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As told to Shy Watson, 2076 words.

Tags: Scent, Art, Business, Process, Collaboration, Money.

On the power of not knowing

Perfumer Marissa Zappas discusses resistance as a sign to keep going, the dangers of collaboration, and seeking out different perspectives.

How did you get started with perfumery?

When I was young I would spray this jasmine perfume on my pillow in order to sleep and kind of tune everything else out. Perfume was very comforting, a way to escape and also a way to ground myself, so I began collecting it and had amassed a collection by the time I was a teenager. However, I didn't know about the career of a perfumer until I was older. I wound up apprenticing with a master perfumer, Olivier Gillotin, at an international fragrance house for a couple of years. It was there that I learned all of the raw materials and really began my journey into perfumery. But I think learning perfumery is a lifelong process; there are always new raw materials coming onto the market, synthetics and naturals, and you really have to stay on top of the game because what's trending olfactively tends to be the newer molecules. So, like nearly everything, it really is a lifelong learning process.

How did you get your apprenticeship?

I started off as a temp receptionist at Givaudan, and I was doing my master's in anthropology at the time. And then right when my master's program ended, there just happened to be an opening to work in the lab as an apprentice to Olivier, and we had sort of developed this rapport throughout my time working at the front desk, and he knew that I was interested in perfumery and he really encouraged me to apply. And so I applied and I got it and the whole thing was very kind of kismet.

What excites you about a new project?

I would say if it's something I've never done before, or even if it's something that I initially feel some type of resistance to, I'm more excited because I've noticed that the projects I tend to feel the most resistance to wind up being the projects that ultimately push me the most and I've been the most proud of in the end. It's kind of like smells, often the ones I'm most resistant to or turned off by at first wind up being my favorites.

What do you consider when you create a new fragrance?

It really depends. If it's for a client, I'll ask them many questions initially over the course of two hours. We'll schedule a time and I'll ask them everything from their favorite colors, textures, their scent memories from childhood, their favorite foods, flavors, sometimes even their favorite movies. Just really kind of obscure things because there's a lot that's lost in translation when people talk about smell. So, you can get a client, for example, who says they want something really green, but at the same time hates the smell of grass or something. So you have to ask all of these questions because they're not necessarily going to think of the exceptions themselves, and I need to know all these exceptions when I'm creating something for them.

It's very thorough. If I'm just creating something for myself, then I can do whatever I want, but also if I'm doing something for my own personal collection, it's good for me to have outside input around my work because sometimes I become anosmic to my own scents. And I think it's actually a little bit similar to writing. Like sometimes when you're writing something and you're just working on it constantly—let's say you're sitting at your computer—it can be really helpful to close your computer, take a break for an hour, go to a coffee shop, open it on your phone, and start editing it or working on it on there. There's just something about the different perspectives.

So, having a different perspective. Clearing your head, clearing your nose. Talking to people you trust. That's why I like to have other people smell my work, not necessarily for their personal opinions, but for their perspectives, and also why I need to take extended breaks and go smell my perfume in the park, or in the bath, instead of my lab.

Where do you get your inspiration for fragrances that you're making for yourself?

Everywhere. That's actually part of my issue right now as far as making a more cohesive brand, is that my inspiration is pretty sporadic, as all inspiration is, but it's hard for me to make a streamlined collection, which is why I have two collections and collaborations and random projects like that. I had this idea for a perfume last month, but I was like, it would be so random just on my site. At the same time, maybe who cares?

What was the idea, if you don't mind sharing?

I want to make a perfume just called, "Maggie The Cat is Alive, She's Alive!" which is a line from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. And the way Elizabeth Taylor says it, she's screaming, "Maggie, the cat is alive! She's alive!" It's so amazing. She's so upset and there's this vibrato in her voice. And I just thought, "Oh my God, I need to make a perfume called 'Maggie The Cat is Alive, She's Alive.'" Maybe it would be in all caps. I can't stop saying it, even now, I'm obsessed with saying it. Really animalic, sweltering... I just imagine Elizabeth Taylor sweating or something. But I'm not sure how that would fit into any of my collections. Maybe I'll do it.

What are some of your favorite notes?

I love natural musks, like cumin and ambrette seed. I would say lately I've been falling in love with eucalyptus absolute, which is very different than eucalyptus oil. The absolute version is really rich and almost has this gourmand feeling. It's sweet and super dark. And then I would say as far as synthetics, I really love coumarin, which is basically synthetic tonka. There's nothing like it. And if I could use it in everything, I would, and I always try and use it. It's just really beautiful, and also gives a certain diffusion to scents and prolongs longevity. So in a technical way, it helps a lot with the projection of the scent, but it also brings something olfactively that I think is really beautiful.

