MEMNOSPHERE is an attempt to find the edges of a single word, 'smell,' and trace the associative connections to the limit of that word. Gathered fragments of texts combined with images, drawings, recipes and other shards of thought tangle the simple word into an unstable web of association. The invisible architecture of that web is explored through three themes: mythology, memory, and research.

Smell is deeply tied to the unconscious. Divorced from representation, it is more primal than the other senses—a path to our animal and emotional being, offering a way of reaching conclusions, that is intuitive rather than conceptual. Smell can summon powerful emotional responses: a scent linked to a pleasurable memory can bring a rush of joy. Despite its importance to our emotional and sensory lives, smell is probably the most undervalued sense in the Western world. The senses have been domination by vision. The eye symbolizes knowledge and enlightenment, and visual observation forms the bedrock of modern science. While the cellular mechanisms behind hearing and sight were largely solved by the 1950s and 60s, there is still no consensus on how a single molecule of odorant entering the nose causes a neuron to fire.

The lack of research, coupled with the human sense of smell being understood as weak and underdeveloped, smell remains an elusive phenomenon. It's likely that our olfactory powers don't rival those of many animals, but they remain remarkably sharp. Our noses can distinguish thousands (maybe tens of thousands!) of smells and detect odors present in only the faintest traces. Unlike colors, smells can't be named—at least not in European languages. We're left saying "it smells like…," reaching for metaphors to describe an experience that resists direct description. Nor can odors be recorded as there's no reliable way to capture or preserve a scent over time. In the realm of smell, we're left with description and memory.

But smell isn't purely a biological or psychological phenomenon—it's cultural, shaped by social and historical forces. Specific smells are invested with cultural values by societies as a means of defining the world. Olfactory experience is so intimate and emotionally charged that these culturally coded scents become deeply internalized by individuals. To study the cultural history of smell, then, is in a real sense to investigate the very essence of human culture.

Smell and Mythology:

Societies have long used smell for seduction, diagnosis, and spiritual insight—a way of forging ethereal connections beyond the reach of the other senses. To smell something is to engage with its interior, unlike sight, which takes in only surfaces. Burying one's nose in a loved one, or identifying a child by scent alone relies on the intrinsic essences. Resisting containment, it drifts, crosses boundaries, and collapses ordinary distinctions of time. Much of this knowledge survives not in books but through inherited wisdom—passed down through generations as home remedies, rituals, and warnings. Smell and mythology alike shape not just how we understand the world, but who we understand ourselves to be, weaving personal identity into systems of meaning built around what is unknown, historical, or inexplicable.

Smell and Memory:

Memory and smell are deeply intertwined, rooted in the fact that our earliest brain structures evolved to handle smell, spatial navigation, and memory together. Our ancient ancestors used odor gradients to navigate and map their surroundings. The human nose contains hundreds of distinct odor receptors, each tuned to detect specific odor molecules. When these molecules enter the nose and bind to their matching receptors, the interaction works much like a key fitting into a lock. This triggers olfactory sensory neurons, which send electrical signals along their axons toward the brain. These signals first pass through the olfactory bulb before reaching several brain regions central to memory and emotion. The piriform cortex identifies the specific scent, the amygdala processes the emotional response, and the hippocampus stores and organizes the memory itself. If the hippocampus registers a smell as significant—particularly if it's tied to an emotionally charged experience—it can encode that memory for long-term storage. As a result, encountering the same scent years or even decades later can instantly bring back the full emotional weight and vividness of that original moment.

Smell and Research:

Academic studies of smell have tended to suffer the same cultural disadvantages as smell itself. In the West, the high status granted to sight means that studies of vision—even critical ones—are readily taken seriously, while attempts to examine smell risk being dismissed as frivolous or irrelevant. Nonetheless, significant progress has been made in understanding the biological and chemical basis of olfaction, but many fundamental questions remain unanswered. Is smell actually one sense or two—one responding to proper odors and another registering scentless, airborne chemicals such as pheromones? Is the nose the only part of the body affected by odors? And how can smells even be measured objectively? Some studies suggest the human nose can smell up to a trillion scents, while others believe it to be closer to ten thousand. Alongside this physical research, a separate body of work has developed around the psychology of smell, particularly as it relates to memory.

Most smells we encounter in daily life are likely complex mixtures rather than single substances. The smell of cake, for instance, is really a blend of hundreds of different chemical compounds. Scientists have only recently begun to investigate how a single receptor responds to a single molecule. Our future understanding of the diversity of olfactory receptor neurons promises to reshape not just our grasp of the senses, but our understanding of human development and behavior.

“Breaths come in pairs, except at two times in our lives - the beginning and the end. At birth, we inhale for the first time; at death, we exhale for the last. In between, through all the lather of one’s life, each breath passes over our olfactory sites. Each day, we breathe about 23,040 times and move around 438 cubic feet of air. It takes us about five seconds to breathe - two seconds to inhale and three seconds to exhale - an, in that time, molecules of odor flood through our systems. Inhaling and exhaling, we smell odors. Smells coat us, swirl around us enter our bodies, emanate from us. We live in a constant wash of them. Still, when we try to describe a smell, words fail us like the fabrications they are. ...If there are words for all the pastels in a hue - the lavenders, mauves, fuchsias, plums and lilacs - who will name the tones and tints of a smell? It’s as if we were hypnotized en masse and told to selectively forget. It may be, too, that smells move us so profoundly, in part, because we cannot utter their names. In a world sayable and lush, where marvels offer themselves readily for verbal dissection, smells are often right on the tip of our tongues - but no closer- and it gives them a kind of magical distance, a mystery, a power without a name, a sacredness.”

