



Chaveli Sifre, *Smoke Compositions*, olfactory walk, November 12, 2022, Córdoba.

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Odorant Routes

Our perception of smell is intricately shaped by the interplay of volatile chemical compounds and our brains' capacity to process and interpret the nerve signals they produce. A feedback loop of emotions, memories, and environmental cues shapes our external and internal worlds. To smell is to open a time portal. It allows us to journey through associations and past experiences, to become fully present in an experience, or to project forward ideas and expectations. Yet smelling is simultaneously a physical connection to the world. Odorant molecules oscillate into the body through the nose as we breathe; as we inhale we take the world in, transforming ourselves in the process. Inhaling, as Italian philosopher Emanuele Coccia reminds us, precedes every distinction between soul and body: "To inhale is to allow the world to come into us."¹

As you hold this book within your grasp, what sensory images emerge in your mind? The books' pages are coated with a scented artwork developed for *Meandering* by Chaveli Sifre, an artist of Puerto Rican heritage. *Smoke Compositions: a meditation on the history of the Guadalquivir; the incense trade route, and incense as heritage, both symbolic and material* (2022–23) emerged from olfactory research around the entanglements between medicine, botany, perfumery, and spirituality in the Guadalquivir valley. Sifre was inspired by the possibilities of incense and its ceremonial burning—a transcultural tradition,

1. Emanuele Coccia, *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 66.

long present in Andalusia, that has accompanied humankind for millennia—as well as incense's mercantile connections with Córdoba. The so-called Incense Route flourished from the third century BCE until the second century, and once linked south Arabia to the Mediterranean. Incense has long carried both affective and symbolic meanings through its various aesthetic, curative, and mystical uses. Sifre's research traversed a pungent mixture of materials including myrrh, frankincense, labdanum, saffron, aromatic resins, as well as essences of plants gathered from the banks of the Guadalquivir River. Sifre writes:

People who cherish books often speak of their distinct aroma, a scent intertwined with nostalgia and comfort. It is a familiar fragrance to all, yet it holds a unique significance for each individual. When I was asked to craft a scent for this publication, I wanted to produce a composition that paid homage to the material roots of most books, trees, and reflected the ongoing cycle of transformation that binds us.²

For the artist, paper can be seen as a tree's reincarnation:

The process of making paper begins with pulping, a method of breaking down wood into a formless mush. The transformation from tree to paper is undeniably harsh, yet it is not entirely devoid of hope; a tree mirrors and

2. This and subsequent quotations: Chaveli Sifre, unpublished artist's statement about *Smoke Compositions: a meditation...*, 2023.

nurtures its surroundings, while a book can serve as a chronicle of events, a repository of gestures that are not entirely forgotten. As books age, their porous structure starts to accumulate a fragrance. This publication will already possess its own scent, a composition that is a dialogue with the vital sap of some of the most notable trees that have accompanied human history, whether serving as perfume, incense, or both physical and spiritual healers.

The scent was originally concocted as a scented offering for the convening “An Ocean without Shore.” In the tradition of the infused papers popularized in France at the end of the nineteenth century, such as Papier d’Arménie, essences were dissolved and soaked into a strip of the paper of the printed program that could be folded and set alight. On this occasion, herbs traditionally associated with healing were included alongside combustible saltpeter (often deemed cursed due to its role as an ingredient in gunpowder) to create a paradoxical blend and reconcile its apparent contradiction.

Also presented during “An Ocean without Shore,” Sifre’s sculpture *Smoke Compositions: Untitled (Theriaca Censer)* (2022), contemplated the entangled history of smell, medicine, trade, and faith. Sifre produced a walk-in censer, a vessel made for burning incense during a ceremony, in the shape of an ouroboros—the ancient symbol of eternal cyclic renewal depicting a snake swallowing its own tail. The form of the censer recalled the slithering meander of the Guadalquivir, as well as the way smoke can coil into the air like a charmed cobra. The fumes rising above also represented a connection to subtle worlds, a path of transcendence, and a bridge between the tangible and intangible that reflects our own impermanence. Meanwhile, its ceramic base echoed the use of tiling and clay planters

in Andalusia, a feature common to both public spaces and private courtyards.

