

Future Schlock! Movies Made on an Xbox (Clive Thompson) and a Cellphone Ad That's a Download Hit (A.O. Scott)

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The Struggle To Create The Good Life

Will we ever arrive at a dignified, meaningful end to life? **By Robin Marantz Henig**

8.7.05 Style

Smoke and Mirrors

The packaging of perfume may
smell suspiciously transparent,
but there is a message in every bottle.

They are ingenious works of art (Donna Karan's delicate apple of glass and metal). They are pieces of humanity (the curve of JLo's behind in your hand). They are semaphores (Issey Miyake's inverted cone), runes (Castelbajac) and fertility idols (Jean Paul Gaultier's Le Male). They are Second Empire (Guerlain), Disneyland (Lolita Lempicka), 1950's Paris (Miss Dior), alien organism (Comme des Garçons 2), mystical riddle (Kenzo Air) and spaceship engine (Sander for Men).

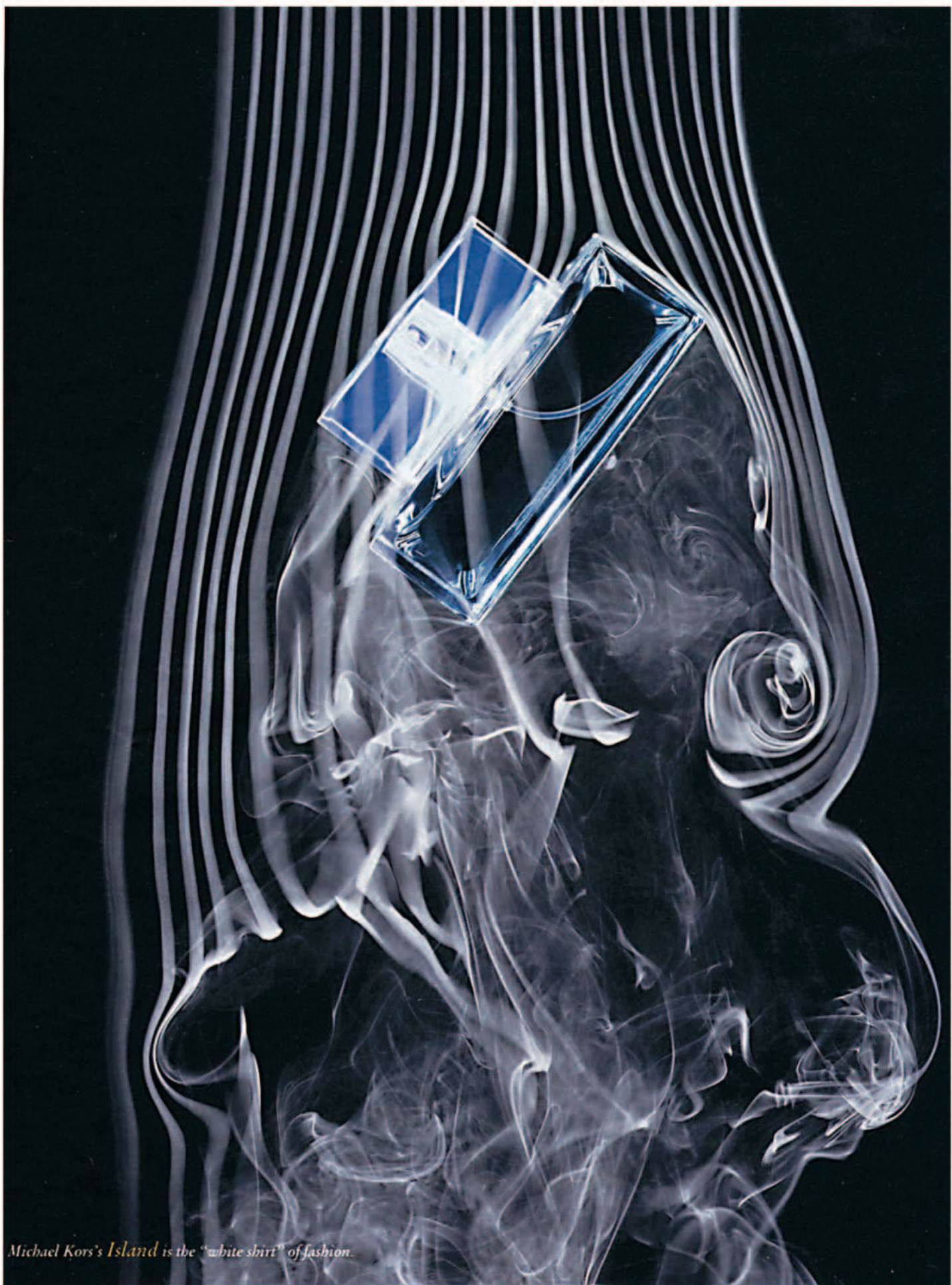
They are perfume bottles, of course.

