

Outside in

A THESIS PROJECT BY SARAH WOOL

MARYLAND INSTITUTE COLLEGE OF ART
MASTER OF ARTS, GRAPHIC DESIGN | AUGUST 2019





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Public domain botanical illustration.

A cutting

A tiny version of the parent plant.

I’ve spent my adult life living in small city apartments that feel far from the outdoors. I’ve tried to bring the outside in, hauling green plants and botanical drawings into my living room and buying blouses patterned with fruits and flowers. But it’s not quite the same, is it?

Outside In explores how to bring the outdoors back to the forefront of the mind in a meaningful way. It explores the botanical movement in art and design, and ties it back into biophilia and design theory. *Outside In* culminates in a series of exploratory, semi-spontaneous collages that juxtapose natural and manmade phenomena.

The first sprouts

The dawn of plantmania.

In the past several years, there has been a huge proliferation in all things botanical. Botanical elements have made their way into yogurt packaging, wrapping paper, retro patterned wallpapers, environmental graphic design, swimsuits, bedsheets, water bottles, you name it. How did this happen? Why did it happen? Will it end anytime soon? It's interesting to examine plants as a marketing and branding ploy while also examining them as beneficial—even crucial—to human well-being.

WORK STYLE AND PROCESS

With this project, I've challenged myself to create digital collages using public domain images. The work is experimental. My early choices to test, iterate, experiment, and play have resulted in a book that serves as a process documentation rather than a highly polished statement on a topic or theory. The book functions instead as a record of thinking and making—a set of partially answered questions, and an invitation to continue the work.

Because I have used digital collage, my work is limited by the collage elements I've been able able to find and source. In other words, since I've mixed things—instead of making them from scratch—the work has inherent limitations. These limitations forced me to make quick choices, creating multiple iterations to test different juxtapositions, angles, cutouts, etc. In practice, having such limitations is freeing. Often, it allows the work to flow and modulate faster.

After initially hoping to research massive topics—the history of environmentalism, environmental stewardship, individual efforts towards sustainability, systematic approaches to sustainability, etc.—I narrowed my focus to something chewable in a shorter time frame: the desire to bring the outside in to one's home and the need for plants and greenery in urban spaces.

This work is informed by research as well as certain design theories. I have researched and written about botanical elements in branding, and I have related those concepts back to biophilia and the use of organic elements in design.



Public domain wallpaper scan.



PLANT OBSESSION

Plant obsession is in full swing, particularly among Millennials. Summer Rayne Oakes (her real name) graduated from Cornell with degrees in environmental science and entomology. These days, Oakes spends her time making YouTube videos about plant care (her channel is called Plant One on Me) and even writing books. Her latest is *How to Make a Plant Love You: Cultivate Green Space in Your Home and Heart*. Oakes has been called an "eco-model" and a "plantfluencer."

Oakes calls our plant ownership "this wonderful hobby that [Millennials] have [some] control over, especially because we don't have back yards or places to call our own, really." Indeed, the Millennial interest in plants has led to a proliferation of plant retailers both brick-and-mortar and online. Bloomscape is an online, direct-to-consumer plant store that ships right to Millennial customers' doorsteps—or, more likely, to their pacakge-crowded apartment entryways. Plants have proven mental health benefits, and they can even help us boost creativity and disconnect from technology.

Eliza Blank, founder of indoor plant store The Sill, says that "plants resonate with millennials as an antidote to this insane [digital] connectivity." She adds, "Americans spend 93 percent of our time indoors. It seems somewhat counter and somewhat intuitive because it's an escape from our screens, and something we can take care of outside ourselves. When it's all self-driving cars and data in our contact lenses, we're still going to want plants."



Summer Rayne Oaks. Image via her website.

Jia Tolentino writes in *The New Yorker*, "[T]here's something mesmerizing about this chronicle of 'plant parents,' in which [you] see a string of lovely, cheerful millennial plant owners attempt to bring a spirit of slow caregiving to the digital systems that make us sad and twitchy enough to crave this very spirit—ideally in a form that can be contained in a nice ceramic pot."

In an opinion piece for *Metro*, Ellen Scott writes sardonically: "Millennials are obsessed with plants, and there's an obvious reason: We have literally nothing else. There's a basic human need to care for something outside ourselves. It makes us feel good to nurture and love something and watch it develop. For our parents, that need was filled by buying a cute little two-bedroom and decorating it, then popping out some babies. They'd build up careers that'd give them enough fulfillment and money to delay a crisis until mid-life and buy a motorbike. We can't do that."

Left: Public domain image.

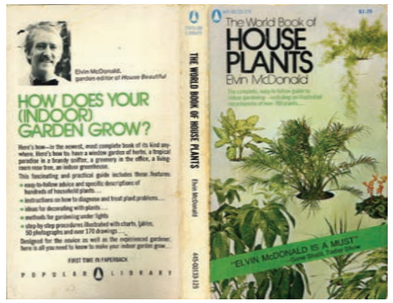
THE ROOT OF THE ISSUE

Millennials are dealing with stagnating wages, increasing student loan debt, skyrocketing home prices, global political instability, and (surely related) an increased tendency to delay marriage and child-rearing. The world is a stressful place. Given all of these factors, it is easy to believe Scott's notion that Millennials are transferring their tendencies towards caregiving from romantic partners or children to urban greenery. We love houseplants because we can't count on much else.

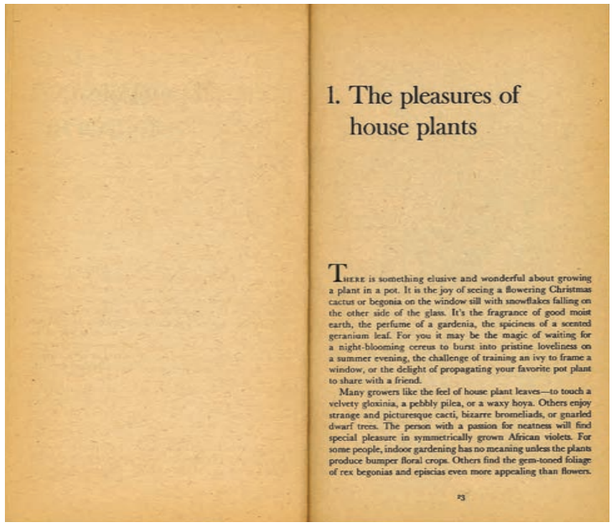
But even if this takeaway is a touch negative, it's a *positive* thing that Millennials have invested in houseplants. After all, there are far worse things than mental health-boosting, air-cleaning houseplants. (For a fuller investigation into the benefits of urban greenery and bringing plants indoors, see page 27 of this book, "The biophilia hypothesis.")

