



SMELL ME

In her solo exhibition "Smell Me" at Envoy Enterprise Gallery, which opened on October 20th, the Polish born and New York City based Martynka Wawrzyniak creates the perfect visceral self-portrait. By extracting and bottling her scent, she literally captures her most private essences: her sweat, tears, and hair. The extracted oils and perfumes are the essential elements of the artist, the intimate parts which she chooses to share with the faceless public.

The identity of an artist always weighs on the reception of the work: their origin, their sex, their life story. So when an artist reveals themselves completely, in a more intimate manner than being nude (which she has in previous work), or sharing their darkest secret- but presenting their scent, it is a beguiling turn of events. Being too personal or not personal enough is a challenge in art work, but Wawrzyniak's "self-portrait" is an unbiased presentation on her ultimate animalistic components. Devoid of personality, physical appearance, composition, and all the other exterior identifiers of an artwork.

As interesting as the end result is, the intensity and the time of the process to achieve these results are equal in their importance. Working for a year at Hunter College with three research students under the supervision of professor Donna McGregor, Wawrzyniak went through rigorous daily schedule-alternating routines to complete her goal. She would make "crying dates" in order to extract tears, so that no other chemical or scent gets mixed up with the purity content, while listening to songs from Poland that reminded her of her childhood. In essence the resulting tears, the resulting scent, is bottled, pure nostalgia. When you think about that concept, the artist was capable of transcending the physicality of an object and bottling an emotion – it's a bit magical. From exercising in bikram yoga, to embalment, Wawrzyniak dedicated a whole year to a life of removal, the derivation of perfection and purity.

On display are vials with the actual extracts, as well as candles, gathered from the scent of her whole body. The artist scented candle, which was created through a tedious process of covering the body with paraffin beads and mineral oil, then being embalmed in bandages, is a dark and satirical part of the project, mainly because when lit the scent is not of a woman's essence but of a woman burning. Wawrzyniak makes a valid point how in our culture we try to modify our scents, to mask them with more attractive versions, when really we are denying our bodies to communicate with other bodies and to let our olfactory senses to evolve.

Along with the vials is the constructed scent chamber, spurring out the scents of tears, hair, sweat and nightshirt at short intervals of time. Collaborating with Yann Vasnier of Givaudan and scent director Dawn Goldworm of 12.29 Wawrzyniak was able to diffuse and synthesize her scents. It was a claustrophobic and dizzying experience to be submitted to an ovular chamber with four orifices releases four very overpowering scents. The overall affect was slightly noxious, thick, super rich environment of intermingling aromas. The sweat was, as expected, the most toxic and vile one. Ironically the tears were the sweetest, but maybe because out of the many kind of different tears one may shed, these were full of childhood memories and innocence. The hair also gave off a very sweet aroma, but combined altogether, continuously refilling the circular room, the experience was definitely unnerving.

The piece is an exploration of the primal state of a person, of a woman. The collected fragrances are not only process based acts, they are also performative, sensual, private. Scent triggers our memory, our feelings, our state of being. The clinical presentation of the bottles, that not only represent the squeezed out parts of the actual artist but also the time put into the extraction, is a good approach to work that is not visually heavy. Sterile, while simultaneously visceral, the exhibition will definitely make you think about the extremes we go to of hiding our true essences and the beauty and sweetness in knowing how unique our overlooked bodily fluids and parts are.

Words by Irina Makarova

All images: Courtesy of the artist and envoy enterprises, New York.

Hair #1 (H1), 2011
extracted on 07.20.11
hair essence, glass, brass
3 x 2 x 2 inches

Sweat #5 (S5), 2011
collected from cotton t-shirt worn to bikram yoga on 08.04.11, (MC 14)
sweat essence, glass, brass
3 x 2 x 2 inches

Tears #8 (T8), 2012
collected on 05.18.12
tears essence, glass, brass
3 x 2 x 2 inches

Night Shirt #1 (NS1), 2011
collected from cotton t-shirt worn to sleep for 5 nights between 08.06.11 – 08.11.11, (MC 16-21)
sweat essence, glass, brass
3 x 2 x 2 inches

Martynka Candle 1 (C1), 2012
scraped off body on 05.20.12
paraffin, stearic acid, sweat essence, wick, beaker
3 1/2 x 2 1/2 x 2 1/2 inches

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