

## **FOOD CHAIN**

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## Introduction

It's not easy to know how to purchase ethically today. The system that we as consumers in America are part of is working beyond our control and destroying the environment. This means your purchasing habits, especially of food, have a bigger impact than you realize, and a bigger impact than the food industry giants want you to know about. I am using screen printed textiles with subversive imagery to illuminate these impacts. Because of our economic privilege, we don't have to examine the impacts of our purchases. Companies like these titans of the food industry, Coca-Cola, Nestle, and Walmart, spend tons of money to confirm passive consumerism, covering up the negative environmental impacts of their services in order to turn a profit (which they have all perfected, each bringing in billions of dollars a year in food sales).

Using a medium seen and used in everyday life, textiles, I will present confronting imagery of North American wildlife that is suffering by big food industry's hands. This will educate my audience about the wide reaching effects of big food industry, and will help bridge the gap between existing purchasing habits and elevating consciousness toward sustainable purchasing habits.

Recognizing your own purchasing habits and becoming knowledgeable about where to shop and what to buy is essential in slowing corporations' billion dollar steam roller which aims to eliminate small local competition by pricing their items lower. Corporations can only do this because of the mass level at which all of their products are produced, and this mass production is exactly what is destroying wildlife in North America. Animals like bees, birds, and fish are all impacted by big food industries indirectly. Pesticide use for mass agriculture kills bees. Deforestation for mass agriculture destroys birds' forest habitats. Excessive water pumping dries out the natural spring water that fish live in. Coca-Cola, Walmart, and other huge corporations are doing their best to monopolize the American food industry using these mass production techniques, and we are letting them. We are all guilty of perpetuating this destructive system, but this is only because they have done a masterful job of taking control of the mass food market and making the most available, cheap food options. The most immediate way that we as consumers

can take action for the environment is holding ourselves accountable for what food we buy, which starts with learning about what to buy and what not to buy.

## **Contextual Discussion**

### **I. Big Food & Drink Industry's Impact**

A lot happens behind the scenes of food and drink production that regular consumers don't see- especially in the mass production business. Green America, an organization dedicated to finding ways to live sustainably in not only an environmental context, but social and economic as well, lays out the map of Walmart's impact on the environment.<sup>1</sup> They state that there are several specific practices they employ that are detrimental to the environment because of the nature of big industry. One being because of their wide reach, their fossil fuel and carbon emissions are off-the-charts.<sup>2</sup> Shipping all of their products to all of their stores around the nation requires a massive transportation force, which means lots of fuel used by lots of large trucks every day. Their low-cost business model creates an emphasis on consumerism and short-lived products which create tons of waste, but also tons of business because of their competitive prices.

Walmart's audience needs low-cost food more than they have the time to think about their environmental impact. In order to get such low prices, they have to be mass producing everything, including their produce. This puts smaller, local farms out of business and supports mass agriculture. Some negative environmental effects of mass agriculture are decreased natural biodiversity, deforestation, water waste, and excessive pesticide use. All kinds of local wildlife, especially bees, birds, and fish are affected by these and are being driven to lower populations as huge agricultural demands grow. Erin Gorman, the director of Green America's Walmart Action Campaign, says this about Walmart's business model; "Their push to lower their costs year after year has driven down wages here and abroad, sent American manufacturing jobs overseas, rapidly expanded toxic industrial production in countries that lack rigorous labor or

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Korfhage and Liz Borkowski, "Beyond the Walmart Economy," Green America, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://www.greenamerica.org/green-living/beyond-walmart-economy>.

<sup>2</sup> Danielle Kurtzleben, "Walmart Struggles to Overcome Environmental Criticism," U.S. News & World Report (U.S. News & World Report, April 20, 2012), <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2012/04/20/walmart-struggles-to-overcome-environmental-criticism>.

environmental protections, and contributed to a host of other social and environmental ills. It's a race to the bottom where everyone loses.”

Another large corporation that has struggled to manage its environmental impact is Coca-Cola. Greenpeace, an organization that focuses on exposing and bringing to light environmental issues and works to address them firsthand, calls Coca-Cola out on one of its biggest failures- the plastic waste produced by their products<sup>3</sup>. Like Walmart, Coca-Cola benefits from short-lived products and mass production to be able to sell at low prices. The massive amount of plastic produced by Coca-Cola and consumed by people not just in the United States, but globally, makes up the biggest chunk of all waste being removed from the oceans around the world. According to Greenpeace, the company hasn't included plans to decrease the amount of plastic in their production, just that they will be using more recycled plastic, which isn't enough to outweigh the devastating impact they have already had.

Along with the plastic fiasco, Coca-Cola has come under fire for unethical water sourcing, and pumping drought-sensitive communities dry of their natural water sources. It's very difficult to find information on United States sources of water for Coca-Cola's brand of bottled water, Dasani. However, Mother Jones<sup>4</sup>, a news reporting outlet that exposes the most important current issues exposes them along with Nestle for extracting water from sources in California, driving natural ecosystems to extreme drought, killing off native wildlife species like the Speckled Dace, the California Spotted owl, or the two-striped garter snake. Their water sourcing practices are so bad that an organization called War on Want<sup>5</sup> came up with this slogan; “Coca-Cola: Drinking the World Dry”. They address their abhorrent practices in areas of the world like India and Mexico, but as mentioned, the U.S. is also being affected negatively by their water extraction methods.