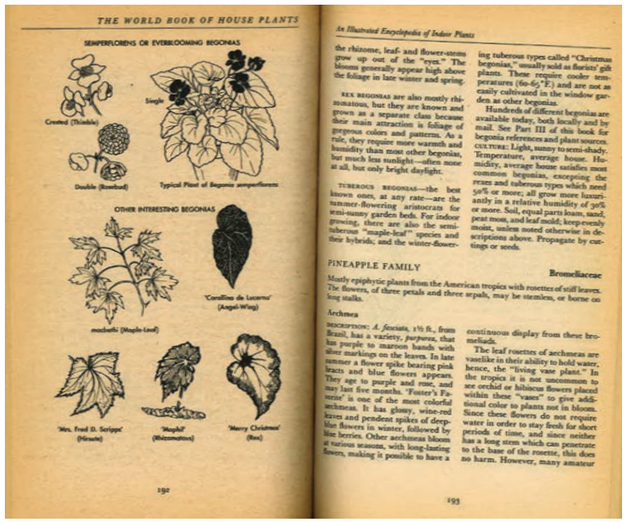
In the *Refinery29* article "Plant Ladies are the New Cat Ladies," Cait Munro writes: "Whether it's some [...] delicate, exotic orchid or just a little succulent that you sometimes forget to water, a houseplant feels like a rite of passage for anyone attempting to create a stylish and inviting environment. And like tattoos or swipes of lip balm or Lay's potato chips, plants seem to be the kind of thing where you can't have just one. For many, the low-maintenance rubber plant someone gave you as a housewarming gift soon becomes a lush garden sprawling from your windowsill outward. Before you know it, you're naming them, you're talking to them, you're spending Saturdays trawling local plant stores for new friends. You're a full-on Plant Lady. And like the Cat Ladies of yore — kooky single women living with a cohort of felines and often no one else — you're totally embracing it, despite any furrowed brows you may receive."

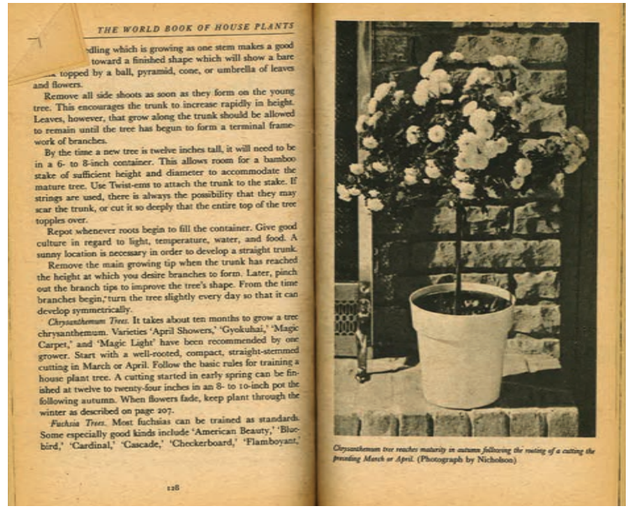
Plant ownership (or small-scale landscaping) provides Millennials with the opportunity to test out caring for other living things, but without anywhere near the level of commitment as pet ownership, home ownership, marriage, or child-rearing.



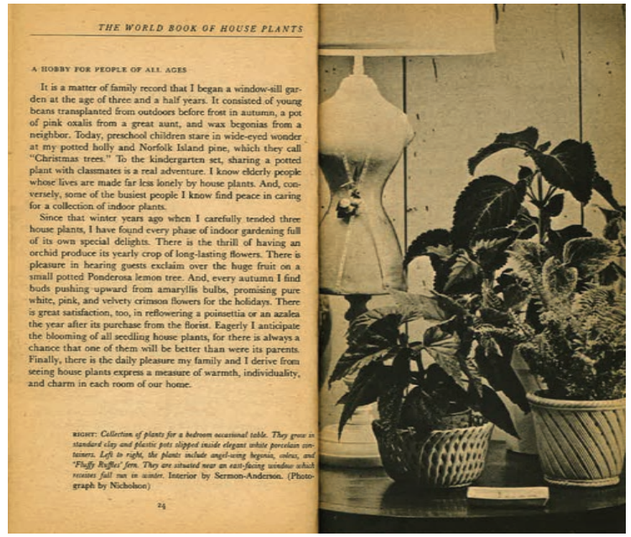








Chrysanthemum tree reaches maturity in autumn following the rooting of a cutting the preceding March or April. (Photograph by Nicholson)



Scans from *The World Book of House Plants,* found on the street in Cambridge, MA, June 2019.



Common pests

What this project can and cannot do.

This is a project about plants and botanica, as represented in homes and as represented in art and design.

THE INITIAL PLAN

At the outset, I saw this as a project about environmental stewardship. I wanted to spend time researching and writing about the great minds behind environmentalism, before environmentalism was a necessity. I would research Henry David Thoreau, Rachel Carson, Edward Abbey, John Muir, and even Theodore Roosevelt.

But I wouldn't stop there: I would also spend time researching the people carrying the torch of environmentalism into the current age: Al Gore, Julia Butterfly Hill, Greta Thunberg, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Lauren Singer, LeeAnne Walters, and Erin Brockovich, and Shailene Woodley.

With this research, I planned to create two practical items. One would be a deck of faces cataloguing the ideologies, actions, and legacies of many of the environmental stewards mentioned above. This deck would serve not only to describe the roots of the contemporary environmental movement, but also to offer a more personalized look at the lives of these figures.

The deck would aim to educate and inspire progressive thinkers. It would also aim to help people who may not consider themselves "environmentalists" to realize how much skin they have in the game.