- Diane Ackerman, A Natural History of the Senses (New York: Vintage Books, 1995)

Among NASA's many specialized roles, none is more unusual than that of George Aldrich—the man officially tasked with sniffing everything that goes to space. Based at White Sands Test Facility, he has spent 44 years ensuring that every object brought into the habitable areas of the International Space Station meets strict odor standards. Because astronauts live and breathe in tightly confined, recycled air, even a mildly unpleasant or harmful smell can pose a serious health risk. To prevent this, Aldrich leads a team of trained volunteer panelists who perform blind smell tests, rating each item on a scale from zero to four—zero indicating no detectable odor. Any item scoring above 2.5 is immediately disqualified from spaceflight. Over the course of more than 800 tests, Aldrich has developed a simple but effective trick for resetting his sense of smell between samples: he sniffs the back of his own hand, using it to cleanse his palate and return to his home smell.



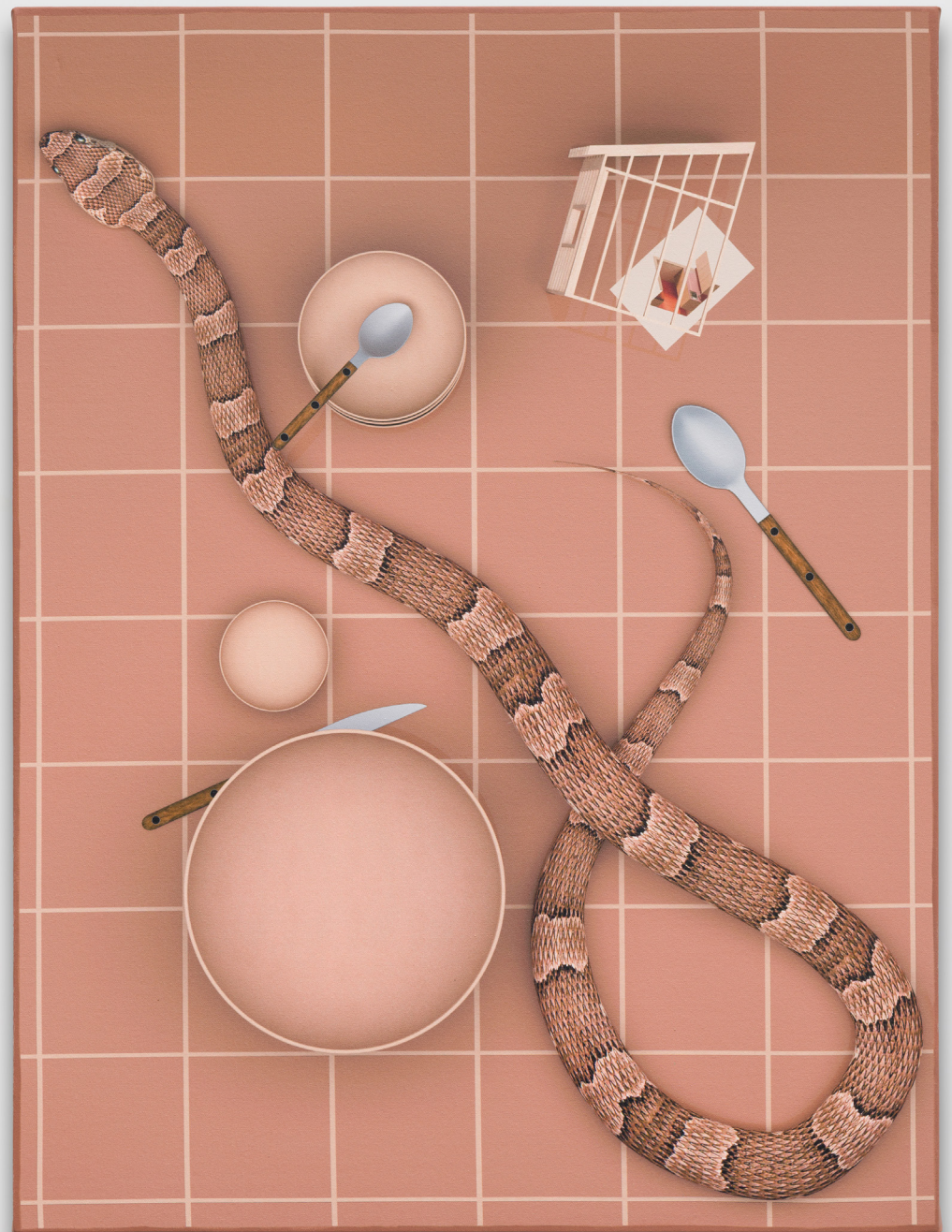
Stills taken from TikTok video by shady_fragrance_lady

Other palate cleansing techniques. Sniffing your elbow, the inside of your shirt or inside of your scarf.



