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*an ode to sophisticated perfumery*

James Heeley // Heeley

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I met James Heeley in Berlin. The British designer lives and works in Paris and talks with passion and a French accent about his perfumes. His creations are based on memories, images and impressions – from places, smells or simply raw materials. The scents are sophisticated, sometimes eccentric but never intrusive. They are clear and balanced to perfection. His philosophy: a perfume is made for the person who is wearing it and those who are close to this person. Everything else would be an invasion of privacy.

**First of all you are a designer, the design of the packages, vials, brochures and scent strips is wonderful – one can feel your love for detail. When did you decide to create perfumes? Was there a pivotal moment?**

I came to scent through flowers. My first job as a designer was working with Christian Tortu, a well known florist and artistic director in here in Paris. I was just amazed the first time I walked into his flower store. There was a fantastic smell, but not only because of the flowers but because of a candle that he was doing with Annik Goutal. I suddenly realized that there was a whole creative process behind scent. A scent isn't just a scent. It doesn't appear from nowhere, it fascinated me.

I realised that as a designer I could also do the graphic design and the packaging. I could turn the packaging into something that was not just a box but something that could be reused as a vase. It is rare now in today's world to make a product from A to Z and to master it. I mean to master what goes into the bottle and to design the packaging. I saw it as a complete exercise. So that's really how it started.

## **You are an autodidact. How did you finally learn to create perfumes?**

I learned it slowly, building up knowledge over time, through trial and error. It's a bit like cooking or learning to play an instrument. Once you've learned the basics you can then move on from there. In fact it isn't that complicated. Sometimes I go in a full circle and end up stripping out elements that I consider superfluous. At least if things do get complicated, they should appear simple and easy.

Take *Figuier* for example. Even if the name and the idea are simple, many different ingredients are needed to really make it smell like a fig tree, or my idea, my memory of a fig tree. A fig tree is in fact quite complex: there are the leaves, the fruit, the wood and the sap. They all come together to create an olfactory impression. There is no fig extract as such, and this is one of the magical things about perfume: a combination of different 'matières premières' can be used to create the impression of something else. So, how did I learn to create perfume? I didn't go to a perfume school; in fact very few perfumers have been taken that route as it's quite recent. Traditionally, the art of perfume was learnt by apprenticeship, or passed from parent to child as part of a family tradition. But learning is not enough though. You have to be passionate to make a good perfume. Creating perfume is much more than technique and knowledge, it's also about intuition and feeling. It's the pursuit of an ideal, of perfection.

## **Do you have a more sensitive nose than others?**

I wouldn't say my nose is better than anybody else's. I don't find my way around with my nose like Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, or smell strawberries from a mile away – what is important is to put scents together to make a coherent whole. It's a bit like being a fashion designer or an artist who can put colours and forms together and make them work. A painter doesn't have to have a 20/20 vision but he has to have a feeling for what works and what doesn't, what's good and what's bad. Scent is obviously linked to memory. It's about having likes and dislikes and developing a certain taste, a certain skill.

## **What is your first olfactory memory?**

I don't have per se a strong first memory of a particular scent. I have quite a few early memories in no particular order and some of my most vivid memories include scents. When I think about it, my first olfactive memory is the smell of green grass. As you probably know, in England we are completely obsessed by lawns. It is often considered like an outside carpet. My grandfather's lawn was immaculate, cut in long straight lines. I will never forget the amazing smell of fresh, green grass that was cut at least twice a week during the summer.

My grandfather was a very keen gardener and was mad about roses. As a child I liked walking amongst the roses, looking at them and smelling them. So roses are another strong memory. And my grandmother's perfume to me was quite subtle and flowery and I remember loving the smell.

Of course the more you think, the more the memories come back. Scent is also about recollecting specific moments and it is extremely present in my memory. But having said that, I don't know how much of it is really my true memory or the memory of a memory that has changed over time.

## **Is there a smell you can't stand?**

What is funny is that what we call 'bad smells' is important. If you smell oud for example in its pure form, the extract of oud, which is the resin of trees infected with a fungus, it actually smells a little like an unwashed goat's bottom! I mean it really smells strong and animal like, complex, but slightly putrid. As a perfumer you end liking smells that you cannot actually imagine liking. Not everything in perfume is beautiful. Not everything in perfume is flowery, fresh and green. You need different kinds of scents to make perfume interesting. When discussing raw materials we often say "Yes it smells like...so and so" and some might be quite disgusting associations – animal secretions or whatever. There are lots of raw materials that are not exactly nice smelling but they are part of a perfumer's palette: castoreum and civet aren't exactly pleasant scents but they can give depth and interest to a perfume.

There aren't really any smells I really don't like. Bad smells are a bit like swear words: they aren't pleasant but we use them quite a lot. One thing I really don't like of a scent is when it's too strong, too constant. Wearing strong perfume can be extremely vulgar, particularly when it's bad perfume – what is bad what is good that's highly subjective – but in a public place it can be offensive, an invasion of privacy, of peace and quiet.

## **What is your philosophy of a perfect perfume?**

A good perfume to me is about balance and proportion, one that has the capacity to evoke an image, a memory, an emotion or a feeling of pleasure. And then a great perfume is quite unique and individual in a discreet way. But then it's so subjective.

