

Debra Howard

Artist Statement

Fragrance

Our sense of smell is a powerful communicator. How often has a scent or fragrance evoked a memory, a vision, a place in time? What does fragrance look like? I explore this in an accessible, interactive way. Each of my large and luminous acrylic paintings are accompanied by a small vial of essential oil that were my inspiration.

As a graduate of Ringling School of Art, I was groomed to enter the field of illustration. I loved my career, and as the computer took over the field of graphic design, illustration and advertising, I followed. Eventually, I began to miss the feel of a brush on canvas, the experience of moving paint around on a surface and being able to touch my art. In response, I shut down my design studio and began painting. This led me to the Artist in Residence position for Tangier Island, as a plein air, landscape painter. Tangier is an isolated, swiftly, disappearing island in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay. After three years of residing 14 miles from the mainland, I moved off the island and accepted a position to teach art at a private school. I taught children, grades K-12. It was enriching and satisfying but exhausting. And that is how I began painting fragrances.

I would come back to my studio after teaching, only to find I was just too drained to paint my landscapes. I began using essential oils to help reinvigorate my creative side. I didn't realize it at the time, but I possess the rare gift of synesthesia, so when I closed my eyes and inhaled the fragrance I would see these beautiful colorful images. Synesthesia is a condition that happens when a sense, such as sight, triggers another sense, like smell, at the same time. I tried to paint what I saw in my mind's eye. At first the work was too choppy, then it became too slick and smooth. It wasn't what I experienced and it frustrated me. One day, I was in my attic sorting through boxes of papers, books and sketchbooks. I noticed that I had been making these same tiny, circular shapes since I was a child. I had drawn them on everything, over decades. These shapes must mean something to me. Maybe these shapes could help me paint the invisible. Maybe they could help me paint fragrances, experiences, or memories. After experimenting I found that if I used layer upon layer of translucent and transparent colors and these particular shapes I could paint the images that the fragrance inspired.

I paint on cradled hardboard that I've primed and sanded with two layers of gesso. Most are gallery wrapped, with the fragrance painted on the sides, but some are framed in slim floating frames. I use mostly Golden acrylics with a matte medium painted with a #2 round synthetic brush.

The only downside to this process is that the transparency doesn't allow for mistakes or for going back over the work to adjust or correct. To overcome this I had to be completely intuitive and to trust my instincts. I couldn't overthink the work or it would become heavy, which is the opposite of a fragrance. My work is luminous and rhythmical. I'm attracted to patterns and movement and they surface in my paintings in many unexpected ways. Because of the transparent use of paint on a brilliant white background, when lit they come alive and have a soft and inviting glow.

They personify fragrance. Inhale the fragrance and see the invisible.