



NATURE

C U L T U R E

INDEPENDENT SENIOR THESIS
PROJECT

By

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ALEXANDER

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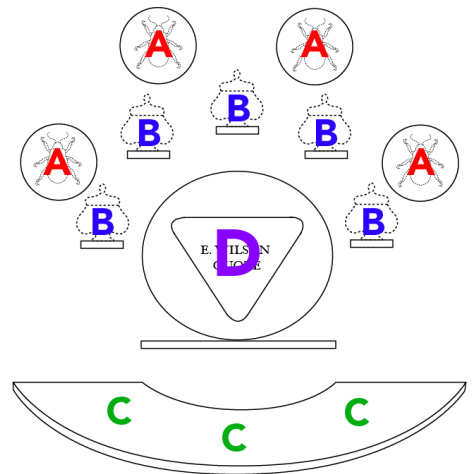
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Intro : Nature Culture is a personal-revisualization of our changing relationship to nature. By using a more legible visual vocabulary I hope to heighten human awareness of our relationship with nature and thus broaden the boundaries of our perception. Nature Culture is an installation consisting of a series of objects such as terrariums and specimen paintings that make visible commentary on our society and point out three principles I've found present in our current relationship with nature. These principles deal with the main ways that we've come to interact with the natural elements around us:

- I. Obsessive Ownership
- II. Hyper-Analysis
- III. Aesthetic Escape

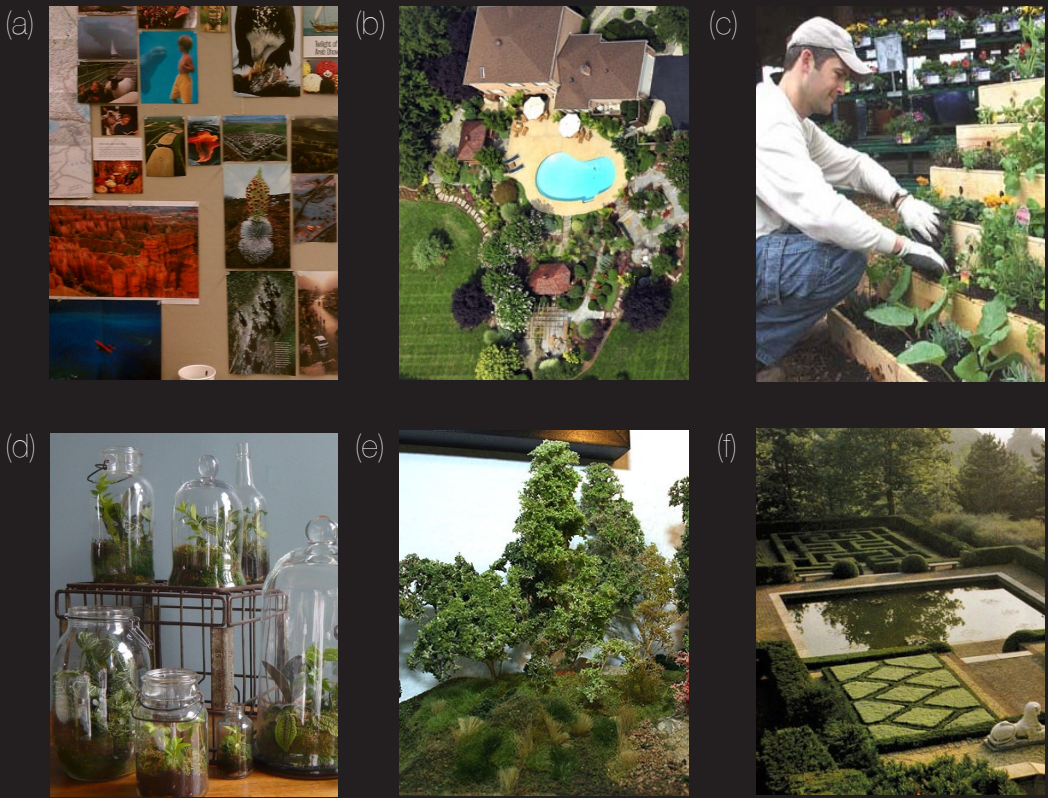
The project is a representation of these methods of understanding nature. It is a collection of objects that all symbolize some sort of "capture" of the natural environment and its incorporation into the man-made world. These objects include: scientific illustrations, terrariums, photographs, and maps. All these objects are not actually nature itself, in its original context, but a way of taking nature and bringing it into chewable man-made contexts. They will inspire feelings of obsessive ownership and scientific curiosity as well as remind the viewer of the exaggerated beauty commonly associated with nature. Feelings of nostalgia and fantasy will be displayed as well through the Art Nouveau style of ornamentation and symmetry as well as reference the french renaissance Cabinets of Curiosity.