The second practical item would be a pocket guide to stewardship in the current day. This guide would be aimed at young urban apartment-dwellers who might be interested in (or just amenable to) making small changes to their lives to become more environmentally friendly. For example, the guide would cover composting in a tiny apartment, cutting down on food waste in general, cutting down on packages ordered, reducing or flat-out eliminating Amazon orders, adding plants to the home, walking or biking to work, shopping thrift, buying bulk toiletries, taking fewer flights, etc.

THE TIME CRUNCH EDIT

The main limitation of this project, of course, is time. This thesis has been written under harsh time constraints, crammed into the time that's been available between a 9-6 job, another five-week summer course, freelance work, and the rest of life. I was sad to realize that there was no way I could realistically create the two items mentioned above. Reluctantly, I decided that it would be better to do an okay job working on a small sliver of my original idea than it would be to do a poor job working on a massive idea without giving it the time it deserved.

That's a wordy way of saying that this project is an experimental, unpolished project about houseplants in design and culture. While houseplants are connected to nature and environmentalism, I can't pretend that they are true weapons of the environmental movement or clear symbols of stewardship. They are a little fluffier, a little shallower, but still interesting and beautiful and still worth researching and exploring.

So I took the initial plan for this thesis and cut it way back and ended up with this book of research and collages about plants and botanica.







Who planted the seeds?

This is a community garden.

This thesis takes inspiration from a number of artists, designers, and writers. This chapter will cover some of the moments in art and design that helped fuel the explosion in plant culture, and thereby helped fuel my research into that same culture. Let's start with a prominent figure in art history: Henri Matisse.

MATISSE AND THE CUT-OUTS

In some of his final years, Henri Matisse was diagnosed with abdominal cancer, which confined him to a wheelchair. Now unable to paint and sculpt like he used to, Matisse worked with assistants to create colorful collages of cut paper painted with gouache. These bright, dimensional cut-outs bridge the worlds of painting and sculpture.

Perhaps it is this bridging of two worlds that makes Matisse's experimental and immersive jungles of botanical and animal shapes so broadly appealing. His cut-outs have inspired artists, illustrators, and designers alike, and have been a massive point of inspiration for contemporary graphic design in particular.

As Liz Stinson writes in AIGA's *Eye on Design* blog, "the appeal of the cut-outs was innate. They were an accessible celebration of form and beauty. When [it was] stripped down to basic color and shape, Matisse's work took on an almost graphical nature—which might explain the recent resurgence of the aesthetic."

Thus, it is impossible to talk about the botanical trend—in life and in art—without mentioning Matisse. With his cut-outs, Matisse aimed to emulate the decorative and organic aspects of Islamic art. Matisse claimed that Islamic art "suggests a greater space, a truly plastic space."

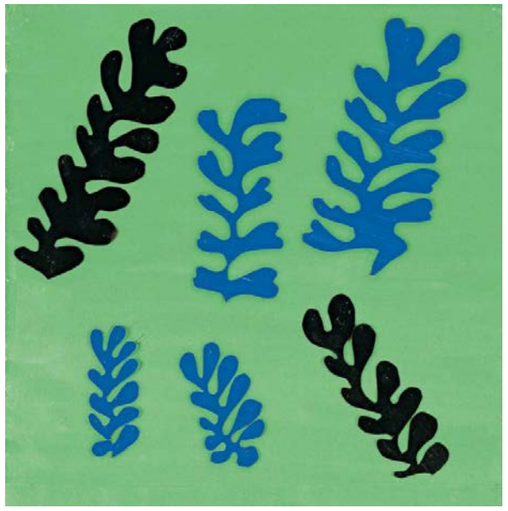
When they are brought into homes, plants—real, drawn, painted, designed, or collaged—have a similar power of plasticity. We use them to make indoor spaces feel bigger, homier, more lush, more organic, more personalized, and more artistic.

Getting your "botanical fix" no longer requires a yard, a garden, or even a houseplant. Botanical designs and objects have made their way into and onto our yogurts, clothes, wallpapers, and digital lives.













Clockwise from top: *The Parakeet and the Mermaid*, 1952; *Composition Green Background (Composition fond vert)* (detail), 1947. Gouache on paper, cut and pasted, and pencil. The Menil Collection, Houston; *White Alga on Orange and Red Background (Algue blanche sur fond orange et rouge)*, 1947. Gouache on paper, cut and pasted; *Palmette (Feuille violet sur fond orange*), 1947. Gouache on paper, cut and pasted; Matisse at the Hôtel Régina, Nice, c. 1952. Photo: Lydia Delectorskaya. © 2014 Succession H. Matisse.













Elements of the heavily botanical Chobani rebrand. Armin Vit of the design group Under Consideration described the rebrand as having an "Amélie-meets-Norman Rockwell-meets-Works Progress Administration aesthetic that feels earthy, nostalgic, and wholesome but without being cloying." Images via Chobani.

CHOBANI AND THE REBRAND

Chobani yogurt launched back in 2007 with a minimal all-caps, sans serif logo and a clean photographic art direction. Ten years later, the Greek yogurt market was oversaturated with nearly indistinguishable brands. The product had lost its novelty, and Chobani needed to make a bold play for customer attention.

Enter the rebrand. Under the creative leadership of Leland Maschmeyer, Chobani used branding to reposition itself as wholesome, with a touch of magic and nostalgia. *Adweek*'s Robert Klara wrote that Chobani had "completely redesigned its packaging, tossing out the usual white cups with the fruit photos in favor of a design inspired by 19th century American folk art, featuring a color palette borrowed from leaves and flowers and bark, and illustrations reminiscent of old seed catalogs."

Sterile was out; natural was in. Oh, was it in. Seemingly overnight, designers began paying more attention to bold botanical shapes and colors, along with other cheery, nostalgic elements of illustration, retro typography, collage, and midcentury modern color palettes. Some of the trend could even be considered childlike, reminiscent of books like *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* (illustrated by Lois Ehlert) and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (written and illustrated by Eric Carle).

To again quote Liz Stinson in *Eye on Design,* "The birds, plants, fish, and abstract forms he cut had the imprecise edges of a childhood art project, but when arranged in compositions, those imperfections transformed into masterful interplays of shape, color, and texture."