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<sup>3</sup> Perry Wheeler, “Greenpeace Slams Coca-Cola Plastic Announcement as 'Dodging the Main Issue',” Greenpeace USA, January 19, 2018, <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/news/greenpeace-slams-coca-cola-plastic-announcement-as-dodging-the-main-issue/>.

<sup>4</sup> Julia Lurie, “Your Bottled Water Comes from the Most Drought-Ridden Places in the Country,” Mother Jones, June 24, 2017, <https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2014/08/bottled-water-california-drought/>.

<sup>5</sup> “Coca-Cola: Drinking the World Dry,” War on Want, June 23, 2015, <https://waronwant.org/media/coca-cola-drinking-world-dry>.

## II. Where do we factor in?

As mentioned in the introduction, these companies work hard to cover up the negative effects of their practices on the environment to keep consumers like us in the dark. They benefit from our participation in their system- we buy their products! By buying food and drink from big corporations like these, you enable them to keep using their destructive mass production techniques. However, there is so much money in the food and drink industry, that these big companies have a monopoly on what's readily available for us to eat and drink. It's easy to have a Coke or a Sprite when that's what's in the soda machines at a restaurant. Eating sustainably means buying local and organic and from brands who use sustainable packaging and distribution methods. The problem with that in most cases is access both in terms of physical availability and price. There are fewer stores selling these niche goods than there are chain stores like Walmart or Costco selling big brands' goods. Along with the niche goods comes a high price. For lots of Americans, buying produce from Walmart is their only option because of the price disparity between their produce and a local health store or farmer's market's produce.

It can be discouraging to realize that as a consumer in America, you are participating in this destructive system. Escaping it in its entirety is a tall order when we are surrounded by these corporations' products every day. Ignorance and economics are the driving factors keeping this system going- meaning that people want to pay lower prices for their products, and don't know about how they're affecting the environment, and the big corporations need it to stay that way in order to stay in charge. This means that conscious purchasing and consumption habits are the most immediate way that we as consumers can take steps in the right direction toward saving the planet. Acconia is a global business with a focus on environmental sustainability and analyzing how businesses can become more environmentally friendly. Their areas of expertise include renewable energy and sustainable water sourcing. They have a website called Active Sustainability, which is full of a myriad of articles detailing current events and informational articles. In one of their articles, they explain that the current big business infrastructure is the antithesis of what the environment can handle. The linear consumption model of United States capitalism isn't sustainable- it's what Coca-Cola and Walmart thrive on; short lifespan products, single use products, and excessive consumerism. Learning about how these businesses capitalize on our consumer ignorance and how they are covering up most of their negative environmental

impacts as best they can is the first step in separating yourself from this system and becoming a responsible consumer.

### III. Nature and Decorative arts as communication

Using motifs, patterns, and symbols, artisans have woven and printed messages and stories into their textiles, ceramics, and wallpapers since the beginning of decorative arts as a medium.



*17th century imperial court robe, Qing Dynasty, silk and metallic thread  
Source: The Met Museum*

The court robes worn by the Chinese rulers and members of high society were riddled with meaning<sup>6</sup>. Everything from the type of cloth to the color to the imagery on your robes had significance. Social, economic, and educational status were all represented by these robes. Their motifs and symbols often stemmed from nature, but the most commonly used and recognized one is the dragon. Down to the number of claws the dragon had, each part of the symbol on the

<sup>6</sup> Alan Priest and Pauline Simmons, "Court Robes and Their Symbols," in *Chinese Textiles ; an Introduction to the Study of Their History, Sources, Technique, Symbolism, and Use Occasioned by the Exhibition of Chinese Court Robes and Accessories ; December 8, 1931 - January 31, 1932* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1931), pp. 50-78.

robe bore meaning. Although I'm not designating power rankings to the symbols and motifs I am using in Food Chain, I apply the same principle of everything having a meaning and no part of the design being superfluous. My choices of color and scale are all embedded with meaning as well, which I guide the audience through in an extra document called the 'map' of Food Chain. People who view my work without educating themselves on the symbolism will only experience pieces of aesthetic design, not the intended meaning. Similar to this, to the uneducated eye, Chinese imperial court robes might look similar to one another, but to someone who knows the symbolism and meanings behind the motifs, it is a garment writing out the story of the wearer's life.



*Seasons by May, wallpaper by Morris featuring birds and blooms of springtime.*  
 Source: Style Library

A famous arts and craftsman, William Morris, created a body of work which was focused on natural motifs and patterns in his wallpapers and textiles<sup>7</sup>. His work was in direct response to the times he was living in. Morris was an adult in the age of growing industrialism in England. As shown by history, this age of adjustment to a new, more man-made world wasn't smooth. Cities like London became black with pollution, and big industry began its journey to taking over

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<sup>7</sup> "William Morris Art, Bio, Ideas," The Art Story, accessed March 2, 2020, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/morris-william/>.

the world market. Morris resented this transition in lifestyle, and looked back often and fondly on medieval times for their extravagant decorations that connected them with nature and the environment. He retaliated against modern times by creating wallpapers and patterns that were all natural motifs in order to try to regain some of this naturalism being lost in the age of growing industry.

