NEWS RELEASE

First major US exhibition of work by interdisciplinary Norwegian-born artist Sissel Tolaas opens at ICA on September 16

Using the building’s architecture to create an olfactory landscape of experiences, Tolaas debuts her most ambitious and evocative work to date

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The first major US exhibition dedicated to smell researcher and artist Sissel Tolaas opens at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) at the University of Pennsylvania this fall. Over the course of the past 25 years, Tolaas has developed an artistic and scientific practice using smell as her primary medium, composing provocative smells to activate memory, recreate place and time, capture seasonality and arouse emotional and intellectual responses. The exhibition *Sissel Tolaas: RE________* exemplifies the breadth of this complex yet highly researched, direct and intuitive practice. Opening on September 16, *RE________* is on view through December 30, 2022.

The exhibition is comprised of 20 works that use smell to consider a broad range of pressing issues, including climate change, evolution, geopolitics and anthropology. Tolaas rethinks, reconstructs, revisits, and reacts to these issues in her practice through her intangible, but highly sensory medium. Between each “situation,” or project throughout the exhibition, Tolaas encourages visitors to reflect on their body and the air they breathe, focus on new impressions and revisit old ones. Recognizing that smell as a sense has the greatest capacity to instantly evoke memory and emotion, Tolaas’s work powerfully explores the concept of experience, of the unknown and even the (un)pleasantly familiar.

“We are thrilled to present bold, new, and recent work conceived by interdisciplinary artist Sissel Tolaas. Sissel has created a space inside the ICA that interrogates the human condition while challenging our audiences to think critically about pressing social and environmental concerns, bringing joy and playfulness to serious issues” said Zoë Ryan, ICA’s Daniel W. Dietrich, II Director. “In a time of immense challenges...
and change, Tolaas invites us to experience her work up close, to exercise the power of our senses, prioritizing smell and forgoing binaries such as good and bad.”

For Tolaas, smell is a vital yet often overlooked tool for communication. Before you see or experience something, many of us smell it. In the course of a single day, a person on average breathes in and out around 24,000 times. With every breath, irresistible signals are sent straight to the brain’s hippocampus – smells, that in a matter of nanoseconds trigger emotions and memories, stirring up the subconscious in turn. Tolaas, who operates from her research lab and studio in Berlin, has been collecting and mapping smells from around the world for over 25 years. Since the early 90s, she has had a profound interest in chemical processes, sensory ecology and the phenomenon of change. Early in her career, these primarily manifested as formal experiments and mathematical calculations that explored how different chemicals and substances, organic as well as inorganic, affect one another and are interdependent. Since then, Tolaas has built multiple archives of “smell recordings,” consisting of around ten-thousand smell molecules and smell constructs. She has also established a unique smell lexicon, aptly named NASALO, which contains 4,200 paralinguistic sounds and is in constant development.

The exhibition invites visitors to use all of their senses, to engage with the works on view on a physical and visceral level, and experience the show for themselves with their whole body and mind. As Tolaas notes, “Without an emotional reaction there is no action.”

For Tolaas, the exhibition has neither instructions nor explanations. Codes relating to a larger score accompany each of the works in place of text descriptions and draw attention to the themes of the exhibition—identity, memory, power, communication and the environment. The choice of how to experience the exhibition rests entirely with the visitor, who can either accept the artist’s invitation to roam freely and connect the codes, or opt to dig deeper in the Reveal room of the exhibition, where an array of tear sheets provides a meticulously coded narrative with more information and keys to the works. The exhibition becomes a playground for everyone and organically generates joy and engagement.

Concurrent with the exhibition, ICA presents three programs that draw upon the themes of RE________, including a conversation with Tolaas and the curators on September 16.

This exhibition is organized by Astrup Fearnley Museet in Oslo and curated by Solveig Øvstebø, Executive Director and Chief Curator. The presentation here has been specially configured for the ICA, and is organized with Zoë Ryan, Daniel W. Dietrich, II Director.

Support for Sissel Tolaas: RE________ has been provided by The Inchworm Fund, the Office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA), the Royal Norwegian Consulate General in New York, International Flavors & Fragrances Inc., and Kvadrat Inc. The exhibition presentation at Astrup Fearnley Museet is generously supported by the Foundation Thomas Fearnley, Hedy and Nils Astrup, The Foundation Hans Rasmus Astrup, EGØ Holding, and The Thief. Additional support has been provided by Nancy & Leonard Amoroso, Cecile & Christopher D’Amelio, Carol & John Finley, Norma & Lawrence Reichlin, Meredith & Bryan Verona, and Caroline & Daniel Werther.
ABOUT SISSEL TOLAAS
Sissel Tolaas (born in 1965 in Norway; based in Berlin) is an artist and smell researcher whose nearly 30-year practice and study of the impact of smells draws upon her background in chemistry, mathematics, linguistics and art. Working at the forefront of her field, her projects have been shown at the Venice Biennale, the Gwangju Biennale, MoMA New York, the National Gallery of Victoria in Australia, the Dia Art Foundation New York, and the Tate Modern London, among others. In 2004, she established the Smell RE-SearchLab Berlin with support from IFF Inc. She has worked with universities, research institutes and companies all over the world.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART | UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA, PHILADELPHIA
The Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) at the University of Pennsylvania is a non-collecting institution presenting interdisciplinary exhibitions and programs at the forefront of contemporary practice. Through its exhibitions, commissions, special projects, publications and programs, the ICA serves as a laboratory for new artistic and curatorial practices, supporting the production of urgent work and providing a critical platform for an exchange of ideas on art and society. Since its founding in 1963, the ICA has shared the University’s commitment to experimental research and belief in supporting the next generation of imaginative and creative thinkers. ICA is dedicated to advancing new directions in artistic practices, creating meaningful connections for the public with art and artists, and advocating for artists, research, and dialogues that contextualize and resonate with the socio-political conditions of our time.

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