

## **Land loss is happening right under our noses: Here's how an artist preserves scents from disappearing coastal communities.**

By Ava Borskey, August 2021

Link: [https://climate360news.lmu.edu/land-loss-is-happening-right-under-our-noses-heres-how-an-artist-preserves-scents-from-disappearing-coastal-communities/?fbclid=IwAR0HcH3hQCKMKq14ahL\\_nBlqOo\\_i0D0W-TCLj19XIk8iHGnX9Z4vnug-pFQ](https://climate360news.lmu.edu/land-loss-is-happening-right-under-our-noses-heres-how-an-artist-preserves-scents-from-disappearing-coastal-communities/?fbclid=IwAR0HcH3hQCKMKq14ahL_nBlqOo_i0D0W-TCLj19XIk8iHGnX9Z4vnug-pFQ)

BATON ROUGE, LA — Most of Manon Bellet's artistic work deals with time, ephemerality and disappearance.

"Our confrontation of human beings seeing something that we can never catch, metaphorically our lives, but obviously the world around us and the world we live in," Bellet said. "My work always picked up the fragility of the human being and the place we're in."

But it wasn't until the French visual artist moved to New Orleans in 2016 that her work began addressing environmental issues, like climate change. "Living in Louisiana... basically faced me directly on the visibility of what it is, and I think that was probably necessary for me to produce some things about that," Bellet said.

Bellet, shocked by the challenges facing her new home, had an abstract idea: extracting scents from places affected by climate change.

"Olfaction came to my head with the invisibility of it, how you can face something emotionally, physically without any image," she said.

Olfactory arts, or art concerned with smell, uses scent as a medium. It includes everything from perfumery to incorporating scents onto sculptures, canvases and other museum installations. The olfactory arts gained new popularity in the 1980s, but artists have addressed the powerful way in which scent triggers emotion and memories for some time.

One of the most popular examples comes from French writer Marcel Proust's early 20th century work, "In Search of Lost Time" or "Remembrance of Things Past," when the narrator experiences involuntary nostalgia after tasting and smelling a madeleine dipped in tea.

Smells are processed in the limbic system of the brain near areas important for emotion and memory, explained Hsuan Hsu, an English professor at the University of California, Davis, who has researched and written about olfaction's complex effects on people's minds, bodies and moods.

"Scent affects the body on a different level than other modes of knowing the world," Hsu said.

"We can't smell something without becoming it a little, taking it into our bodies and being transformed in ways we don't fully understand."

Hsu said smell has strong associations with a sense of place and emotionally significant, place-based memories.

"Many places have distinctive smells associated with them — often natural, but just as often smells resulting from human activity," Hsu said. "Environmental change has a way of introducing often unwanted, unpleasant changes to long-established smellscapes that erode people's sense of place and well-being."

For her olfactory project, entitled "Golden Waste," Bellet focused on this idea of scent as it relates to memories, place and change.

She traveled to Delacroix, a small town in Southeast Louisiana, destined to disappear from coastal erosion, sea level rise and other climate-related issues, like repeated hurricane damage.

Bellet explored the Delacroix community's connection to the land, going out on the water with fishermen and visiting families' homes. She asked the people she met to share any memories they held that were associated with scent.

Some mentioned the traumatization of smell, recalling the terrible "Katrina smell" that remained after the hurricane in 2005.

Bellet interviewed a mother and daughter who spoke about the long-lasting smell of smoke after their house burned down in the '80s.

She spoke to an older couple who lived on the same piece of land in Delacroix their entire lives. They used to keep a garden, but no longer do because of increased salinity in the soil. The couple told Bellet that the bees on their property produce less honey and what little honey the bees do make tastes different than before.

Fishermen explained that the smell of the water can be extremely important.

For instance, when speckled trout go on feeding sprees, the fish often regurgitate or burp, releasing oils that float to the surface and create a slick, one of the surest signs that fish are present.

Even if a fisherman has trouble seeing the shiny spot on the water, he'll be able to smell it — slicks have a tell-tale scent of sweet watermelon.

The smell of the water also left an imprint on Justine Bird, a Boulder, Colorado, native who assisted Bellet during her interviews and project. Bird said that even now, years after working on the project, she remembers the smell of the water that she and Bellet collected near a research center.

"It had a little of that kind of chemical tinge to it, but also swampy, and it just felt so quintessentially Louisiana," Bellet said. "There's so much in the scent of the water, like the rotting plants, the fishiness and the chemicals, like, that's the whole story. That's everything, isn't it?"

To preserve the stories of the disappearing land, Bellet extracted a scent from each place she visited in Delacroix.

She took some half-burned photo album pages that the family managed to salvage from their house fire. She took some honey from the other family's bees. She collected water, soil and plants from her boat trips with the fishermen.

One by one she put the substances into a glass dome, using what's known as headspace technology to create a vacuum system and capture the smell with a chemical absorbent.

From there, Bellet dissolved the chemical into a solvent. She mailed each individual odor trap to a perfumer in Switzerland, who synthesized the natural scents to create long-lasting concentrates.

"These fragrances may be the last olfactory documents created in these disappearing environments, thus giving an almost eternal life to these ephemeral scents," Bellet wrote in a description of the project on her website.

Bellet gifted everyone she interviewed a scent, giving them the chance to keep memories of a place and time amid a rapidly changing landscape.

In hope to build more awareness of environmentally impacted areas like Delacroix, Bellet has presented several of the scents in art galleries across New Orleans.

Bellet wants each person who experiences her olfactive work to have the chance to develop an intimate relationship with the scent and the place it comes from. She presents the scent by spraying it onto paper in an enclosed Plexiglas box.

"When people open the door, they can smell it, and they have this direct confrontation with the smell, one by one," Bellet said.

Next to the box, Bellet includes a museum label with excerpts from her interviews with community members.

“That tells the story around the scent,” Bellet said. “Why it is a scent, where it is from and what it is.”

Bird said she feels Bellet’s approach is so strong because it combines the emotion of the sensory experience with the intellectual experience of a memory.

“I found that approach to be such, like, a tender, yet confrontational and direct way to deal with the idea of loss of land,” Bird said.

As Delacroix continues to slip into the water, the community is left to adapt or leave. Many of the homes Bellet and Bird visited were raised high above the ground on stilts. Some were the last homes left on the street.

The place may be fleeting, but the memories are now preserved in little bottles holding scents.