



ART SCENTER

**SCULPTOR AND PERFUMER NOBI SHIOYA
MAKES SCENTS OUT OF SINS AND SCULPTURES
OUT OF SMELLS**

Nobi Shioya was born in 1958 in Albany, New York, where his father was studying plastic surgery as a visiting student from Japan. Shioya's parents converted to Catholicism while in the United States, and, a few months after JFK's assassination in 1963, took him back to their home country. But the day before they left, the family went to see Michelangelo's 1499 sculpture *Pietà* at the Vatican Pavilion of the 1964 World's Fair in Queens, New York—the only time the masterpiece has left the Vatican in its 507-year history. Shioya gazed at Mary holding a dead Jesus in her lap. Then just after arriving in Japan, Shioya went to Kyoto and saw *Ryoanji Temple*, the paradigmatic Japanese work of art, which consists of fifteen stones floating in a sea of white pebbles like asteroids in the time-space mesh. Shioya became a sculptor in 1980, studying at the elite Geidai (Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music) and building surfboards on the side. Then he moved to New York City. In 1996, just after his first New York sculpture show, "Submersions," at the 123 Watts Gallery in Tribeca, he got an e-mail from a friend who had created a scent. Something clicked.

When I first came across Shioya's work—at Colette, the indefinable clearinghouse of ultra-chicness on Paris's rue du

Faubourg Saint-Honoré—I assumed he was a perfumer. And he is, in part. Shioya runs his own fascinating commercial collection of ingeniously packaged scents, called S-Perfume. He shares with the scent-architect Frédéric Malle a Woody Allen-ish knack for convincing stars to work for him. Jet-Scent was created by Alberto Morillas, one of the industry's legendary perfumers and author of *Acqua di Giò for Men* for Armani, *Carolina Herrera's Chic*, and Calvin Klein's *cK One*, among others. He got the equally esteemed Sophia Grojsman (YSL's gorgeous *Paris*, and the exquisite *Calyx*) to create 100% *Love* for him. Under Shioya's artistic direction, the brilliant young star Christophe Laudamiel made *S-ex*, a masterful, complex juxtaposition of elements that gives the scent of the genitalia of a freshly shampooed beast (www.s-perfume.com).

But Shioya's commercial line is simply a corollary to his art. He is a sculptor who, crucially, centrally, and with an astounding sureness of touch, incorporates the sense of smell into his work. The 1997 show that ultimately resulted from his friend's e-mail, "Sugar Mountain," also at the 123 Watts Gallery, featured three sculptures made of sugar (one a copy of Michelangelo's *Pietà*; the second the Virgin Mary, highly sexualized and on all fours; the third the Virgin Mary spreading her legs like a stripper and masturbating), all mated to a particular scent. Shioya got in touch with Véronique Ferval, an evaluator in Paris at the esteemed scent company Firmenich. Together they created the smell he wanted. Shioya used candles to fill the space with the scent, which was his memory of the smell of white American kids.

"The show was all about my love and hate of Catholicism," says Shioya. "Being Catholic is a very strange thing in Japan, and I was always surrounded by white American kids. They had this unique body odor. It's comfortably sour, and there's a sweet smell like bubble gum and artificial flavorings in packaged cakes, and a slightly decomposing indole-like smell that comes off the skin." (Indoles are heavy-smelling molecules present in feces and corpses and often used in perfumes; Grojsman used them

prominently in *Eternity*.) Ferval, coincidentally, arrived to work in Firmenich's New York office on the day "Sugar Mountain" opened. They met. Ferval is pretty, smart, and energetic, and the two became a couple. They now live together in Brooklyn, New York, and have a son.

Shioya uses scent, in a sense, to complete his material. "As a sculptor, I am very space oriented. Form is of course the most important thing, but the space that surrounds the form is an equally important part of my sculpture. I realized there was a completely new way to experience the space when I used scent." He adds, "It's hard to explain this, but I can see invisible movement in the space, like there are transparent dancers performing there."