Palette Cleanser, 2026
40.5 x 26.5 in | 102.87 x 67.31cm
Acrylic and colored pencil on canvas

There's a well known Southern legend that the crisp scent of cut cucumbers while walking in the woods signals a nearby copperhead snake, one of four venomous pit vipers in the American Southeast. The myth persists as a piece of multi-generational "grandma" wisdom; one survives the wilderness by not disturbing the wildlife encountered. While snakes do release a musk as a defensive mechanism, one would need to be handling or disturbing the snake to smell it, making the myth a useless early warning system.
The source of the smell is likely from native flora, such as maidenhair fern, Ozark gourd, or wild creeping cucumbers.



Hot House, 2026
40.5 x 30.5 in | 102.87x 77.47cm
Acrylic and colored pencil on canvas

Unconscious Patient (Allegory of Smell), a 1624 painting by Rembrandt, features a young man wearing a colorful, loosely-draped housecoat, who has fainted and is slumped in a chair. An extremely worried old woman wearing a fur-trimmed hooded mantle tries to revive him by holding a white handkerchief to his nose, presumably one containing smelling salts. An equally old man, his right hand covered by a white cloth, holds the youth's bare right forearm and anxiously awaits to see if the woman's efforts succeed.

Smelling salts are a centuries-old folk remedy for fainting. Going back to the 13th century at least, ammonia—the active ingredient in smelling salts—has been a key component of the doctor's medicine bag. Smelling salts work through the sense of touch, rather than the sense of smell. When smelling salts are held adjacent to the nose of a person who has fainted, the ammonia fumes irritate the membranes near the trigeminal nerve, which triggers a breathing reflex.



Unconscious Patient (Allegory of Smell), 1624-25
Rembrandt van Rijn



Allegory of Smell, 2026
14.5 x 10.5 in | 36.83x 26.67 cm
Acrylic and colored pencil on canvas

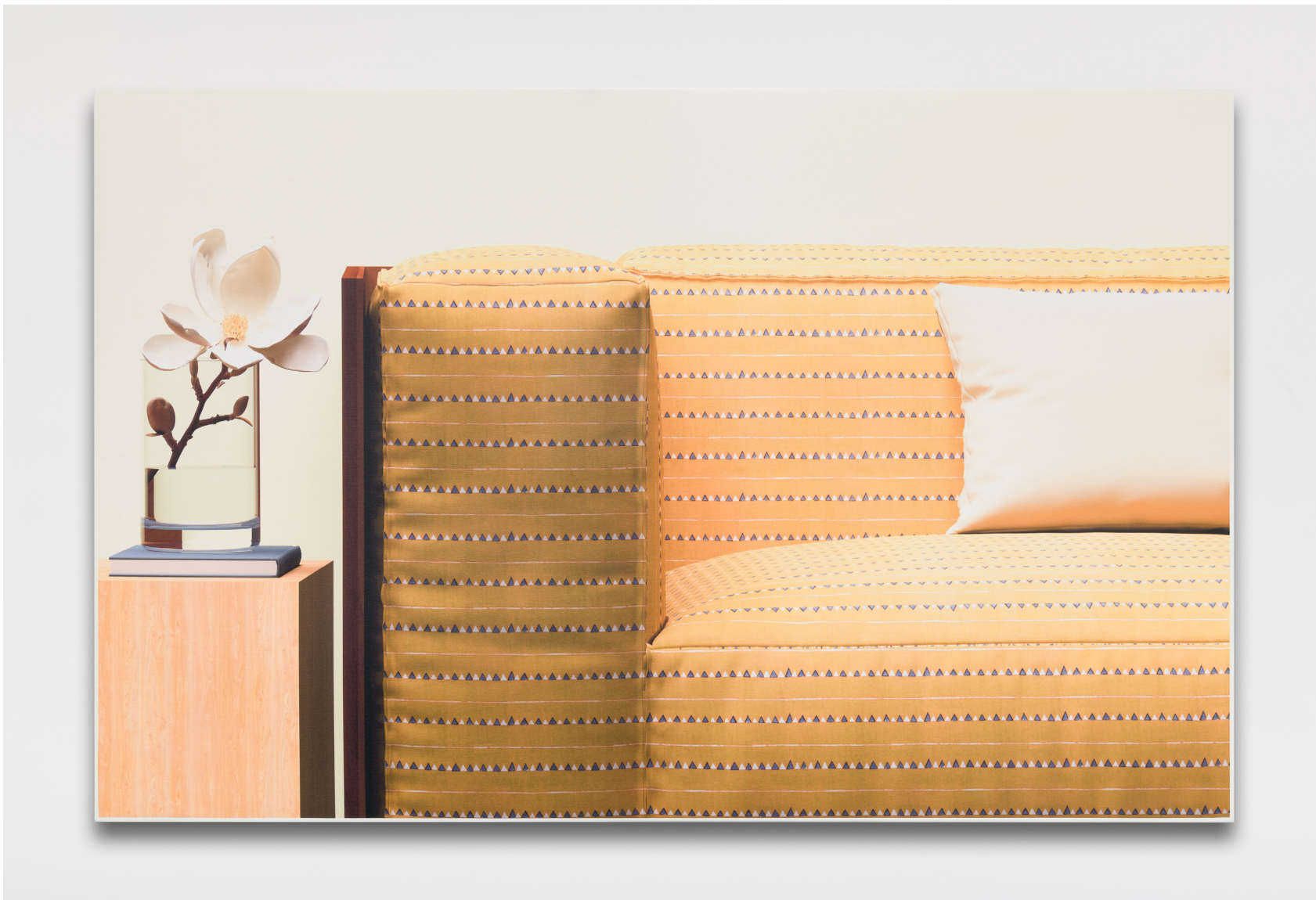
Magnolias are native to both Asia and the Americas and are widely regarded as among the most evolutionarily primitive lineages of flowering plants, with fossil evidence indicating their presence since prehistoric times. Notably, the plant's reproductive structure has remained largely unchanged across millions of years of evolutionary history.

