ON BEAUTY

These Perfumes Come With Notes of Blood, Latex and Floorboards

For a growing number of fragrance fans, smelling singular is more important than smelling good.

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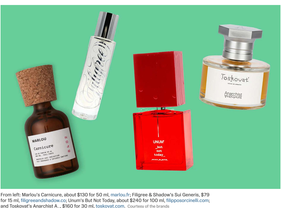

From left: Marlou's Carnicure, about $130 for 50 ml, marlou.fr; Filigree & Shadow's Sui Generis, $79 for 15 ml, filigreeandshadow.co; Linuer's But Not Today, about $240 for 100 ml, filippoworcinelli.com; and Tookovet's Anarchist A., $150 for 30 ml, tookovet.com. Courtesy of the brands.

By Cassidy George
April 9, 2024

After the New York City-based perfume brand Le Labo launched its best-selling scent Santal 33 in 2011, a fragrant chemtrail of fig, leather and sandalwood wafted across Lower Manhattan and Williamsburg, invisibly mapping the presence of fashionable people and places. For a period of time, for certain circles of New Yorkers, encountering Santal 33 was a near-daily occurrence at art galleries, clothing stores and cocktail bars. In 2017, when the New York-based beauty brand Glossier released You, with its lighter, brighter and spicy-sweet notes, that perfume began to take Santal 33's place as the ubiquitous scent of trend-conscious young people.

But now, the era of unavoidable "it" fragrances may be ending. "People have become fed up with the same old, same old, over and over again," says the perfume historian Elena Vosnaki, 51, who's also one of the founding members and senior editors of the website Fragrantica, a digital magazine and online database for fragrance enthusiasts. Although the mainstream perfume business has long run on seduction, celebrity and the idea that a person must have a signature scent, a burgeoning countermovement, driven by independent artisans, is questioning the idea that a perfume's central function is to delight the noses of others. A growing market of fragrance fans is more interested in smelling peculiar than pleasant.

"Do you know any perfumes that smell like dead trees, water-stained motels, peeling wallpaper, dusty wooden floorboards and an abandoned church?" is the kind of hyper-specific request that Annabelle La Chimia, 31, says she regularly receives from followers of her popular TikTok account, @nametheunusual. (Her recommendation in that particular case is Memory Motel by the French perfume house Une Nuit Nomade.) She is just one of many creators on #Perfumetok, a hashtag with 6.7 billion views, that cater to an increasing demand for bizarre, outlandish and even intentionally off-putting notes. La Chimia recommends perfumes such as Bucharest-based brand Tookovet's Anarchist A., which is advertised as having notes of dirty dollars, old confession room and snow, or Eau de Space's eponymous fragrance, which features notes of latex, gunpowder and biscuits. (One user on Fragrantica suggested its scent might be comparable to that of a nuclear reactor.) "People no longer feel they need to smell good to be loved or accepted," says La Chimia, whose followers are mostly between 18 and 20 years old.

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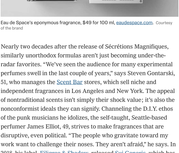
Polarizing fragrances are by no means new. Over the years, many controversial releases — including Yves Saint Laurent's Opium, introduced in 1977, and Christian Dior's Poison, launched in 1985 — have become best sellers. The controversial aspect of those perfumes, however, wasn't their scents, but rather their overwhelming potencies or their lascivious advertising campaigns. According to Vosnaki, one of the first influential, genuinely experimental perfumes arrived in the mid-2000s, at a time when the market was oversaturated with fruity and floral scents. The French house Etat Libre D'Orange released a piece of conceptual olfactory art called Sécrétions Magnifiques in 2006. "It was supposedly inspired by blood, semen, saliva and sweat," says Vosnaki. "It was never intended to be a commercial perfume, but it became a cult item. People scatter from it in terror. It's beautiful."



Eau de Space's eponymous fragrance, $49 for 100 ml, eaudespace.com. Courtesy of the brand.

Nearly two decades after the release of Sécrétions Magnifiques, similarly unorthodox formulas aren't just becoming under-the-radar favorites. "We've seen the audience for many experimental perfumes swell in the last couple of years," says Steven Gontarski, 51, who manages the Scent Bar stores, which sell niche and independent fragrances in Los Angeles and New York. The appeal of nontraditional scents isn't simply their shock value; it's also the nonconformist ideals they can signify. Channeling the D.I.Y. ethos of the punk musicians he idolizes, the self-taught, Seattle-based perfumer James Elliot, 48, strives to make fragrances that are disruptive, even political. "The people who gravitate toward my work want to challenge their noses. They aren't afraid," he says. In 2018, his label, Filigree & Shadow, released Sui Generis, which has notes of bubble gum, rose, leather and the drug methamphetamine and is inspired by the '80s New York nightclub Danceteria and the heavy metal style of the band the Plasmatics. After the overturning of Roe v. Wade in 2022, Elliot created Laughing With a Mouthful of Blood, which has notes of Coca-Cola, linen and tobacco; proceeds from its sales benefit nonprofits that help provide abortion care, as well as safe spaces for L.G.B.T.Q. youth. Elliot is currently developing a perfume inspired by gay clubs that smells of leather, sweat, cigarettes and used underwear.

The rise of niche scents reflects a wider trend in online-centric fashion and beauty communities, where micro-aesthetics, such as cottagecore and dark academia, proliferate. A broader range of available fragrances means wearers can more easily shift between various styles and moods. These nuances inform the work of the Italian olfactory artist Filippo Sorcinelli, who's designed fragrances intended to express complex and often dark emotions, such as fear and anxiety. He describes his target audience as introspective people "who want to open themselves up through a smell that becomes a mirror of a memory, good or bad." One of his most discussed perfumes is But Not Today; launched in 2014 as part of his first fragrance collection, UNUM, it takes inspiration from the 2001 film "Hannibal" and features blood as a top note.

Compared to larger fragrance companies, small houses like Elliot's and Sorcinelli's are freer to experiment and push boundaries. As French perfumer Brise Frorcrain — who describes his fragrance line, Marlou, founded in 2016, as an exploration of the sensuality of bodily odors — points out, long before the formation of beauty and luxury conglomerates, most perfumers were small-scale, independent businesses. "What was extremely ordinary a century ago is now viewed as punk," he says. These newer artisanal perfumers, though their creations might be unorthodox, also have the same goal perfumers always have — to make an impression. And which is more likely to turn a head: a pleasantly floral but familiar scent or Tookovet's Born Screaming, with notes of popped balloon and DVD case?

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