Principles I and II are based on our human desire for control but principle III is based on our need for escape from that control and the yearning to feel small and a part of something much larger. Principle III is a direct reaction to the intensified effects of principles I and II.

I. Ownership Obsession : For most of our existence as humans we've known very little about how nature works and in that respect it has felt larger and more in-control than we were. We've had to learn about nature so that we could survive under its rules and by its terms. Humans though, as a species, are inherently very dominating and have a desire to always be control—constantly wanting to out smart our predators and to make life easier for ourselves and our human community. So, nature, when once having been seen as a larger than life entity (one not to be reckoned with) is now something we often try to shrink down, to own, and control. We do this by miniaturizing nature in some form (images d and e); causing it to be in someway dependant on our existence (c); mimicking a characteristic so we can begin to recreate a smaller version of it; and by stopping it in time through photographs, sketches or collecting dead specimen, so that it will remain the same forever (a). Examples of our ownership and need for physical control are exhibited in obvious ways such as house plants—that are small individual pieces of nature that rely on us to survive; landscaped gardens that are designed by us pruned by us and guarded from “weeds” by us; and owning land and controlling what will grow on it, who will live off of it and basing our societies infrastructure on its resources.

We're not very comfortable having to live by the wills of other beings so we make ourselves independent from them by gaining physical ownership (making them dependant on us) and mental ownership (by learning about them—principle II).



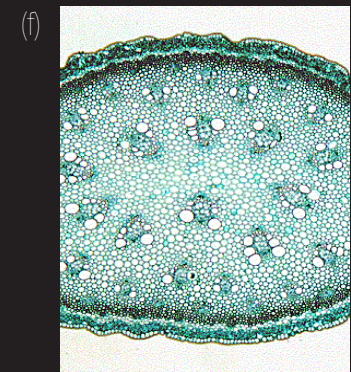
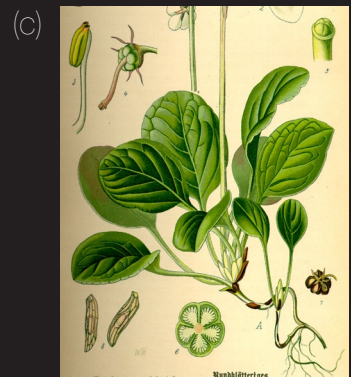
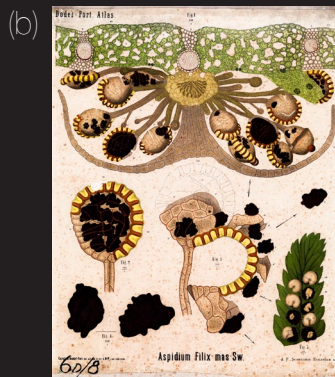
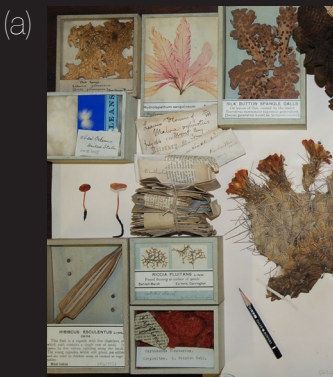
Images (a) through (f) are different examples of ownership and desire for physical control by miniaturizing, making dependant, and capturing in time the individual elements of nature.

II. Hyper-Analysis : So, in our attempt to gain power over nature, through understanding it, we've begun to pick it apart. This learning and exploration is often fueled by a feeling of curiosity for an "alien" world separate from our own. We disassemble, categorize, analyze and label nature to a point where we can now manipulate it to our advantage—like in commercial farming (d). In farming we asexually reproduce plants that would otherwise benefit from reproducing sexually in the wild.