The sculpture was activated each evening of the convening for *limpias*, or spiritual cleansings. The *limpia* is a healing practice rooted in Mesoamerican and Amerindian ethnomedicine that serves as an embodiment of religious syncretism in the Caribbean. In this practice, Indigenous, European, and African influences converge through scent, ritual, medicine, and spirituality to generate a diverse cultural tradition and worldview that is shaped by colonialism and its afterlives. It aims to restore harmony between the individual and their surroundings by encompassing a physical, social, and spiritual purification. By cleansing uneasy spiritual elements, *limpias* aim to alleviate distress and “dis-ease.” Sifre’s sculpture also referred to *theriaca*, one of antiquity’s panaceas, a medicinal concoction believed to cure all ailments and diseases, whose multiple ingredients frequently included snake flesh.

Moreover, Sifre’s incense gathered scent elements commonly used for purging rituals across the three Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Some of the natural resins used to create the incense have been traded for over five thousand years. For the artist, such resins are an expression of the circulatory system of trees that represent a sacred geometry of scales while also implicating the topography of our own bodies and their complex blood vessel irrigation networks. Resins, as the artist reminds us, are a tree’s response to injury. Trees exude sap to revitalize and shield their vegetal form. It hardens once exposed to the air to form, in Sifre’s words, “fragrant jewels that shimmer in the sunlight.”

Expressed in this book’s sensuous experience of smell, resins play a reconciliatory role:

These resins, once separated from the trees, are now reunited with them in a different form within the book. We, too, return to this publication, to breathe life into what has

passed. As the book ages, its transformation continues, not only in a physical sense but, hopefully, within us as well.

For Sifre, the use of incense and aromatic embers is as ancient and transcultural as fire itself.

Smoke has always held special significance in all civilizations. Inhaling its essence becomes a magical act, intimately connected to life. In the ancient world, where access to the [visceral] body was challenging, smoke served as a healing vehicle, penetrating the body without a blade.

Sifre’s research contributions also encompassed an “olfactory sit-in” on the banks of the Guadalquivir, in which a smell experience of the riverine vegetation that inspired the creation of *Smoke Compositions: a meditation...* took the form of experimental pedagogy, something that is an integral part of Sifre’s practice. Using fragrance as a tool, her workshops aim to develop an awareness of how the mind creates memories, emotions, and realities, based on individual scent experiences. They also attune to the histories that materials tell as well as the immaterial heritage of particular substances. In a collaboration with Lafawndah, Sifre developed the ethnobotanical essence *Scent of Light* (2022) in the context of “The Journeying Stream.” It blended fragrance notes of antiquity from both Arab and Latin American spiritual and religious healing practices, represented by myrrh and palo santo respectively. During Lafawndah’s *Ancestral Rave* (2022), the ethereal scent—at once camphoric and floral—was wafted with cotton hand fans through a thirteenth-century palace courtyard, which was open to the public for the first time. The metallic notes of the smell mingled with the fragrance of jasmine—typical of Córdoba during the month of June.

In previous works that incorporate painting, sculpture, and installation, Sifre has

used methods of distillation, extraction, and other smell development techniques, to reflect on the intricate relationship between societal structures and our physical and subtle bodies. By emphasizing healing practices, the senses, and their interconnected belief systems, Sifre has created a body of work that intricately combines ritual, sensory experience, and Caribbean cosmivision. She defines the latter as a particular form of resilience and syncretism that developed out of colonialism and its continuities in the region. Both individuals and communities continued practices based on their spiritual beliefs, and ultimately generated new traditions.

Drawing on the tradition of what Sicilian philosopher Federico Campagna has called “true magic”—a blend of Western and Eastern theosophy and theology spanning the period from antiquity to the Renaissance—Sifre’s interest in alchemy and magic can be considered a form of therapy, and an antidote to the capitalist exploitation of the body. Magic, according to Campagna, goes beyond popular notions of supernatural abilities or mere illusion, and is concerned with personal transformation and the reenchantment of the world.³ Similarly, Sifre believes that by consciously undoing the systems that restrain other ways of sensing and envisioning the world in and around us—systems we might identify, following Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, as the coloniality of the senses—we can undergo a transformative perceptual shift. By mindfully focusing on olfaction, rehabilitating and actively engaging with our sensory experience, we can make new sense of the world and our own reality within it.

3. Federico Campagna, *Technic and Magic: The Reconstruction of Reality* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).