

Culture Vulture: Skew-whiff

Raymond Gill

February 18, 2012

[Read later](#)



Wim Delvoye's *Cloaca* installation at MONA.

Smell has been one of the periphery senses but it's now getting its nose back in.

THE Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart has been the biggest sensation in the art and tourism scenes since it opened a year ago - and why not? The private collection of billionaire maverick David Walsh is all sex, death and rock'n'roll and is in his underground lair, cut into the side of a cliff on a bank of the Derwent River.

Visitors are taking the ride down, down, down from the Earth's surface to enter a world where the senses, momentarily deprived of natural light and air, recalibrate to MONA's endless galleries of darkly lit and provocative art.

But it's not only sight, sound and touch that readjust as you narrow the eyes, prick the ears and glide your hands along the walls of its shadowy passageways and tunnels that lead to startling exhibits including a (lifelike) dead horse, a (real-looking) suicide machine and five score (plaster-cast) vaginas.

It's the sense of smell as well. MONA's visitors can't resist sidling up to its vast rock walls cut from the mountainside and breathing in their earthy aroma. You've got to admit it's not often you see art-goers sniffing the walls of a major art institution. (Though lying face down on the carpet of the Great Hall of the NGV is not uncommon, especially during opening-night sponsor speeches.)

MONA, however, is possibly the only art gallery in the world to also have a "destination smell" rather than a "destination painting".

This comes in the form of Belgian artist Wim Delvoye's much-talked-about *Cloaca* installation, pictured below. This early-2000s artwork takes its title from the Latin term for "sewer" and Delvoye's gurgling tubes and large glass cylinders process and expel excretia true to that name.

This is much to the delight or repulsion of its visitors, depending on their age, humour, or what the gastro-contraption was fed that morning. On the day I visited, the small room containing *Cloaca* smelt of not-unpleasant, just-out-of-the-oven Brumby's bread chased by notes of Pine O Clean and with lingering hints of apple sauce.

Whatever your reaction to its sight, sound or smell, Delvoye's work (and there is a lot more of it on show now in a survey of 100 of his works at MONA until April 9) puts the olfactory back into the arts.

It's been a long time since an artist's work alerted the rest of us to our sense of smell. The last time we went crazy over aroma was in 1985 when German writer Patrick Suskind's literary novel *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* became an instant international hit. His story was about an 18th-century French lunatic called Grenouille who couldn't resist the scent of a freshly shucked virgin. After disposing of their bodies he would bottle their bouquet in perfumes, which a marketing team might today label "Essence of Virgin".

But the 1980s sensation for emanation was short-lived. This was possibly because Suskind didn't move fast enough in granting the film rights to *Perfume* and so the opportunity to create the world's first high-brow "Smell-a-Vision" movie was lost. When the book was finally made into a film in 2006 it was something of a stinker, but unfortunately not in a literal sense.

Since then digital technology has revolutionised the visual and the aural on our screens and speakers but our sense of smell has been left behind,

like it was bad or something.

But there does seem to be something in the air, so to speak, and it isn't only Delvoe's *Cloaca* that is putting the pungent back into the public consciousness.

Real estate agents have recognised smell's power by whacking on the coffee percolator at their open for inspections. Smells are wafting across the city as a new Pie Face opens on every second corner. Cafe owners across the world have discovered their customers will pay more for a humble cup of coffee if their menus describe it as "well-balanced, stonefruit nuances, juicy mouthfeel and pineapple acidity".

And now a men's club in Cape Town has really stuck its nose out by marketing a radical range of men's colognes called "Alibis" which provide its wearers with excuses for the challenges of modern life. One of the "Alibi" range is said to combine the smell of stale cigarettes with notes of coffee if the wearer wants to convince others he has been "working late". Another called "My Car Broke Down" apparently summons the heady aroma of automatic transmission fluid and freshly crushed tail light, while another called "We Were Out Sailing" combines hints of sea breeze chased with a delicate floral afterglow.

Smell, it seems, is proudly taking its place again in the realm of the senses.