

All That Grows Around Us

An exploration of the innate attraction towards the natural environment, and how to utilize this within surface pattern design to promote a positive emotional wellbeing.

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Surface Pattern and Textiles

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This essay details the narrative behind the collection “All that Grows Around Us” and will explore the ambitions for myself as a designer beyond university. The essay intends to demonstrate the importance of the innate relationship between humans and the natural environment, specifically through the view of Indigenous Americans, while utilizing textile design as the medium to convey the message. It will reference the Biophilia Hypothesis as defined by E.O. Wilson, while discussing the importance of a reciprocal relationship with the natural world as proposed by Robin Wall Kimmerer. The historical and cultural significance of fiber arts will be expanded upon using examples such as William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement in order to thoroughly develop an understanding of the collection’s visual outcome. The collection will consist of patterns applicable to fashion garments, as they are an integral part of our daily lives, in which I believe the appearance should be just as refined as the functionality of them.

The impulse to place imagery of the natural environment onto artificial surfaces is not coincidental, but rather inevitable. Biologist and naturalist E.O. Wilson defined this instinct as the “Biophilia Hypothesis”. In his book *Biophilia*, Wilson states it is “the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes” (Wilson, 1984, p.1). Wilson goes on to detail how the intense attraction to nature can be attributed to our biology. This can then be viewed through a design lens to explain how it entices us to the point where we not only seek it out externally but look to integrate it into our domestic environment. Society now seeks to cover their manufactured materials with images of the wild rather than immerse themselves in their genuine natural surroundings. There perhaps would be more incentive if the benefits of a strong relationship with the environment were more apparent, however money is the only object instantaneous enough to entice society to disregard their origins and destroy their roots.

While the invisible pressure to be constantly productive and prioritize profit above all else has created a false imagery of happiness, we seek to restore true connection through biophilia. Author and botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer address this in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, in which the belief that there is value in slowing down and an appreciation for the Earth is a consistent theme throughout the chapters. Kimmerer addresses the limitations that industrial society poses when trying to maintain a relationship with the natural environment. She uses industrial forestry as an example, how we have deforested vast amounts of land, replacing it with monocultures to appease product demands. Kimmerer believes that “Pioneer human communities, just like pioneer plant communities, have an important role in regeneration, but they are not sustainable in the long run. When they reach the edge of easy energy, balance and renewal are the only way forward, wherein there is a reciprocal cycle between early and late successional systems” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 284). The capacity at which the land can healthily support humans has been reached as we are stressing it to its limits, reflecting how we have also pushed ourselves to the working limits. Adapting a more gratuitous view of the natural world, as Indigenous people have traditionally done, will create a more sustainable, calming environment for all. This belief not only incites connection to our planet, but encourages community within each other, something that has

been lost through over promotion of individuality and competition. This invisible requirement to be the “best” at everything has been a weakness for me, as I have found I tend to feel disconnected from others when I am overwhelmed by work and or other responsibilities.

During this past summer, an internship in London led to isolation in an urban environment while working long hours, which, paired with the overarching stress around my final year and the prebriefed summer work made for many mental obstacles that obstructed the desired creative outcomes expected by the end of summer. With the beginning of summer spent working long hours at home, the need for rest and renewal was disregarded in the name of productivity. Only when I took the time to go to the park and read, or take a walk surrounded by the forest did I feel relaxed, and with that came the urge to create. The artistic urge only came when I was outside and allowed myself to experience the calming effects of the environment, easing the functional burnout I felt. Through personal experience, the overwhelming stress of impending deadlines and responsibilities can lead to task paralysis, as defined by Goodwin University as what “occurs when the brain perceives an overwhelming workload or a high-stakes task, causing a freeze response similar to the fight-or-flight mechanism” (Kuraska, 2025). This excessive level of stress and expectation not only leads to burnout, but often self-isolation. As the pressures continue to increase, we self-isolate farther away from the natural environment, creating a positive feedback loop. Despite the word ‘positive’ within the term, the effects of the loop are typically negative – in this instance our negative emotions are exacerbated through self-isolation, which incites more pessimism and isolation. While the personal seclusion may not be blatant, the loss of connection and community has been notable through the recent decades, especially the observable disconnection from our natural surroundings.

It is important to note that when discussing the natural environment, it is in reference to living flora and fauna, as well as naturally occurring byproducts, as opposed to manmade synthetic structures. Human created biophilic spaces such as parks and new growth forest do still constitute as natural environments in the context of this essay. This collection intends to portray the desire to reconnect with our environment through the motifs and materiality of the textile patterns. It will also feature natural elements that can only be observed within the local surroundings of both the United Kingdom, and New England in the United States, as this is where the majority of my experiences with nature have taken place. The motifs will be of live drawings that I have done in the environment to ensure the collection has an authentic appearance true to what the observable surroundings were.