The structure commonly referred to as the magnolia "cone" is technically a woody aggregate fruit rather than a true cone. As this fruit develops, it encloses the plant's seeds; upon maturation in autumn, the fruit splits open to reveal seeds with a distinctive red, gem-like appearance. The foliage itself, when crushed, releases a pronounced coniferous aroma. The mature seeds likewise yield a notable scent when the fleshy outer covering, or aril, is broken—commonly described as evocative of citrus and pine.

Within the perfumery industry, magnolia occupies a prominent position among white floral notes. Emerging research suggests a physiological basis for this widespread appeal. A study conducted by researchers at Ruhr-Universität Bochum in Germany identified the presence of a specific olfactory receptor, designated VN1R1, within the human nasal epithelium. The investigators demonstrated that a volatile compound emitted by magnolia flowers, binds directly to this receptor upon inhalation, resulting in activation of neural regions associated with motivation, hormonal regulation, and memory formation.



Two Girls, Memphis, TN, c. 1974 - 76 (printed 1978),
William Eggleston
The Kate and J Hall Petersen Fund



Fat Fists, 2026
40.5 x 62.5 in | 102.87 x 158.75 cm
Acrylic and colored pencil on canvas

It's a common misconception that if you touch a baby bird or mammal, that the mother will reject it, kill it, or even eat it. This is largely a myth as nature's proclivity to nurture overrides its flight mechanism. This is another piece of "grandma wisdom," meant to protect both children and animals, and in most cases, is illegal.

For mammals such as bunnies, the mother will leave their kits unattended for the first few weeks of life, only checking on them as dusk and dawn. This has to do with scent. Baby bunnies remain odorless during their juvenile development because the scent glands have no developed yet. The mother, whose mature scent glands are fully developed, stays away in order not to contaminate the area with her scent and potentially attract predators.

Based on a 2009 study by the National Institute of Health, scientists investigated the role of the mammary pheromone as an enforcer of early olfactory learning in newborn rabbits. Chemosensory communication between the mother and her kits play a critical role in eliciting adaptive neonatal responses. In particular, lactating females release a molecule, the mammary pheromone, which has several functional impacts. The pheromone-induced learning is efficient from birth and supports successive acquisition of distinct odorants. This reveals that a mammalian pheromone can function as a cognitive organizer that promotes early learning of relevant environmental cues.

Because of a proximity and shared biological dynamics (especially in immunology and cellular pathways) between humans and bunnies, researchers often prefer rabbit models over rat models for studying complex diseases and human biological processes. Scientists suspect that a similar pattern confers success in human offspring's approach to and exploration of maternal body surface, ensuing effective initial feeds, and quick learning of maternal identity.



Mother, 2026
46.5 x 70.5 in | 118.11 x 179.07 cm
Acrylic and colored pencil on canvas

Humans are remarkably sensitive to a particular pheromone released by female fruit flies, and even trace amounts can leave a drink smelling and tasting off. Female fruit flies (Drosophila melanogaster) release around 2.4 nanograms (1 nanogram is equal to 1/1,000,000,000 of a gram) of this mate-attracting chemical every hour. To study the effects of a single nanogram of fly pheromone, researchers recruited eight seasoned wine tasters from Germany's Baden region. The participants sampled wine from glasses that had briefly held a female fly, a male fly, or no fly at all. Consistently, the glasses exposed to female flies were judged to have a stronger, more noticeable odor than the rest.

The pheromone's presence is enough to throw off both the aroma and the taste of a drink. A fly that's fished out quickly will likely have tainted the drink. If you leave the fly to drown, it can still stink out the glass because females have a pheromone precursor chemical on the waxy surface of their bodies. The compound is not only detectable in tiny amounts, it's nearly impossible to wash off, even remaining on the glass after dishwashing.



Fly Shock, 2026
38.5 x 26.5 in | 97.79 x 67.31 cm
Acrylic and colored pencil on canvas

In response to flat and overtly curated internet dating, there are a number of alternative dating services based entirely on molecular intuition. Services like LoveGene, Smell Dating, or Pheremone Link are relying on smell (pheromones*) and chemistry to determine attraction and compatibility.