## **You call your new fragrance *Oranges and lemons say the bells of St. Clement's* "a timeless chic Eau de Cologne" that you created for yourself. What was the idea behind?**

In the end it is not something I intended to do for myself but one I adopted if you like. In France people often say "Oh you're so typically English" – but I don't really see it. So then I started to think what a typically English perfume could smell like and I found it amusing to look back and ask myself the question. What I wanted to do was a perfume that typifies something that's English and about things I love. I love toast and marmalade. I drink gallons of tea everyday. I like traditional English clothes, tweed jackets – I've always liked vintage clothes. I wanted to do a perfume that captured a kind of Englishness but one that was fresh and contemporary.

I also wanted something elegant and timeless because fashion is so ephemeral. But it's also circular and things come back. Fashion is all about style and attitude, so I thought it would be great to do a traditional Eau de Cologne as an Eau de Parfum that a stylish girl could wear. Style is not just about what you wear, but how you wear it. I think a pretty girl wearing a tailored jacket or a men's shirt, wearing an Eau de Cologne is a nice idea.

## **What are the stories behind your scents?**

Some come from me trying to recapture a transient moment. Scent is all about the ephemeral world and associations. Sometimes I want to recapture a fleeting moment. On the other hand, the idea can start from a raw material; something that I simply love to smell and from then on I might imagine associations. So a typical way of working for me – if you take the perfume *Cardinal*: in English churches we don't burn incense. I was in a beautiful church in Paris,

L’Eglise St. Gervais. Light was streaming through the windows, the monks wore white habits and I felt something very uplifting and the smell of burning incense was a wonderful smell to me – an impression I wanted to recreate in a perfume. It’s nothing about religion it’s just about being moved in an aesthetic and emotional way, as one can often feel in a beautiful place or in front of a beautiful landscape.

The idea behind *Cuir Pleine Fleur*: I was in a leather merchant buying leather to line boxes with. It was a combination of a girl wearing a floral perfume and next to the smell of leather it was quite a sort of a fantastic combination – quite original. *Cuir Pleine Fleur* is a play on words, it’s the best part of the leather in French. It literally means “leather full of flowers”. Normally leather scents are quite dark and smoky, but I wanted to make something more modern and lighter, more floral; more like a luxurious fine leather.

*Esprit du Tigre* was inspired by tiger balm and travelling in the Far East. I always used to have with me a little tin of it in my travel bag. It has a wonderful smell and it existed for many hundreds of years as an ancient herbal remedy. It’s warm and it’s cold, it’s energizing and relaxing. It has an intriguing duality and I wanted to do a perfume about it. *Esprit du Tigre* isn’t particularly commercial. You can only do this kind of perfume as a small, independent perfume house – it’s not an easy scent. But it’s one I love and enjoy.

*Menthe Fraîche* is again based on something I love – fresh mint. Friends said, “Does anybody really want to smell of mint?” But if something is really well done it doesn’t matter, something simple and almost banal can turn out to be interesting and elegant. I also saw it as a challenge to make a perfume out of something very simple like mint.

Another perfume I love is *Sel Marin* which is based on the idea of the sea. I love the sea, I love swimming and I love being surrounded by it. The idea was to capture the scent of the sea breeze, something that you can only get a slight whiff of in a fleeting moment. I wanted to capture it in a bottle. Not just in a bottle because this perfume you really have to put it on your skin and smell in the open air to understand what it is about.

### **Do you wear other perfumes besides your own ones?**

I love perfume and I used to wear other scents and I still do from time to time. I wear many of my own perfumes but most of the time I am wearing something that I am working on.

### **A question to the designer: Is a perfume a piece of art?**

I wouldn’t say it’s pure art: not like painting or sculpture, but it’s definitely creative. It’s probably more like music than anything. I don’t think it’s really important. I mean there is a lot of art that I don’t like, that I don’t really consider as art. ‘Art’ is a very big word. It’s too much to call it art, but perfume could be part of a piece of art. Why not?

### **You often compare cooking and creating perfume. What is your favourite food?**

I love cooking and I also love going to the outdoor market in Paris. What I love the most about cooking is finding the best, seasonal ingredients and trying to do them justice and sometimes that means doing things very simply. It depends on your mood doesn’t it? I like the things quite simple – really tasty and fresh.

**Do you have a favourite fashion designer?**

Hedi Slimane. He hasn't been around on the fashion scene for a while but he's very creative and a good photographer. He's a great fashion designer, especially his first year at Dior was fantastic! His cuts and lines are amazing. He brought a breath of fresh air, creativity and modern elegance to men's fashion. His clothes are also great on women.

**What's your song of the hour?**

That's even harder. I like so many different kinds of music. One of the albums I preferred this year was the *The XX's* debut album. I had a crush on a few songs from that I played over and over again. And then there was the new *Gorillaz* album 'Plastic Beach' and the earlier 'D-Sides' album that I discovered. I'm a great fan of Damon Albarn. By and large British bands are the best!

**Thank you very much for this interview!**

Photo: Elina Kechicheva

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