What challenges arise when you're blending?

Working in the lab that I'm currently working in is a challenge because it's so small. For now, I'm making do, but I think in the next couple of years, it will be really nice to move into a much larger and more well-equipped lab.

How do you explore things? What does your curiosity look like?

I'm incredibly impatient by nature, and at the same time I've always had a really strong sense of curiosity, but it's kind of an interesting combination because I'll get intensely curious about something and then become impatient with it. And with perfumery, it was almost as if I knew from the start that it was too important to lose steam with.

So, I think my sense of curiosity with my work and with perfume is much more patient than my sense of curiosity around other aspects of my life. For example, I just don't have the patience to cook. I will say, I've been in psychoanalysis for 13 years and that has required a great deal of patience. In a way, that experience of having to be patient—with perfumery and psychoanalysis—both journeys have been parallel in certain ways—has impacted my curiosity in other aspects of my life. My sense of curiosity, it's recovering from being a little defensive. Because curiosity requires a sense of not knowing. I'm trying to be more at ease in that place of not knowing.

What effect do you hope to have on your clients, both clients that you make a perfume for and also clients who just buy something that you've already made?

I don't really think about that, maybe I should. But at the end of the day, I really just want to bring people small moments of joy and maybe some solace. It's rough out there. To know that you made something that someone looks forward to interacting with every morning is actually a pretty profound feeling. And if I can do that, and also pay my bills and have some nice clothes or whatever, that's enough for me.

How do collaborators figure into your work? What's helpful and/or unhelpful about working with others?

I would say it's helpful for me to be given an idea for a fragrance. Most of my friends are artists or creatives, so the idea of collaborating with them can be very seductive. But also collaborating with friends can be dangerous, like becoming roommates with your best friend.

How did you figure out how to make a living through perfumery and to treat your art like a business?

I'm definitely still figuring it out. I think having multiple streams of revenue is important. I do freelance work for brands and individuals as well as sell my own perfume collection. It's hard though. I'll let you know once I nail it.

How do you know when a project is finished?

I think it's similar to writing a poem, in a way. It's almost like, when there's nothing left to remove from the formula, it's done. Or honestly just when I get tired of working on it, that's real.

How did you manage to carve a path for yourself outside of the established system?

I'm still carving it, and every day is a challenge. The fact that I don't have access to the resources that the commercial fragrance world has is difficult at times, but I also think the challenges it presents ultimately make me better at my craft and give me a richer understanding of the entire process of creating a fragrance. Because I don't just create the formula, I navigate production, design, stability testing, client interactions, and more. There's also a certain level of shamelessness, especially when it comes to promoting my work or myself on social media, that still after years of doing it makes me feel physically ill. I've sort of normalized the nausea for myself that comes with logging on.

So I'm guessing that social media is a big part of how you get the word out about your fragrances, right?

I rely on it very heavily. It's where I think 90% of my sales come from. And I don't even have that large of a following, but yeah, I know if I post there will be sales. I would delete it in a heartbeat if I didn't need it. But it's terrifying to think what would happen to my income if Instagram was suddenly gone.

But now your perfumes are available at Lucky Scent?

Yes. And Scentbar, which is their storefront, and my website.

Do they do some promotion work for you, too?

They do a little bit, yeah. And they're really great to work with.

You mentioned writing poetry. I know that's another practice of yours. Does your work with perfumery ever spill over into your writing or vice versa?

Yeah, it does. I actually think somehow now more than ever. I'm writing something at the moment and I'm also working on a fragrance, almost just psychologically for myself. And I don't know if I'll do anything with the fragrance, but it helps to mark the feeling that I'm working around and immediately transports me to a certain headspace. Basically, I went on this date that was four days long...it was pretty amazing. Afterwards, I felt inspired to write for the first time after having severe writer's block for over a year. And so, I just started writing nonstop and began working on this perfume as well. Sometimes all you need is a really good date to start writing again. Who knew? Truly, now I know how to break writer's block...

I know that olfactory senses can trigger memories or take you back to a place. Does smelling the same scent help you get back into the creative flow of your project?

Definitely, it's somatic. It helps me connect to what I'm writing about, like music. An instant brain to heart cord.

Marissa Zappas Recommends:

Holly Hunter's voice

Psychoanalysis

Tamaryn Brown

Getting lost in Cimetiere du Pere Lachaise

Francis Picabia's poetry

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Vocation

perfumer, artist, writer

Fact

Marissa Zappas

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