The industry hires artists and artisans to create them: Serge Mansau sculptured the delicate block that held Diorella. And René Lalique designed perhaps the most beautiful fragrance bottle ever created, the frosted globe filled by Jacques Worth with Je Reviens. Publicly, Dior hardly ever talks about Diorella as Mansau's creation but as the receptacle for Edmond Roudnitska's juice. But privately those in the industry benchmark their scents by the beauty of these small creations. They refer obsessively to "the Chanel square." (Chanel says the bottle comes from the shape of a "gentleman's flask"; industry mavens maintain that it is actually a modified

By **Chandler Burr**
Photographs by **Mitchell Feinberg**



Thierry Mugler's Angel Garden of Stars is the offspring of the "unmakable" Angel.



Michael Kors's *Island* is the "white shirt" of fashion.



*Fabien Baron broke the mold with Viktor & Rolf's **Flowerbomb**.*

Viktor & Rolf wanted 'an explosion of a thousand different flowers,' so Fabien Baron designed a glass hand grenade.

stock bottle from a lab — purity, simplicity and luxury mixed with function.)

Bottles can be hugely expensive to develop. Rumor has it that just the pump for Gaultier's *Fragile* cost \$200,000 to devise because the company wanted one you could press from the bottom. The negotiations begin immediately. The house lays out its vision. The designer replies that it is not technically possible to do this, but it can do that, and it will cost X. The house recoils, then sets its limit. The designer replies that he cannot do it for that price, and they wind up compromising on a cap in metal and no round edges. Rounded glass edges are truly expensive. Ninety degree glass edges are even more difficult and expensive to produce. According to Thierry de Baschmakoff, a glass bottle exits the mold at 600 degrees and is still red at 100. When he designed the bottle for Mauboussin's *Histoire d'Eau*, the manufacturer had to come up with a way to suspend the bottle in the air to preserve the rounded bottom until it cooled.

It takes 12 people to hand-make each bottle for *A Modern Perfume* by Michael Kors, which the designer describes as "the black evening dress: something you always need and love." For his second women's fragrance, *Island*, Kors was looking for something "sleek, sexy and a combination of textures. It's more the 'white shirt' of fashion, winter or summer, casual or black tie." And so Chad Lavigne, a bottle designer, had to give that concept form. He demanded perfect corners on the rectangular prism, which took incredible precision and many attempts by the glassmakers. The bottle, which weighs in at nearly 10½ ounces, features a wave pattern embedded in the heavy glass. It is like a life raft floating on a turquoise sea, as if a piece of a tropical scene had been cut out and set upon a shelf.

Fabien Baron has designed the bottles for *CK One*, *Contradiction*, *Truth*, *L'Eau d'Issey* and *Pure* for Jil Sander, but his hand grenade for Viktor & Rolf's *Flowerbomb* is his most daring. "The most important element," the designers say, "the one that we started with, was the name.

We wanted an explosion of a thousand different flowers, a flower bomb." So Baron designed a glass hand grenade, complete with pull pin. Viktor & Rolf saw a diamond grenade — "a combination of power and romance, preciousness and rareness" — and critics saw things that kill children in certain parts of the world. If the bottle combines luxury goods and explosives, well, to the designers their fashion is often recognized as playing with opposites, combining masculine and feminine, like their inserting men's trousers in classic ball gowns. "We believe that our bottle is unique on the market today," the duo say, which is probably true, if only because few designers would be willing to tell people a story of terrorism when buying a fragrance.

When Thierry Mugler created the original star-shaped bottle for *Angel*, he was channeling both his love of everything Gothic — "It's why he loves New York," says Vera Strübi, president of Thierry Mugler Parfums, "it's a Gothic city" — and his interest in architectural forms, lines and facets. "You'll never see any rounds at Mugler," Strübi says. "The feminine is not our aesthetic approach."

As a child, Mugler was utterly absorbed by stars because they made him dream of things to aspire to attain, and yet they were unreachable. Mugler's new *Angel Garden of Stars* bottles are derived directly from the star Mugler sketched out in 1990 for *Angel*. For these *Violet*, *Lily* and *Peony* iterations of *Angel* — one single floral note floating on elements of the *Angel* formula — Mugler made this bottle look more like a flower than a star, the cap reaching up to heaven, to the stars to which it aspires. It's worth remembering that Mugler's sketch was considered unmakeable. Strübi took it from him and thought, Oh, no. The manufacturers, the French company *Brosse*, sent the sketch back, saying, "This is impossible to make." Strübi replied, "If it works, it will be a miracle." They worked on it for two years and figured it out.

They made the bottle. *Angel* arrived. And Strübi was right. ■



Chanel No. 5 is the standard against which bottles are meas