The art of making a Bonsai tree (e) is only possible through having a great understanding of the science of the tree itself. A bonsai grower must be able to balance keeping the tree alive while severely limiting its nutrition and root space so that it forever stays small. This is an extremely hard endeavor and is highly praised in the Japanese culture when done well. A tree in the wild would almost never survive in the same conditions let alone find itself in such circumstances in the first place. Thus the Bonsai depends on us.

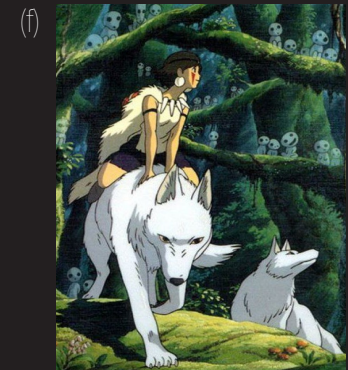
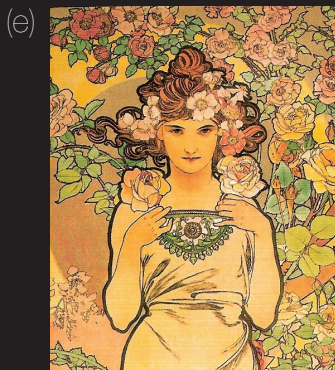
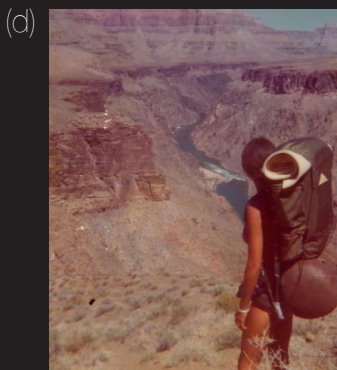
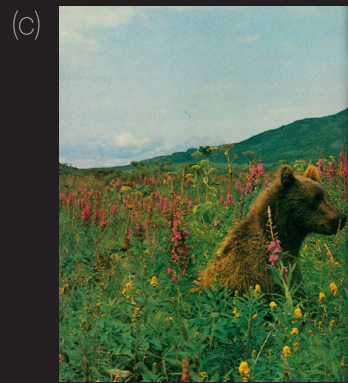
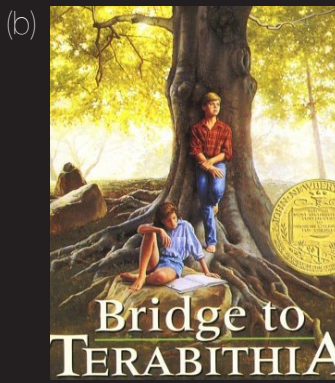
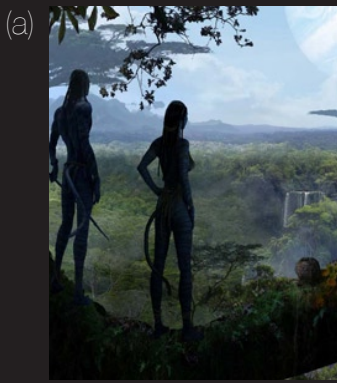
These activities and interactions are heavily based on a system we've created around understanding nature—science. Science allows us to manipulate nature which puts us in a superior position. There are less popular ways of getting to know nature that don't put us in control. Spiritual understanding or observational understanding are some common examples but science is by far the most prominent human method of understanding nature because it allows us to control it for our own benefit.

From this system a visual vocabulary and common culture has developed. Botanical and anatomical illustrations dominate the field because in a drawing you control exactly how the plant will look (images b and c). A dead specimen (a) will be easy to analyze for decades to come because we've found ways to preserve nature for our educational purposes. We've even figured out ways to see into the micro scale of nature (f) making it smaller in our eyes until we feel like giants and sometimes even like gods in comparison.



III. Aesthetic escape : Nature, once seen as the all-encompassing environment and entity around us, a practical necessity of life has now become something separate from the world we live in. It is viewed as an aesthetic object or an escape from the more practical life we've created—the man-made environment. The beauty found in nature begins to inspire and support fantasies and imaginative narratives outside of the world we know. There's strong evidence of this in the way that we decorate our gardens and how we often combine our narrative fantasies of adventure with grand natural settings like in Avatar, Bridge to Terabithia, Peter Pan, Lord of the Rings, Narnia, Moby Dick, Princess Mononoke and many, many more.