Recently, at Shioya's apartment—he lives in an old public school building in Cobble Hill—he showed me a series of vaginas he'd sculpted in 1999 of plaster and scent, and then pieces of his 2003 exhibit at the Cleveland State University Art Gallery in Ohio, Shioya's most ambitious work to date. Called "7S"—he has put it on his art website www.compressedart.com/7S—Shioya sculpted the seven deadly sins in the form of seven plaster industrial-style weights, each a mix of plaster of paris, water, pigment, fragrance oil, and a chemical that turns oil water soluble. Each sin was about a foot tall and hung from thick, white, synthetic ropes. Shioya then chose seven Firmenich perfumers and started creative directing seven scents, playing architect to the perfumer's construction chief (in this way he is part Peggy Guggenheim, part Bennett Cerf). He mated the nature of each sin to its perfumer's creativity. "No doubt about Thierry [Wasser], he loves being lazy," says Shioya affectionately. So Wasser created Sloth. Sloth is an incredibly light orange blossom scent in which the concept, as with much postmodern art, is more important than the piece of art itself: in French culture, orange blossom is the scent used to lull babies into sleep.

Anger was done by Annick Ménardo. "Easy to assign," says Shioya, "because Annick Ménardo is always angry. She is amazingly talented. According to Véronique, she has an almost animal-like sense of smell." Anger is a magnificent work of art. Shioya describes it as "green—as a kid, when you smashed a praying mantis, their insides smelled like that." I would describe it as bleach dosed with a failed floral scent: anger flashes between corrosive chemical and a synthetic bouquet from a nursery—a bizarre, shocking juxtaposition.

Avarice was created by one of the most commercial of Firmenich's perfumers, Harry Frémont (*Romance* for Ralph Lauren), who told Shioya, "I'm only giving you the top note." Avarice is a thin, vaporous scent, a miserly flower. Lust was Alberto Morillas, and Annie Buzantian, who has created for Estée Lauder, made *Envy*. "She said," says Shioya, "'Okay, I'm going to create a scent that everyone envies,'" and in fact Buzantian has made a brilliant simulacrum of the scent of Breck shampoo from the 1970s and all the gilded, vain, blinding Giorgio of Beverly Hills-style perfumes designed to convey the presence of money; you smell the send-up in an instant. Gluttony was Ilias Ermenidis. The profound flaw in this work is perhaps the most interesting one possible: it is simply too gorgeous, too beautiful. Pride was done by Jacques Cavallier, one of the hottest perfumers around (*L'Eau d'Issey*, among many others). Pride has no scent at all.

Because every work of art that he creates constitutes a possible commercial product (and Shioya is neither stupid nor ideological; he appreciates sales as much as the next guy), Shioya faces the question of whether to place each scent in his S-Perfumes. "I don't know if I'll bring out the Deadly Sins as a line," Shioya says to me thoughtfully. "Alberto's *Lust*—it's unwearable. Annick Ménardo's *Anger*—it's actually repellent." His feeling is that if Rei Kawakubo can create scent art as determinedly unwearable as *Odeur 53*, which is the olfactory equivalent of a Francis Bacon on a particularly horrifying day, so can he. Would it be commercially successful? Kawakubo in theory sells gallons of *Odeur 53*—to whom, I've never been sure; to me it is the Roswell of perfumes, its existence unconfirmed and consisting of furtive whispers of "so-and-so wears 53," but, if so, so-and-so has never actually introduced himself to me, and 53's (rumored) impressive sales seem inversely correlated to its actual presence on human skin. But I haven't seen the sales figures. One never knows. With *Anger*, an unwearable, angry, lustful scent, Shioya could have a major minor commercial hit on his hands.

He's considering it. **Chandler Burr**

Ashita no Joe, Tokyo Icon, 1998

Artwork Nobi Shioya

Photography Hajime Watanabe