The problem arose when what felt like dozens of brands started to look like Matisse and Chobani had a baby. Almost as soon as the botanical design phase had emerged, it was laughably ubiquitous. The trend hasn't died yet, partly because colorful plants and plant shapes possess a timeless beauty and universal appeal. It is up to artists and designers to continue drawing on botanical objects and imagery, but in new and innovative ways.



Tote bags by Chobani (L) and Marimekko (R).





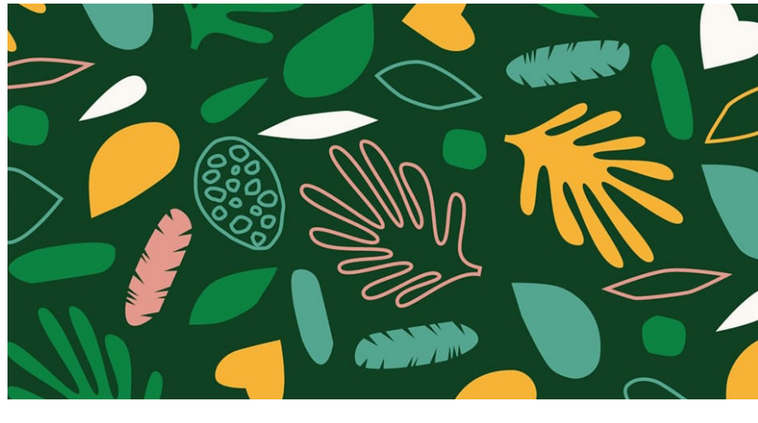




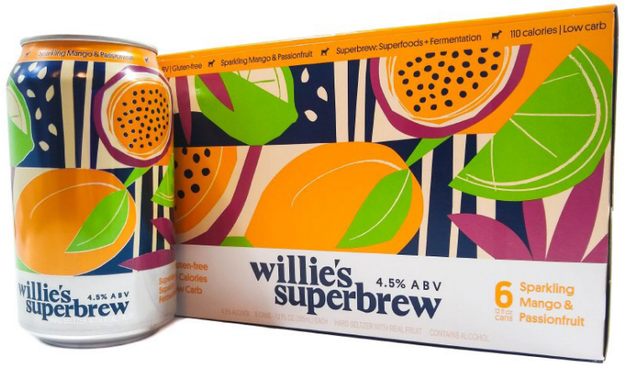








Left to right, top to bottom: See Mama Bee branding; La Casiana coffee branding; La Casiana packaging; Verde branding/ typemark; Juice Bar branding; 2018 original painting by Will Bryant; Re-phyll branding; Verde branding.









Cut-out mania, clockwise: Willie's Superbrew beer packaging, collaborative illustrations by Adam Higton and Atelier Bingo, as seen in *It's Nice That*.

BOTANICAL ILLUSTRATION

Classic botanical illustration served the function of recording plant species before photography was widely available. Between 50 and 70 CE, the Greek botanist Pedanius Dioscorides created an illustrated book called *De materia Medica* to help people identify different medicinal plants.

During the 1700s, new printing technologies paved the way for more colorful, detailed, and accurate botanical illustrations. Botanical illustration was a respected full-time profession, and skilled illustrators like Pierre-Joseph Redouté (who worked as a royal flower painter for Marie Antoinette) created images that still have the power to delight and captivate viewers.

Now, even phone cameras can capture wildly detailed images of plants. However, even though we don't *need* illustration to capture the different types of plants, botanical illustration still retains a massive appeal and popularity. Contemporary artists and illustrators have picked up on the appeal, resulting in a proliferation of new print and digital botanical imagery.



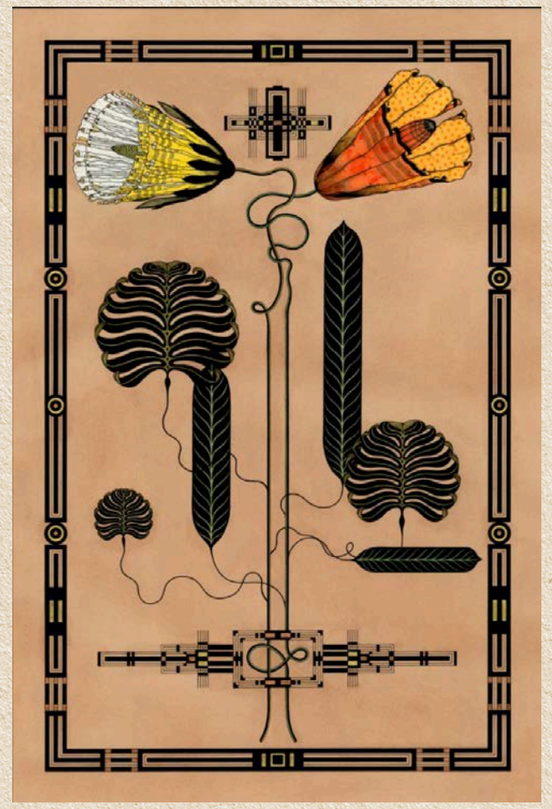
Clockwise from top: Artwork by Marsha Robinson, AKA "Strange Dirt;" artwork by Rokas Aleliunas (cropped); illustrations by Rocio Montoya.















Clockwise from top: Embroidery by Sarah K. Benning; artwork by Rifle Paper Co.; artwork by Marsha Robinson, AKA "Strange Dirt."

COLLAGE

Collage—both print and digital—is another area where botanical elements have popped up seemingly everywhere. Plants, especially leaves and flowers, lend a textural, organic quality to collages. They can create interesting interplays with more contained elements.

