

How One L.A. Bus Stop Became a Depot for Experimental Perfumes

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John Metcalfe @ citycalfe Feed John Metcalfe is CityLab's Bay Area bureau chief, based in Oakland. His coverage focuses on climate change and the science of cities.

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1. [John Metcalfe](#)

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The LADOT's inaugural artist-in-residence has gifted a bus shelter with some truly weird, history-inspired scents.

How does one describe the [smells](#) at the heart of Los Angeles?

For [Alan Nakagawa](#), it's sweat-drenched cowboys riding into town for some late-night carousing. It's the energy flowing around the influx of new shops and residents, and the pleasant but ultimately unexciting monotone of California's climate.

All of these were inspirations for scents Nakagawa whipped up in a smell lab and has been displaying since June at a [Mar Vista bus stop](#). Commuters waiting for their ride are presented with a chrome cylinder, the inside glowing blue, labeled "Try Street Perfume." If they're bold enough to stick their mitts into the mystery orifice, they're rewarded with a spritz of hyperlocal fragrance—this week's is "Economic Development"; "Hollywood Springtime" is next week's offering.

Nakagawa is the city's very first "[Creative Catalyst Artist-in-Residence](#)," an initiative of L.A.'s Department of Cultural Affairs that connected him with the L.A. Department of Transportation's Vision Zero team to reimagine how people perceive streets.* During his year-long tenure, he's made [art-filled zines and road-sign haikus](#), but he was also obsessed with experimenting with something to titillate the nose. So one day he scoped out a stretch of road where the department was planning to install protected bike lanes. "I remember walking those streets in the 1990s," says Nakagawa. "Back then there were a lot of closed shops. It was a little bit on the desolate side."

Nowadays the area is bustling, with tons of cafes, art galleries, and boutiques. Nakagawa stalked the sidewalks for inspiration, hovering in the varied scents wafting out of businesses and the ground. "There are smells of coffee, food, there's a lot of landscaping so there's also soil," he says. "There are aromatherapy shops so you occasionally get whiffs of perfume. Then there are the sewers, the gas mains, carbon dioxide, asphalt, and all that stuff."



(Alan Nakagawa)

Armed with a memory bank of odors, Nakagawa headed to the lab at L.A.'s Institute for Art and Olfaction—yes, [such a place exists](#)—and proceeded to brew up strange perfumes. “When you build a perfume, it’s like a piece of music,” he says. “There’s the first smell, which is the melody; then a mid-tone, which is the place that drives the melody; then a base smell that helps you remember the scent.”

Here are descriptions of his three perfumes:

- **“Into Town”**: The first scent came about when Nakagawa discovered the existence of something called “cowboy perfume.” “It’s a plant, indigenous to the area, called California sagebrush. Back in the day when the *caballeros* were working really hard, and then they had a break, they would rub this plant all over their bodies because, you know, they wouldn’t bathe or anything,” he says. “Then they would ride into town and do whatever partying they were going to do. I like the idea of this early form of perfume that the cowboys used in California that happened to smell good enough it would at least neutralize their stench.”
- **“Economic Development”**: “There are a lot of things going on in Los Angeles, a lot of changes. Some call it gentrification, some call it economic development,” Nakagawa says. “I wanted that to be more of a fun smell. So it’s kind of a lavenderish smell at first, kind of musky, and then it quickly changes into a coffee smell with cocoa and vanilla. Everyone who smells it always starts giggling, which is what I wanted to evoke. I wanted to make it playful, even though the discussion happening currently is very toxic.”
- **“Hollywood Springtime”**: “This one is very autobiographical because I’ve always had this thing about the four seasons, having been born and raised in Los Angeles,” says Nakagawa. “I’m only aware of the seasons through the movies or television. I didn’t really see snow until I was an adult, for instance, and I only experienced autumn and orange leaves in post-grad.... I guess maybe I felt cheated when I was a kid. ‘Hollywood Springtime’ is going back to that thing about music. It’s a smell that has no base note, so it’s easy

to forget what it smells like. When you smell it it's like, *Oh, this is very nice, it's very springtime and flowery, it has a sweetness and a wetness to it.* But after an hour you probably won't remember what it smelled like because it doesn't have substance."

Nakagawa acquired a perfume machine and installed it into the side of a bus shelter at Centinela Avenue and Venice Boulevard, where he's offering his scents on a rolling basis into August. The so-called "street perfumes" have proved to be pretty popular, with a counter logging roughly 500 arm-pokes into the smell hole each month.

"As LADOT's first-ever Creative Catalyst Artist-in-Residence, Alan brought a new way of problem-solving to our team," says Nat Gale, the transportation department's Director of Vision Zero. "His 'street perfumes' project is just one of the myriad examples where he harnessed the power of art to transform space, influence design, and expose the transportation profession as something that can be fun and inviting."

Visitors to the bus stop should note, however, that dabbing oneself with these perfumes might create olfactory confusion among their peers. "They weren't really designed for anybody to wear," Nakagawa says. "They were designed to evoke conversation at a bus stop."



(Alan Nakagawa)

* **Correction:** The "Creative Catalyst" program is an initiative of the L.A. Department of Cultural Affairs, not LADOT as originally reported.