While many isolate within their urban environments to escape from the stresses of work, there are proven benefits to productivity through immersion in nature. Attention Restoration Therapy, better known as A.R.T. as introduced by psychologists Stephen and Rachel Kaplan in their book *The Experience of Nature* explores how immersion in nature may lead to increased productivity. Kaplan and Kaplan explain how the incessant pressures of modern society has pushed our brain’s ability to concentrate to its capacity, specifically our directed attention – attention in which we are intentional about. Immersing oneself in natural surroundings provides a restorative feature that encourages more effortless brain function, which Kaplan and Kaplan state how “such environments foster the recovery from mental

fatigue. They permit tired individuals to regain effective functioning” (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989, p. 196). The importance of multi-tasking within the workforce is often overvalued, when in reality this mentality has created an overarching inability to completely focus and has increased impatience.

As the patterns will feature imagery of natural forms, the collection will also be made of completely natural materials. Wools, silks, cottons, hemp, linens, and other options will be considered, and the environmental impact of each fiber will be essential to the final choice of materials. The renewable fibers will not be blended with any synthetic fibers, as that will prevent the material’s ability to be recycled or renewed after the garment has reached the end of its lifecycle. The materiality will reflect the feeling of nature surrounding the body, which has scientifically proven to favor natural fibers against the body for a multitude of reasons, both mental and physical. I understand the drawbacks to certain natural fibers as well, for example, I acknowledge that non-organic Cotton may be treated with toxic chemicals, as well as the high consumption of water it requires. I will look to consider all the possible benefits and disadvantages to the fibers. Within this, I also seek to provide surface level processes to enhance the fabric’s feeling and functionality. Research article by Lizhu Hu et al goes deeper into the current state of research of “skin-friendly-textiles”, and accuracy of their quantifying definitions. In Jiangxi Centre for Modern Apparel Engineering and Technology, where the article was funded by, the researchers found that in terms of skin-friendly finishing on cotton, PFOTES, a renewable and reusable sorbent creates an effect in which “the inner layer of the fabric can be directed to wick away perspiration, [and] the outer layer can repel water, with excellent breathability.” Hu et al then explain how this process paired with natural dying provided “antibacterial finishing on the fabrics” and acted as a “functional finishing” (Hu et al, 2021). The combination of methods contributes to the overall breathability and absorption of the textile. Through a scientific lens, the finishing of the textile is pertinent to the sensory experience of the wearer. Through a more tactile lens, the feeling of the fabric against the skin is important when seeking to evoke positive emotions associated with the garment. As explained throughout this essay, the motifs will be in reference to the natural environment, and the patterns are intended to be applicable to a range of garments, ranging from more casual pieces, to dressier, occasion wear. Natural dying will also be used, not just in reference to the “functional finish”, but to achieve color that would be found occurring in the natural environment, keeping consistent with the collection’s theme.

In addition to natural dying, the other contributing processes to this collection will consist of screen printing, digital printing, and embroidery of multiple techniques including digital machine embroidery, domestic machine embroidery, and hand stitching throughout. While the “Biophilia Hypothesis” explains how humans are attracted to the environment, William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement is symbolic of how this attraction materializes in our domestic spaces. Morris was a prominent textile designer and activist during the Arts and Crafts movement in which he was at the forefront of. This movement was an encompassment of all the protests towards the industrial revolution and how technological advancements were replacing true craft and quality within production.



Fig. 1. Morris, W. (1883) *Strawberry Thief*. London: Victoria and Albert Museum.

Independent scholar Jeffery Petts explains how the movement fought against mass production abusing artists for maximum profit. His article discusses how art requires the intention behind it, and explaining why “Arts and Crafts traditionally sees a problem for art in allying machines to overspecialization of tasks; additionally, it theorizes the drive to this as commercial capitalism, which also removes artistic autonomy in production” (Petts, 2008, pp. 36-37). Maintaining autonomy throughout the artistic process is vital to my practice, as I truly only find joy within projects that I find a personal purpose in. The Arts and Crafts Movement also emphasizes the importance of craftsmanship, and the value in producing quality products – an important factor that industrial manufacturing appears to neglect. This element is also integral in the creation of “All that Grows Around Us”, as the patterns will all be created with quality and care at the forefront.