*Scientists have not proven that human pheromones exist.
While humans produce chemical compounds similar to animal pheromones, the vomeronasal organ used to delivers those chemical readings to the brain lacks the necessary nerve connections. As for scent related to compatibility, it's likely that a person's natural body odor contains important biological information, like immune system compatibility, which may influence our subconscious attraction.

"At Smell Dating we understand the metrics of compatibility are chemical; connection is a matter of intercourse not interface. The Internet has replaced fleshy experience with flat apparitions, avatars and painstakingly curated profile pics. Smell Dating closes digital distance by restoring your molecular intuition. Our members make connections via deeply intuitive cues, perfected in the ancient laboratory of human evolution. Surrender yourself to a poignant experience of body odor."

- Smell Dating Website FAQs.

How It Works:

1. We send you a t-shirt.

2. You wear the shirt for three days and three nights without deodorant.

3. You return the shirt to us in a prepaid envelope.

4. We send you swatches of t-shirts worn by a selection of other individuals.

5. You smell the samples and tell us who you like.

6. If someone whose you like the smell of you too, we'll facilitate an exchange of contact information.

7. The rest us up to you.



Daisy Glaze, 2026
62.5 x 40.5 in | 158.75 x 102.87 cm
Acrylic and colored pencil on canvas





Max, 2026
60.5 x 42.5 | 153.67 x 107.95 cm
Acrylic and colored pencil on canvas

“NASHVILLE — For decades, my grandmother was the caretaker of a gangly, disorganized houseplant with nothing, so far as I could see, to recommend it. The plant was ugly, an awkward tangle of greenery fashioned from what seemed to be spare botanical parts: long stems that reached out in a vaguely threatening way and generated new stems, randomly, from within their own stretching expanses. Some of the stems were round and some of them were flat and some were almost serrated, and there were no leaves at all. It was less a plant than something out of a nightmare. As a little girl, I thought it might bite me.

In warm months, the plant stayed on the front porch of that equally gangly, equally disorganized old farmhouse, a dogtrot structure that had been added onto willy-nilly over the years. When the evenings began to cool in early autumn, my grandmother would bring the plant indoors, set it on a table next to the fireplace, and wait hopefully for it to bloom. She called it her “night-blooming series.”

It was years before I understood that the scary plant in my grandparents’ house was actually a night-blooming cereus, a catchall term for several varieties of cactus that bloom at night — often for only one night each year. That’s if it blooms at all: My grandmother’s “series” apparently bloomed only once in all the decades she had it. There are just two pictures of it in full flower, and they were taken on the same night sometime during the 1960s.

I have no idea how my grandmother, a teacher in a two-room schoolhouse tucked among peanut fields in lower Alabama, came to be in possession of such an exotic plant, but I understand her attachment to it. All my life I have longed to see such a plant in flower, but so far my own night-blooming cereus has proved to be a nonblooming cereus. All it grows are ridiculous appendages: One stem is 92 inches long and still growing. This particular variety of cereus is a pass-along plant, easily shared via rooted cuttings. My cutting came from my brother and sister-in-law’s plant, a proven bloomer, but it has never formed a single bud under my care.

Last week, my brother texted a photo of the bud he’d discovered on his plant. “It might bloom tonight!” he wrote. “I looked in my garden journal, and it was fully open by 8 p.m. in 2014.” My brother’s garden journal is a force of nature in its own right, a combination of art and detailed field notes, and I had full faith in his best guess. So I got in the car and drove straight to his house in Clarksville, more than 50 miles from here, stopping only for gas. With a night-blooming cereus, the transformation from bud to blossom can take less than an hour.

Driving west into the sunset I was half-blinded, but I could see well enough through the dust-smeared windshield to note how dry the trees along the highway are right now. The Carolinas may be underwater, but parts of Middle Tennessee are experiencing drought conditions. The trees along the roadsides are covered with dust, and the fall wildflowers have yet to appear: According to the National Integrated Drought Information System, more than 26 percent of the United States is in a drought right now.

Believe me, I recognize the irony: There I was, driving through a parched landscape with a full tank of gas, on a pilgrimage to do nothing more than watch a flower bloom, while the hot winds from the 18-wheelers shook my whole car as they passed.

I am only one generation removed from the farm, and I spent much of my childhood in the very world where my mother grew up, the same one where my grandmother grew up, and my great-grandmother before her, going back farther than anyone could remember. For weeks of every year, I slept in the bed my mother slept in as a child; I walked barefoot down the same red-dirt roads she walked down barefoot as a child; I ate the dark plums that grew beside her childhood porch, at least until they fermented in the hot Alabama sun and made the red wasps drunk on their wine.

Today only 2 percent of Americans live on farms or ranches, but we have not lost our need to be among green things. Which may explain why friends and neighbors were already hurrying to my brother and sister-in-law’s house by the time I got to Clarksville, and why we all gathered together in their living room to wait for the miraculous event to unfold. The plant’s single bud, which spanned the full length of my hand, was clearly in no hurry to open, pink filaments still tightly ribbing it from stem to tip an hour after we arrived. “It’s like counting contractions, waiting for a baby to be born,” someone said.