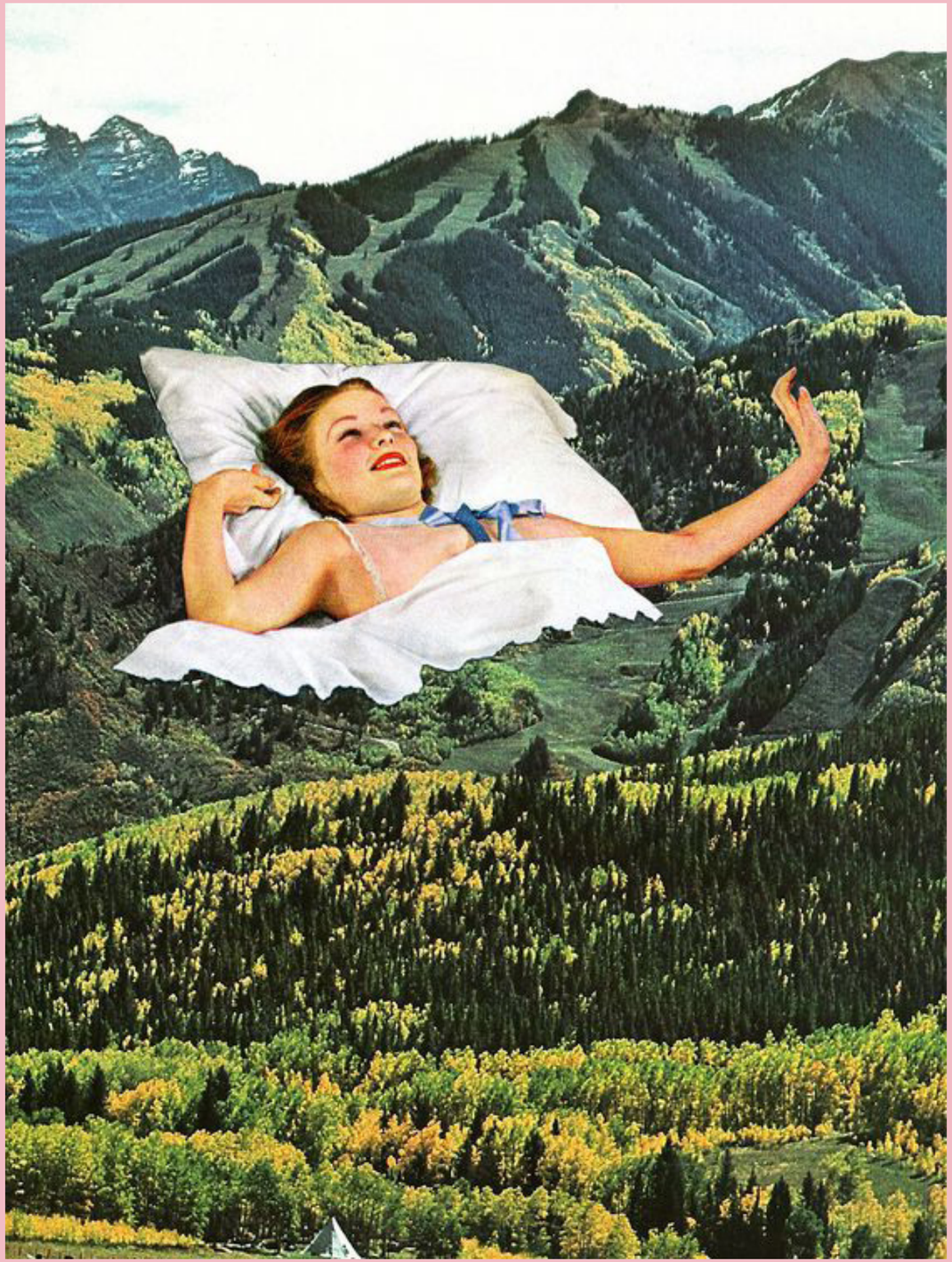








Clockwise from top: Collage by Stephen Eichorn, collage by Rocio Montoya, collage by Rocio Montoya, collage by Astrid Torres. Next page: Collage by Eugenia Loli.



The rest of the forest

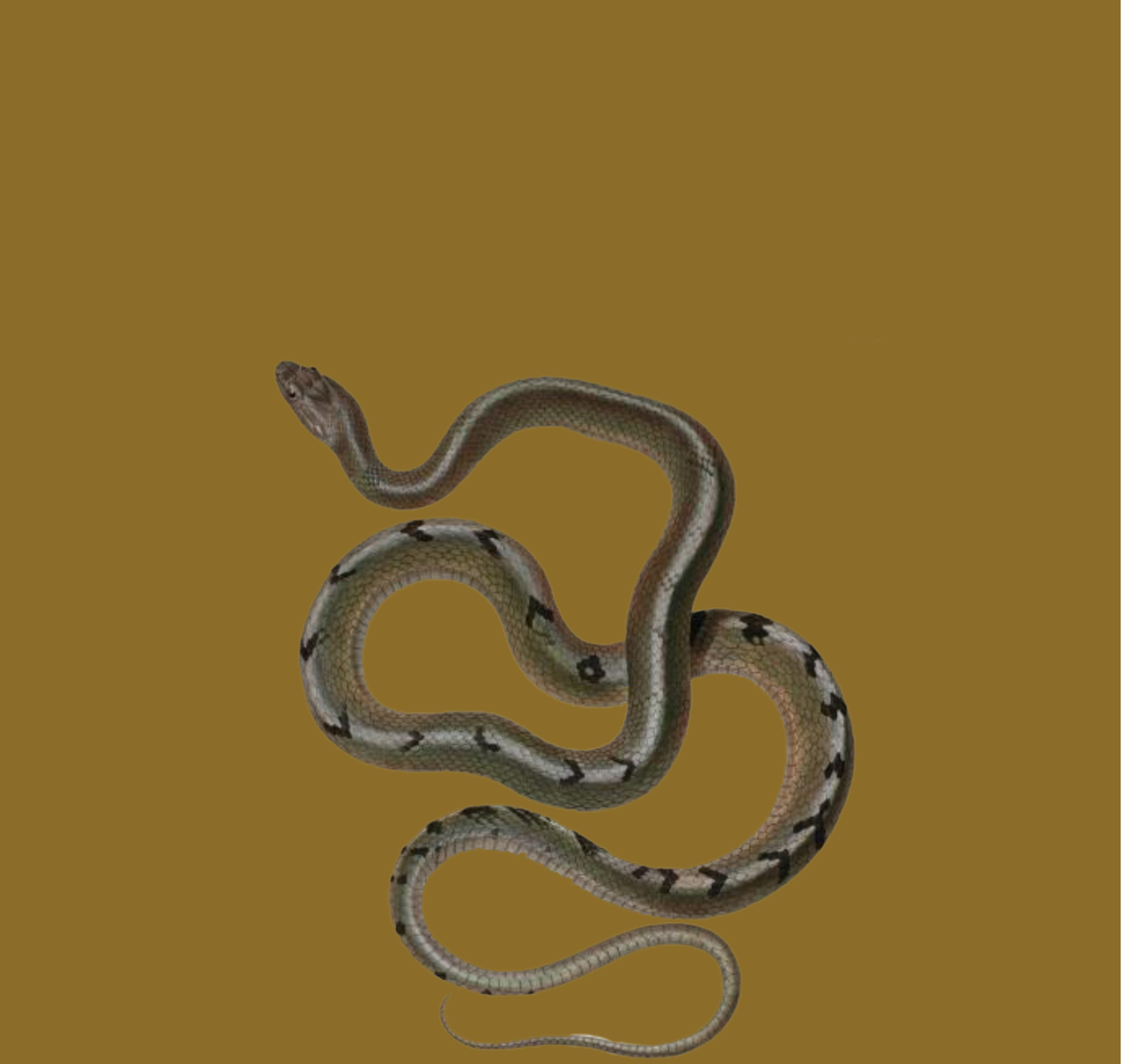
Understanding the context.

