

Why You Should Stick Your Hand in This Mystery Box at the Bus Stop

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The Perfume Bus Stop
Photos courtesy of Alan Nakagawa

Normally not the best move, but in this case totes fine

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What does gentrification smell like? Lavender, coffee, cocoa, and vanilla, says former LADOT artist-in-residence [Alan Nakagawa](#). He created “Economic Development” — a scent inspired by our city’s rapidly changing neighborhoods — as part of his ongoing “perfume bus stop” project, which has been spritzing curious passers-by with Nakagawa’s custom “street perfumes” since June.

Located at the corner of Venice and Centinela, the bright yellow installation houses a chrome cylinder with a light sensor inside. When visitors stick in their hands, it releases a small amount of one of Nakagawa’s experimental blends. The perfumes are switched every month, and have alluringly abstract names like “Into Town,” “Economic Development,” and “Hollywood Springtime.”

Nakagawa developed the piece as part of his work with the city’s [Vision Zero](#) initiative, which aims to eliminate L.A.

traffic deaths by 2025. When he was awarded the [DCA Creative Catalyst residency](#) in June of 2016, his main goal was to inspire a shift in perspective — if he could help Angelenos envision their streets differently, he thought, it might make them more willing to accept the sometimes controversial changes that Vision Zero proposes, like road diets and protected bike lanes. Walking around downtown one day, he caught a whiff of inspiration.

“I went outside and I actually walked down Spring and Main,” says Nakagawa. “As I was walking through all these smells — like coffee and perfumes, colognes, and of course the awful smells of urine and carbon monoxide — I thought, wow, if you could change the smell, that would change the perception of the street.”

Nakagawa spent several months hand-crafting his perfumes at a tiny Chinatown non-profit called [The Institute for Art and Olfaction](#). There, he discovered that he could use his past experience as a sound artist to inform the way he blended smells.

“My background is sound, music, and sound installations,” he says.

“What I took from the classes is that perfume is like music — there’s a melody, a counter melody and a base note.”

But according to Nakagawa, the real key to making a powerful scent is connecting it with a memory.

“That’s what perfumes are,” he says. “It’s really not about exacting the smell of something, but really opening up or unlocking a memory of that something.”

This month’s perfume, “Hollywood in Springtime,” is the final, and most nostalgic blend in the series. Lacking a base note, it was crafted to be intentionally forgettable — much like the indistinct seasons of his Los Angeles childhood.



Photo courtesy of Alan Nakagawa

“Hollywood in Springtime’ is semi-autobiographical,” he says. “I grew up in Hollywood, and Hollywood was always romanticizing the four seasons. And yet I never experienced the four seasons. I always felt like I was missing something.”

Nakagawa’s LADOT residency wrapped up in June, but you can still grab a dab of “Hollywood in Springtime” through the end of September. If you want to see more of Nakagawa’s work, he’ll be leading a bike tour of his Street Haiku project next month — riders will meet in Mariachi Plaza on September 10th at 8 a.m.