Then, finally, the bud began to open, at first just one tiny aperture at the very end. The pink filaments began to loosen and lift. As the aperture widened, a star-shaped structure unfolded within it — a white star inside a white flower — and the translucent petals unlayered and arrayed themselves around the star. The flower was nine inches across fully opened, and its perfume filled the whole room with sweetness. It was not a nightmare plant at all. It was the flower of dreams. It would be gone by morning, not to return for another year. If then.

It was just one flower on just one ordinary day in September. Its arrival did nothing to mitigate the drought unfolding in the night outside, and nothing at all to make the floodwaters recede in North Carolina. You could insist that it didn’t matter in any way at all, and I would not think to argue with you.

But it was also not nothing. That night-blooming cereus brought my grandmother back to me in her halo of white hair. It brought back, too, her plum tree, long since cut down, and the feeling of red dirt between my toes. In a time of great cultural dislocation and environmental despair, for an hour it made me remember what it feels like when the world is exactly as it must be, and I am exactly where I belong.”

- Margaret Renkl, “Journey to a Night Flower,” from The New York Times Opinion, 24 September 2018.



Night Blooming, 2026
72.5 x 48.5 | 184.15 x 123.19 cm
Acrylic and colored pencil on canvas

Recipe: Lucinda's Southern Sweet Rice

Ingredients.

2 cups water
1 teaspoon salt
1½ cups long-grain white rice
½ cup heavy cream (heavy whipping cream)
2 tablespoons butter
½ cup sugar (adjust to taste)

Preparation.

1. Bring 2 cups of salted water to a boil on the stove.
2. Add 1½ cups of long-grain white rice and stir.
3. Cook until the rice absorbs the water.
4. Reduce the heat to very low.
5. Stir in ½ cup heavy cream.
6. Add 2 tablespoons of butter and let it melt.
7. Add ½ cup sugar (adjust sweetness to taste).
8. Stir well and cook until creamy.
9. Serve warm.

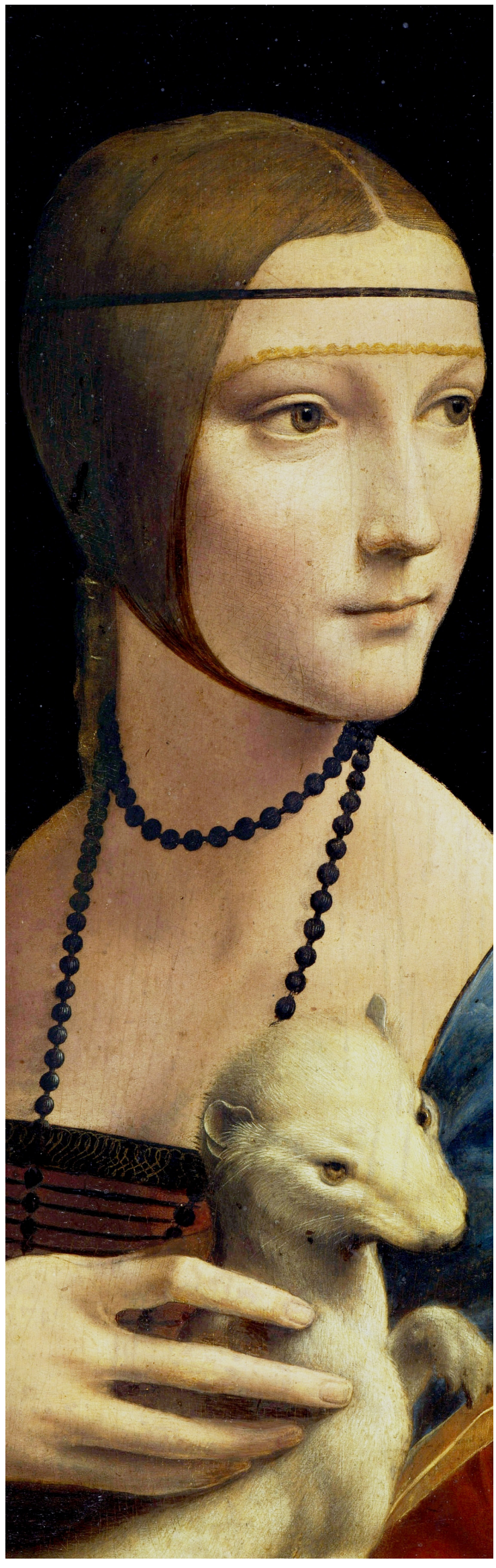


Lunch, 2026
14.5 x 24.5 in | 36.83 x 62.23 cm
Acrylic and colored pencil on canvas

In the 1948 painting *Lady With An Ermine* by Leonardo da Vinci, the subject, Cecilia Gallerani is wearing a beaded necklace wrapped twice around her neck. Those beads were likely made of jet, colloquially referred to as “black amber”, a prized material used for court fashion, spiritual protection, and medical treatment.

While wearing the amuletic stone as jewelry, jet released a very faint (almost odorless) petroleum or coal like aroma. Women wore jet beads across their chests to repel negative energy and deflect the malicious, jealous glances of romantic or political rivals.