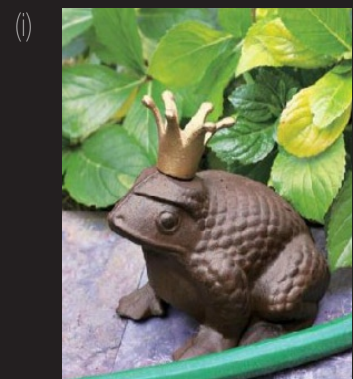
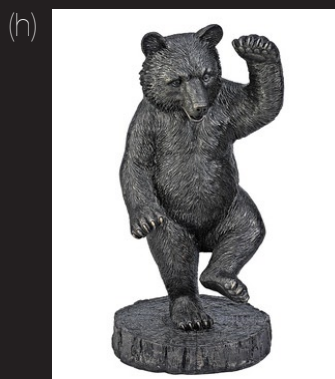
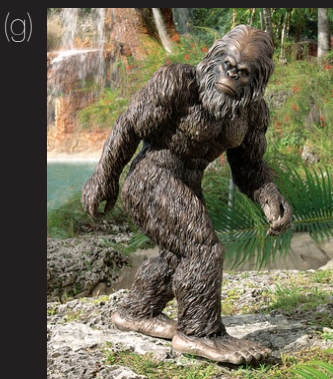
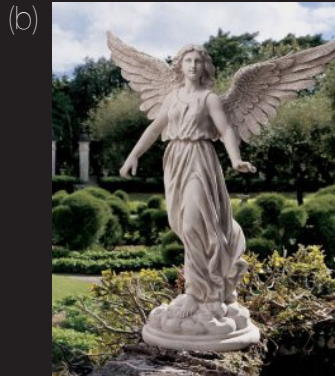
Nature lives in art and is often expressed as the most original and rawest form of beauty. Artists such as Alphonse Mucha and Maxfield Parrish, often organized their organic imagery with simple geometric shapes and symmetrical compositions, thus defining the Art Nouveau style. Art Nouveau became a popular aesthetic at the turn of the century when we were beginning to industrialize and quickly move away from a life where nature was once more seamlessly integrated into our activities.



Images:

- (a) - Avatar (a movie where nature is associated with alien life and pureness)
- (b) - Bridge to Terabithia (a story about 2 children who create a make-believe kingdom from the forest behind their house)
- (c) - Nature as an innocent beauty
- (d) - Nature as a way to feel smaller and to inspire feelings of adventure
- (e) - Alphonse Mucha, Roses, example of Art Nouveau
- (f) - Princess Mononoke (a movie about a battle between nature and human industry)

I recently discovered and realized that the imagery associated with personal gardens (as represented by the decor offered by many home improvement stores) is potentially related to whimsical feelings and fantasy imagery. While looking for some terrarium vessels I found myself spending a lot of time in the garden sections of many stores and I began to document the extremely apparent theme that runs through all garden decor. I always knew that gnomes were a garden staple but it really struck when I realized that all decor ran in this same vein. Nothing was realistic, all was very innocent and slightly juvenile—obviously tapping into a time where narrative, fantasy, and adventure played more prominent roles in our lives:



Images (a) through (i) are several examples of different kinds of garden decor that can be found in Home improvement stores at present. Though different they all carry the same fantastical inspiration and illusion separating the garden from real life.

PHYSICAL COMPONENTS OF NATURE CULTURE

Each component of the installation is directly related to at least one of these principles:

A. Specimen Paintings of Beetles : The specimen paintings of 4 brightly colored beetles were painted from 4 scientific reference photos. By utilizing the aesthetics of scientific observation I was able to aid in the aesthetic organization and ornamentation of my project. The beetles are arranged in an arc around the center mimicking common Art Nouveau elements. I also chose to use the beetle rather than some other type of living organism because though they are the most common animal living on earth we very much associate them with “alien” imagery and know very little about them. This mystery relationship coincides with our general relationship with nature as something separate from the normal (man-made) world though it literally makes up everything around us.

