collective odor in the Santa Monica Museum by closing time Saturday. As mid-Wilshirites sniffed Valley-dwellers and Los Feliz residents (who smelled like night-blooming jasmine and dry concrete) contended with the cumin-tinged b.o. of Eastside enclaves like mine, it was as if the whole city, for once, was on the same bus. It was as if our micro-concerns had blended into a larger, shared experience — and not just the experience of behaving like dogs.

Admittedly, certain fragrances were in heavier rotation than others that day. South L.A., whose essence Goeltzenleuchter distilled as metallic heat, hydraulic fluid and old asphalt, was represented by just one person during my time at the exhibition. She was a museum guard, who confessed to washing off her fragrance hours earlier because it was giving her a headache. Still, the scent lingered, and she patiently held out her arm while visitors sniffed away.

It wasn't half bad. (Goeltzenleuchter **told The Times** in a website story that the South L.A. scent was his favorite and that he wears it regularly.) Meanwhile, when I got home, my dogs got one

whiff of me and ran out the back door. Guess it's time to move.

Copyright © 2014, Los Angeles Times

Smells like ... a Westsider: All wet lawn and the sweat of a trop...

<http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-daum-los-angeles...>