When burned as incense, it produced a thick, black smoke and an intense odor of sulfur and burning coal. Alchemists and lapidaries considered the smoke to be therapeutic and spiritually powerful. Renaissance medical texts recommend inhaling the fumes to treat hysteria, alleviate headaches, and balance the humors of body.



Lady with an Ermine, 1489-91
Leonardo da Vinci

FINAL IMAGE / NECKLACE

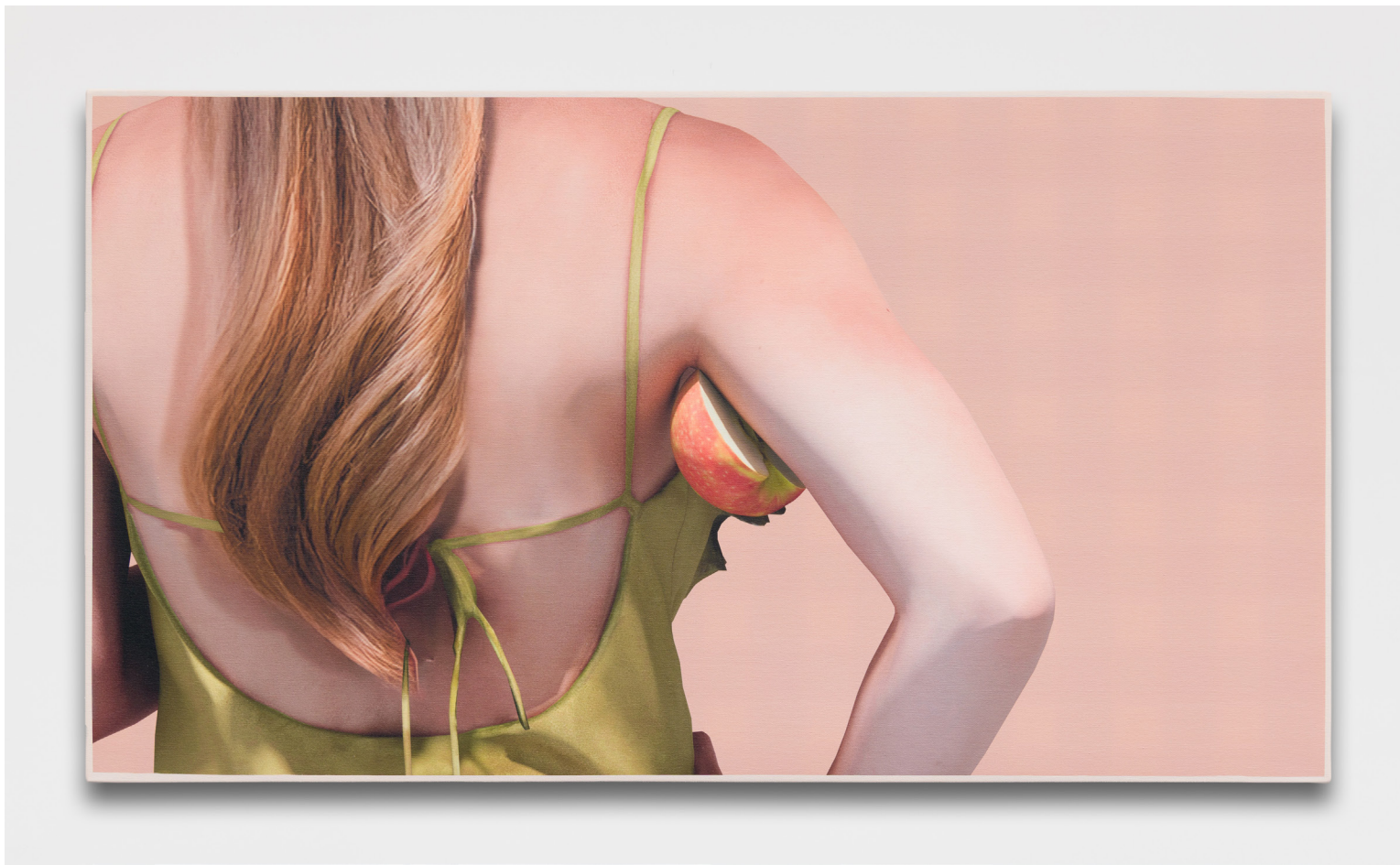


Amulet, 2026
18 x 13.5 in | 45.72 x 34.29cm
Acrylic and colored pencil on canvas

Various pop science books claim that Elizabethan women tucked peeled whole apples or slices of apples under their armpits to soak up sweat while dancing or socializing. These women then gave “love apples” as gifts to men they fancied, and the suitor would smell or eat the apple as a gesture of affection.

Despite being quoted by several authors, it has proven impossible to find the original source of this myth. No primary source has ever surfaced—this is likely one of those claims that gets repreated across enough citations that it starts looking like established fact.

Whether or not the practice ever occurred, its continued circulation suggests it serves a function beyond historical accuracy: it destabilizes a modern sensory order in which smell occupies a devalued position, and resists a broader cultural tendency to sanitize the body of its biological signals.