Most of the research relevant to this project has been covered in the Introduction section (“The first sprouts”) and in the Precedents section (“Who planted these seeds?”) of this thesis book, so I’ll keep this section short.

Here’s what we know: While beauty is, of course, subjective, there is an argument to be made for the objective beauty of plants (see: the biophilia hypothesis). The human inclination towards plants and nature is both strong and well-documented. In the current day, this inclination towards plants and nature often takes the form of plant acquisition.

Millennials in particular have shown a deep interest in houseplants and botanica, and brands have taken note. Products like Chobani and Willie’s Superbrew tapped into Millennial plant obsession to create brands that call to mind simpler, wholesome times.

The visual context for this project is less clear, partly because this project is so experimental and unpolished. The most relevant visual context is, of course, collage work from similar artists and designers. Other relevant contextual work includes Matisse’s cut-outs as well as other plant imagery, both abstract and illustrative.



The biophilia hypothesis

The need for nature.

As a design theory, biophilia codifies a sentiment most of us already know to be true: Humans have an innate need to connect to nature. Unlike phobias, which describe our fears, philias describe positive sentiments and attractions. The ancient Greek term *philia* is often translated as brotherly love or affection. Aristotle translated it as friendship—more specifically, a mutually beneficial and positive relationship.

In the 1993 book *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, Edward O. Wilson defines biophilia as "the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes." He describes it as "the [human] urge to affiliate with other forms of life," like plants and animals. The German psychologist Erich Fromm used biophilia to characterize the human attraction to things that are alive and vital. Humans are drawn to nature, likely because we've always relied on nature for sustenance as well as for recreation.

In design, biophilia tends to refer to architectural design. Biophilic design is used to help humans feel more connected to their natural environment through building features like lighting, air systems, and plants. As far back as 605 BCE, humans have worked to bring nature into design. The Hanging Gardens, built by the Neo-Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II, were as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The Gardens were said to have contained tiered gardens, reminiscent of a large green mountain. The terraced gardens were full of plants, fruits, flowers, and waterfalls. The Hanging Gardens may have actually existed, or they may have been an imaginary structure of beauty and grandeur. Regardless, they are an ancient example of human reverence for nature and plant life.



A 3D reconstruction of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, via Encyclopedia Britannica. © Elena Terletska/Fotolia

In the past several decades, biophilia has come back into discussions of design and architecture. Stephen Kellert, a pioneer of graphic design, was a professor of social ecology at Yale University until his retirement in 2010. In his final few years at Yale, Kellert helped to strengthen the biophilia hypothesis, promoting the idea that connecting nature and built environments can improve human health and well-being. He also created a framework for biophilic design that champions the wonder of nature while also providing a fulfilling and multisensory environment for people.

Kellert promoted design that allows for (1) direct experience of nature, (2) indirect experience of nature, and (3) experience of space and place.

Direct experience of nature is the most obvious and concrete part of the framework. Buildings that offer a direct experience of nature usually have natural lighting, achieved with clerestory windows (windows that are high above eye level, like the ones seen in many church buildings), glass, atriums, skylights, and reflective facades. They may also have water-based structures, like fountains, ponds, or aquariums. Finally, buildings that are biophilia-friendly tend to have landscaping elements, gardens, and/or plants.

Indirect experience of nature comes from things like photographs or paintings of nature, natural materials, natural colors, natural shapes, and natural geometries. Finally, a biophilic design that provides good "experience of space and place" is a design that has qualities like organized complexity and transitional indoor/outdoor spaces (like porches, atriums, bridges, and foyers). Prominent examples of biophilic design include Fallingwater, Sandy Hook Elementary School, and Singapore's Supertree Grove.

Fallingwater is perhaps Frank Lloyd Wright's best-known architectural masterpiece. The home, designed in 1935 in southwestern Pennsylvania, is deeply integrated with the surrounding nature. It takes hints from biophilic design as well as Japanese architecture, focusing on the interplay between indoor and outdoor spaces and on creating a sense of harmony with nature. Fallingwater is built atop a waterfall that flows beneath the house. Running water can be heard from the home.

Sandy Hook Elementary School was the site of a tragic school shooting in 2012. After the tragedy, a new school was built. The new building is meant to be a site for community healing and remembrance. Architects Svigals + Partners included biophilic elements in the redesign, including courtyards, natural shapes, animal feeders, transitional spaces, wetlands, images of nature, and natural light. The new school also has a garden, intended as a healing space. The school is nestled against a forest, and the school lobby contains metal trees with reflective, colored glass leaves that scatter the natural light.

Supertree Grove is a nature installation in Singapore, Singapore, with more than 160,000 plants installed in 16 manmande "supertrees." A number of the supertrees contain solar panels, observatories, and walkways for humans.









Clockwise: Singapore's Supertree Grove, designed by Grant Associates, photographed by Peter Stewart Photograpy (image via Flickr); *Fallingwater* by Frank Lloyd Wright, photographed by Mike Dobel for *Washingtonian*; Sandy Hook Elementary School, photographed by Robert Benson Photography for *Architect Magazine*.