The beetles are painted with acrylic on 10” wood panels. They were then shellacked (a lacquer made from beetle shells) to give them an authentic bug-like sheen.



B. Terrariums on display shelves : These terrariums represent the ownership obsession that we have developed with nature. We've domesticated plants the same way we've domesticated cats and dogs. When once we lived and interacted with plants for practical reasons it felt as if nature owned us. Now we enjoy the companionship and the aesthetic advantages of the plant in our homes (with very little responsibility) and can now feel like the owners because they depend on us. The tropical plants that live in terrariums would normally be living in very specific parts of the world, only areas that can support the environment that the plant needs. But since we've built these terrariums as fully enclosed, fully self-sustainable environments they can literally live in any climate on any continent fully detached from its native origins. Now we dictate where nature will live.

To build the terrariums I had to learn a great deal about mini-ecosystems and about the kinds of plants that can live well in these small humid places. I myself have always had an enormous fascination with terrariums and have always been drawn to the aesthetic of miniaturized nature. In an attempt to understand my own preoccupation with owning a small piece of nature I explored terrariums as a medium to represent principle I.

Plants were bought and resized to fit the terrariums



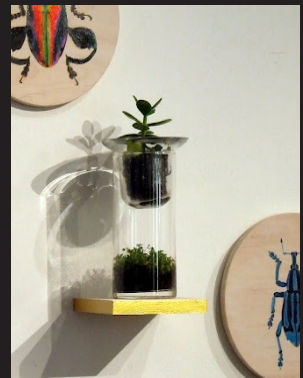
Moss was collected from the Arb. (Moss LOVE to live in terrariums)



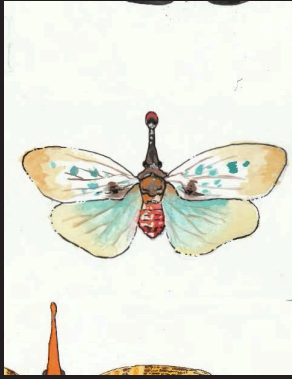
Terrariums were grown under a table in my studio by the light of 2 grow lamps, prior to the show.



The Terrariums are a reference to Principle I, but are also evidence of our Principle II by having to understanding plants and their environments. And like the garden the terrarium provides a visual escape from the man-made environment that surrounds us a reference to principle III.

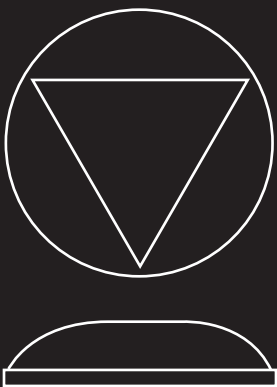


C. Specimen Illustrations of botany and zoology : The specimen illustrations are similar to the beetle paintings because they employ the aesthetics developed around science culture yet present nature as a beauty without any explanation or categorisation involved. The drawings are multimedia, but most are executed with water-color paint and colored pencil. Each drawing is sandwiched between 2 sheets of thin glass like specimen slides used when looking through microscopes.



D. Chia-Covered Centerpiece : The centerpiece is a 3-dimensional circular board made of wood, covered in insulation foam (for the shape and volume of the mounds), and covered with the common Chia-plant seeds. In the center there is a flat area gilded with gold-leaf paint where the title of the piece is painted in acrylic across the middle. Extreme ornamentation then surrounds the title, using all organic elements and a symmetrical organization. The idea of a centerpiece brings to the mind thoughts of a shrine or spiritual alter. While I encourage all associations the main purpose of the centerpiece is to establish a french renaissance/Art Nouveau aesthetic. Styles that both idealize and venerate nature and floral beauty. Both these styles used a lot of gold and circular organization.

Using chia as the natural element for the centerpiece is referencing the fad of the chia-pet, that was once so popular in our culture. For no extremely practical reason there were millions of chia being used as home decor all over the world most likely because the plant was being portrayed as a “pet”, a small companion that you own.



Cheese cloth is used to hold everything together, but allows the plant to grow through. Next a layer of organic cotton that the roots can easily grow through covers insulation foam adhered to the wood base-board. All of this sits on top of the gold painting.