Love Apple, 2026
22.5 x 40.5 | 57.14 x 102.87 cm
Acrylic and colored pencil on canvas

“Insects generally do not utilize active ventilation. They just let the air move in and out of the spiracles passively. They do have muscles that can be used to close the spiracles when necessary to reduce airflow. When insects need additional oxygen in their system, the increase airflow by telescoping the abdomen. This is much like physically forcing air into and out of human lungs by chest compression during CPR. Because insects don’t need to force air into lungs like mammals, they don’t have noses. They do have a proboscis, however. Some human noses of rather large size have sometimes been humorously called probosces. Insects do have proboscises, but they aren’t used for breathing. An insect proboscis is just used for eating!”

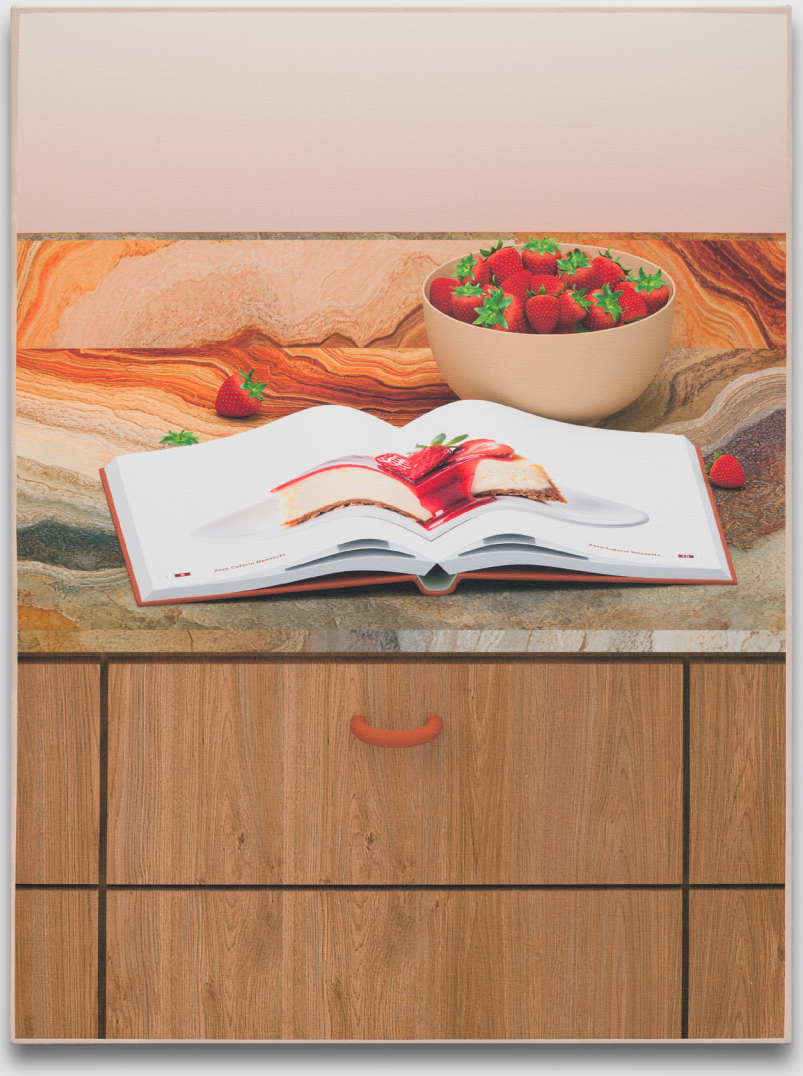
- Tom Turpin, “Insect Breathing Not Dependent on Noses,” from “On Six Legs,” column published by the College of Agriculture, Purdue University, 23 January 2003.



Company, 2026
60.5 x 37.5 in | 153.67 x 95.25 cm
Acrylic and colored pencil on canvas



Reviews of ***Zero Calorie Desserts***, a 1989, calorie-free scratch-n-sniff diet book.



Zero Calorie Desserts, 2026
40.5 x 30.5 in | 102.87 x 77.47 cm
Acrylic and colored pencil on canvas

In September 2007, a fiery mass flew across the morning sky and crashed into the ground, creating a 50-foot-wide crater in the Peruvian village of Carancas. Locals approached the crash site to find a smoking crater with bubbling water that emitted a foul smell. Upon contact with the site, the meteorite exploded and buried itself in the ground; the pieces, which were collected by curious villagers, continued to emit smoke. Curiosity turned to fear when unexplained symptoms began to afflict locals: headaches, vomiting, and skin lesions struck more than 150 villagers. Others reported that children were restless and cried through the night.

Scientists disagree about the source of the smells and the cause of the illnesses. Some believe the gases were created when the meteorite's hot surface reacted with an underground water supply tainted with arsenic. Natural arsenic deposits in ground water are not uncommon in southern Peru. Others believe that the meteorite, composed of Chrondite (the only meteorite of this type to ever hit Earth), may have been linked to extraterrestrial activity.



Meteorite, 2026
34.5 x 26.5 in | 87.63 x 67.31 cm
Acrylic and colored pencil on canvas