A final, more recent example of biophilc design is the Amazon Spheres in Seattle, Washington. The domes contain tens of thousands of plants. The largest sphere has a four-story “living wall” covered in plants. The spheres are largely reserved for Amazon employees, but public tours are available.

Images: Avery Hartmans, Business Insider

Design Process

How it started.

This project started with cutouts from 1950s issues of *Life* magazine. With these colorful, retro cutouts as a starting point, it felt right to use a midcentury modern color palette and wholesome serif type for titles.

The spread across the next two pages shows my initial style guide for this project. The style components have changed as I’ve completed more and more work in file. In particular, body text has decreased in size, grids have changed, and color palette has been reduced.

Most of the process of creating this book has been a research process, rather than a pure graphic design process. I’ve been surprised at the amount I’ve time I’ve spent researching and writing compared to the amount of time I’ve spent actually messing around with digital collages.

The drafty, experimental nature of the design process has been loose, fun, and different from any design project I’ve done.

Outside In | Visual Style Guide

COLOR

BASIC COLOR PALETTE

EXPANDED COLOR PALETTE

TYPE HIERARCHIES

MERRIWEATHER BLACK ALL CAPS, 9 PT, 50 TRACKING

Merriweather

(for titles/H1, 35 pt, 0 tracking)

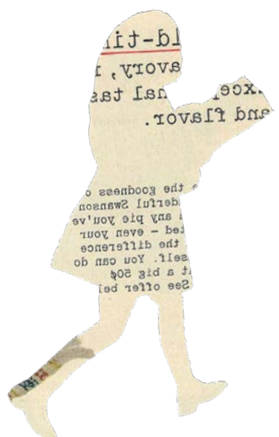
Merriweather Bold Italic

(for subtitles/H2, 15 pt, -10 tracking)

Montserrat Regular, body text, 10/14, 0 tracking

Montserrat Regular, annotation/callout text, 8 pt, 0 tracking

Montserrat Medium Italic, H3, 10 pt, -10 tracking
(subsections within body text)



Preliminary visual style guide for *Outside In*.

TYPE PAIRINGS

MERRIWEATHER BLACK ALL CAPS (SUBHEADERS, CALLOUTS)

Merriweather Black Sentence Case (Section titles and experimental type)

Merriweather Bold Italic (Subtitles, etc.)

Montserrat Regular
(body text)

Montserrat Italic
(subsections within body text)

outside outside outside outside

ARTWORK

This project is experimental

The work in this book is experimental and often spontaneous. The visuals are a documentation of process and research, but also a documentation of curiosity and playfulness—a testing of the waters.

Collage is a major part of the visual language of this book. As the book-making process continues, the collage style will inevitably become more defined. At this stage of the project, though, it is unclear whether the collage elements should maintain their original color. Perhaps this much color is overwhelming or distracting for the reader.

The book will include other visual elements, but these other elements will highlight and/or offset collage elements.

