



Peter De Cupere (Leuven 1970)

Einsteinium smell, 1998-2008

Mixed media on paper

640 x 480 mm

Signed and dated lower center

Peter De Cupere is perhaps the only artist consistently working with smells, objects and installations of smells, and smells as the motif in videos and performances. With his exposé on the smell that the chemical element Einsteinium, a highly radioactive metal, might exude, he tries to penetrate the world of science. No-one knows what Einsteinium smells like, and here De Cupere sees his chance for 'unscientific' creative thought. The fact that no scientist ever posed the question, is seen by the artist as an excellent starting point (for that matter, Einsteinium's sole use thus far has been to produce 17 atoms of Mendeleevium, itself also of no known use). De Cupere combines the photorealistic style of portraits hawked to vain passers-by at tourist spots, with an extensively formulaic and probably unanswerable question that only a smell artist would be interested in. He alludes to the status acquired by Einstein of having a genius that surpasses science alone, by applying a famous aphorism of his across the bridge of his nose – 'Imagination is more important than knowledge' – something equally applicable to art. De Cupere's work was once summarized as follows: 'By exploiting the subjective, associative impact of smells, in combination with visual images, (he) generates a kind of meta-sensory experience that goes beyond purely seeing or smelling.' Perhaps the antecedents of his work must be rather sought in literature, for many writers have examined the 'difficult' senses like smell and taste.

Perhaps De Cupere is searching for an update of Rimbaud's method – 'It is about reaching the unknown through the disruption of all the senses.' – or does he wish to go in the direction of Jean De Esseintes with his perfume-organ in Huysmans' novel *A rebours* (1884), an aesthetic manifesto of decadence. De Cupere's study of the grammar and syntax of smell illustrates how contemporary art connects with earlier applied art or even craft, whose practitioners remain in the shadow of their

creations, as with Edmond Roudnitska, one of the greatest master perfume-makers of the 20th century, who stated that a beautiful perfume 'produces a shock, a shock to the senses followed by a psychological shock.'

Literature:

Ronny Van de Velde, *The Mind of the Artist*, Knokke, 2013, cat.nr.113

Artist description:

Peter De Cupere defines himself as an olfactory artist, giving special attention to that often overlooked sense that makes us nostalgic, nauseated and hungry (sometimes all at once). Today we spend more time covering up smells than we do experiencing them, but De Cupere paints with scents, produces olfactory objects, soap paintings and sculptures, creates video and live performances, makes three-dimensional drawings and builds poetic smell installations. By exploiting the subjective, associative impact of smells, in combination with visual images, he generates a kind of meta-sensory experience that goes beyond purely seeing or smelling. De Cupere is exploring and exposing fragrances in revolutionary new ways. While often smell is dismissed as a fleeting pleasure or annoyance, the artist's works reminds us of the poetic powers resting in our nostrils. Scent, more than any other sense, directly affects our limbic systems and prompts a visceral, almost uncontrollable reaction. While sight can be processed from a distance, scent triggers your memory, turns you on, makes you nauseous, even poisons your body... all outside of your consciousness. In this mini olfactory lab Peter De Cupere combines some of his experiments for visitors to experience.