Through the internship this past summer I learned I do not enjoy being a piece of the manufacturing process but instead prefer to be intrinsically linked to the designs and artwork being created. While I do not mind tedious, slow work, I find it is the personal connection and passion behind the project that allows for the process to be satisfying. While I acknowledge the use of digital machine embroidery may be contradictory to the previous sentiments, it is still a labor intensive process that requires artistic development in production. The repetitive nature of embroidery in all techniques has proven to be calming to me. Unbeknownst to me, I later learned this was not unusual, but rather common. While art therapy is not necessarily new, specific studies into the benefits of embroidery have been conducted in recent years. A research article published in 2023 explored the benefits embroidery has on psychological health. According to the article the “phenomenological qualitative study explored the experiences of adolescent girls with emotional disorders from

post-hospitalization boarding schools who embroidered in an art therapy open studio group”. The researchers found that there are “three central features pertaining to the therapeutic aspects of embroidery: repetition, structure (working according to a pattern), and simplicity. These qualities may facilitate states of ‘flow’ or rejuvenation”. Additionally, the researchers note that “rhythm and a sense of reward characterize the creative process in embroidery and have been revealed as essential factors in the treatment of children and adolescents who have experienced trauma” (Wolk, N. and Bat-Or, M., 2023). These advantages will help aid my collection, as performing calming tasks will help ease the stressful nature of a daunting deadline and expectations. It also holds true to them throughout, on the importance of slowing down and appreciating the smaller, more mundane moments that shape the majority of our lives.

Despite the benefits of embroidery, it is typically disregarded as an art form due to its practical nature, and its gendered culture. In historical times, sewing and stitch was vital to nearly every household for clothing. The accessibility of stitching paired with the expectations that women would do the sewing created feminine connotations and class bias against the art. Art historian Elizabeth Eager explores the role of stitch in women’s lives in eighteenth-century in her research article where she explains the constant criticism throughout all economic classes of the role of women’s embroidery. Throughout the article Eager details examples of how embroidery can be viewed as work from the lower classes in the sense that it is a physical product that must be labored over to make profit, or at least a usable product. On the contrary, wealthier women utilized it as a way to increase their social status, as the leisurely act of embroidering was a way to increase others’ perception of them. She explains that “By highlighting the role of women’s needlework in the generation of both physical and social capital, historians have sought to capture the significance of women’s labor within capitalism’s binary paradigm” (Eager, E. 2024), Eager concludes her article explaining how the multifaceted nature of embroidery and its role during the time cannot be defined into separate categories, that it is all intersectional. Whether it is viewed through the lens of the working or wealthy class, embroidery was still disregarded as the skilled art form it is. Using this historical context, I will integrate embroidery and stitch into my collection to display the tacit knowledge I have acquired through years of practice and dedication, in which I hope to highlight the value of the labor that was never acknowledged for women in the past.

Beyond university, I wish for my work to be intentional, and to work with those who align with my values. Working with sustainable brands that are transparent about their production practices and values will be vital to my development as a designer. In my practice I seek a more bespoke approach, in which the pieces I create are solely one-of-a-kind, as they will be made with recycled and deadstock materials to prevent unnecessary contribution to landfills. Brands like Goat Vintage, a Canadian clothing brand, upcycles old vintage clothing into new, unique pieces. Their design team “Use[s] vintage materials only, don’t generate any waste, and create the best fashion possible, in the most efficient way” (Goat Vintage), all while

maintaining a single design studio.



Fig 2. +Rework Quilt Bomber Jacket. (Goat Vintage, no date)

Alternatively, I may look to begin my own brand, or freelance to allow myself full autonomy over the designs and outcomes. I will prioritize slow making, as I feel the market is already oversaturated with designs that lack much thought in terms of quality and intention. In my production I will be sustainable in terms of quantity, but also in quality. The designs that I produce will possess a durability that prevents the customer from needing to replace it often and will instead focus on repairing and taking care of the garment to respect the possible lifetime of wear it may provide. This slow making will not only ensure a sustainable practice in the physical sense – what and how much is produced – but also in a mentally sustainable approach – not exhausting myself to the point of burnout – which will in turn lead to more consistent creation. I intend to use this collection as a reference point for how I wish my

future as a designer to transpire, and as a stepping stone to display my skills as well as the values I hold within myself and my practice.

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Figure 2: Goat Vintage (No date) + *Rework Quilt Bomber Jacket*. Available at: <https://goatvintage.com/collections/jean-jackets/products/rework-quilt-bomber-jacket>