Design Outcomes

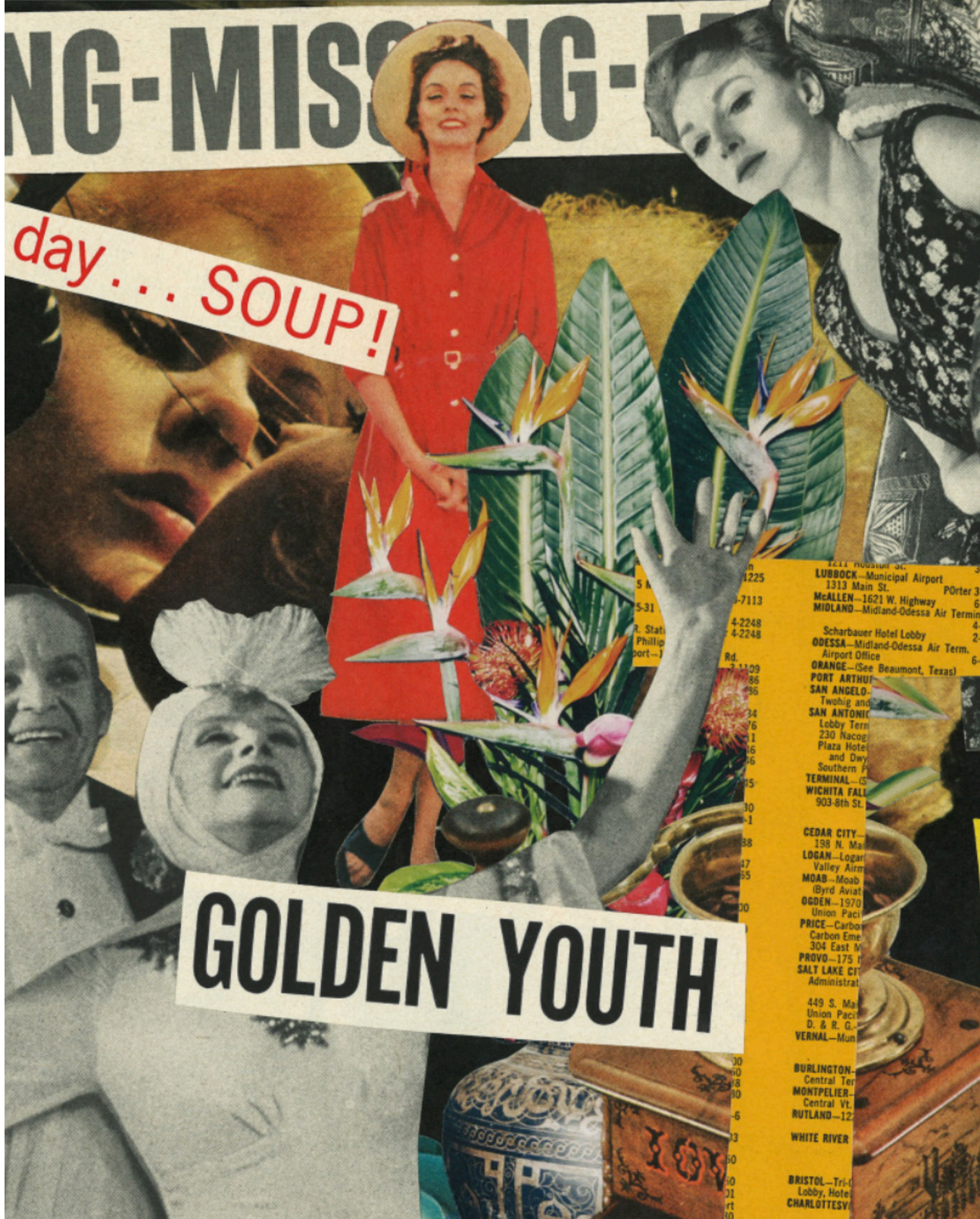
An exercise in leafy juxtapositions

As mentioned earlier, the design process for this project was both spontaneous and experimental. The results are just a brief start. There is so much more exploring and iterating that should be done for this project, and in the future I hope to give it the time and power it deserves. Here, though, I'll aim to describe how I got interested in collage generally, and plant collage specifically.

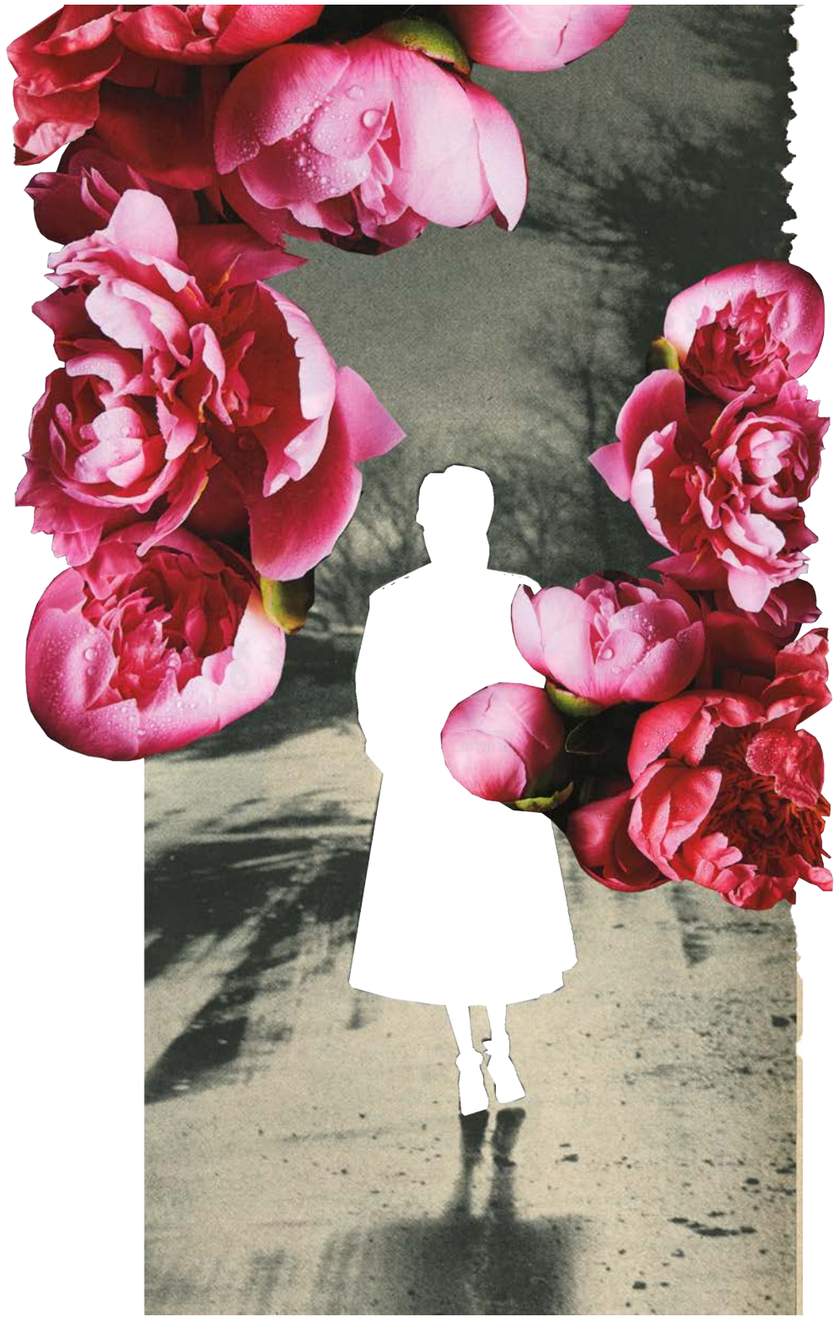
In my first design job out of graduate school at MICA, I worked at the Denver Art Museum. Occasionally, at the end of an exhibition run, museum staff would get access to some of the pieces from the exhibition. Not the art, of course, but the props, like furniture. Often, exhibitions included texts (think art books, coffee table books, or actual magazines and publications that were produced during the same time period and zeitgeist as the art in question).

Shortly after an Americana-themed exhibition ended, staff were alerted to the fact that there were lots of items at the "free table" in the administrative building. I headed to the table and was delighted to find a large stack of Life magazines from the 1950s and 60s. I grabbed a few, leaving a few more so as not to be greedy, and brought them back to my desk. I thought I would use the magazines for personal, experimental design and collage work. The advertisements in the magazines were some of the most interesting parts. Often sexist, ridiculous, or both, they were rich with images of hourglass-shaped women, cars, bold declarative statements in large type, etc.

I started cutting elements and scanning them, hoping to make something of them one day. When this thesis project came up, I decided it was the perfect opportunity to start actually making collages and also incorporating elements of nature and plant life. The resulting collages are some of the initial experiments I created.












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Conclusions

What are those?

Because this project is experimental and spontaneous, it is not conclusive, nor is it meant to be. I suppose the only conclusion is that there is plenty of future work to be done on this project.

Specifically, there is work to be done to make this project more useful and more helpful to the environmental cause. As it stands now, this project is a relatively shallow study of plants in culture and branding. With finesse and attention, it could actually be turned into an educational, inspirational, and aesthetically beautiful piece. I hope to pick it back up in the future.



Water and light

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