Not only do I resonate with his frustration with the destruction of nature from the industrial revolution, but I have chosen a similar approach to him to express my frustrations. Both Morris and I utilize wallcoverings as a medium because of their ability to surround their audience without overwhelming them. It can exist in a space in a large capacity while still remaining in the background of people's visual consciousness. Interior spaces and the way they are decorated have an immense impact on the mood and mindset of the people occupying it. I think, and Morris thought, that including natural elements like wildlife imagery in interior design is necessary for feeling complete and spiritually whole.



*Iguana Solid Wallcovering, a Timorous Beasties design depicting tropical wildlife, at the center of attention being a large iguana wrapped in vines.*

*Source: Timorous Beasties*

Timorous Beasties is a modern luxury wallpaper brand that operates out of London. It was started and is owned by two designers, Alistair Mcauley and Paul Simmons, who met while studying textile design at university<sup>8</sup>. Nature strongly informs their work, and they include

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<sup>8</sup> "About," About - Timorous Beasties, accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.timorousbeasties.com/about>.



natural motifs in most of their patterns because they believe nature interacts with all aspects of our lives. This particular pattern displays a semi-realistic rendering of an iguana, plants, a bird, and a bug interacting with each other. The way that they render their subjects gives a gritty kind of realistic take on non-traditionally beautiful parts of nature- they don't just portray things that are easy to look at. Their designs often take on the air of modern renditions of 18th century styles of wallpaper, and they also employ interesting and unexpected colors in their designs, which is part of what makes them a pioneering luxury brand.

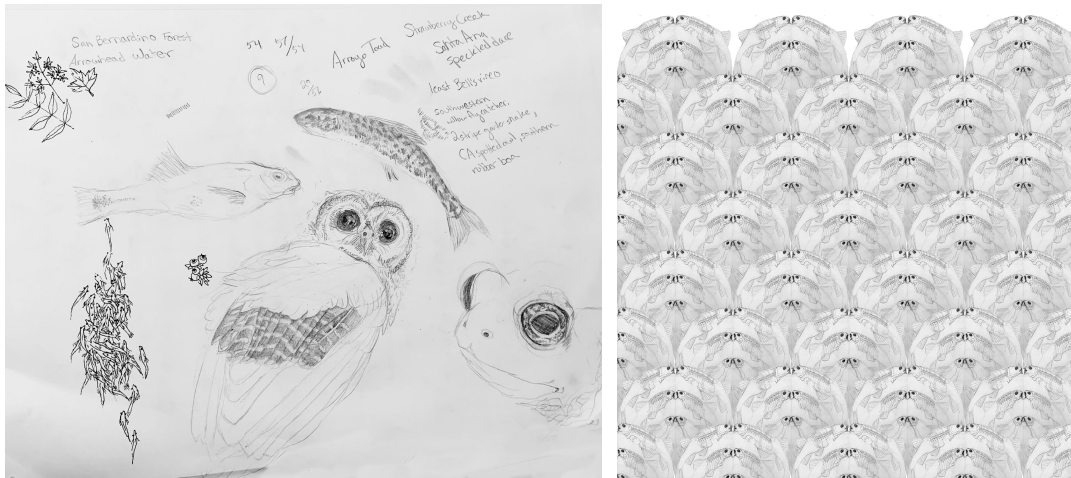
Timorous Beasties takes risks with their imagery, which is something I also incorporated in my designs. Like they included large lizards and realistic insects in theirs, I used imagery of dead birds, beetles, bees, and a whole textile filled with sea animals suffering at the hands of single use plastics (Cola Ocean).

Although, because the images are presented in a pattern, that can tend to disguise meaning from the motifs, seeing them over and over can desensitize a viewer to their graphic nature. In the second image, the utilization of color, specifically the lack of contrast in the color between the foreground and background is something that also helps to soften the look of shocking imagery and make it marketable to a wider audience who might not be bold enough to put the wallpaper color on the left around their house. I also used this strategy in my work, strategically planning the colors of the designs to communicate a visual hierarchy as well as disguise some more shocking or unusual imagery in my designs.

## **Methodology**

### **Sketchbook**

To get rid of blank page stagefright when starting to sketch, I let myself look to other artwork for inspiration instead of drawing on nothing or fabricating something from my own brain. In the case of Food Chain, my sketching started out very scientific, making realistic sketches of the animals involved in my project. This was to get my eyes and my brain warmed up to thinking about my project visually, changing my mindset from scientific and scholarly research to visual research and exploration. The sketchbook played an important role in my first ideation stages.



*Left: a page in my sketchbook where I identified key animals to my research and began visually synthesizing them through sketching them. I analyzed different aesthetic affordances of each animal and thought about how to incorporate those things into repeat patterns. Ex: the feathers on the California Spotted Owl are beautifully striped and already in a repeat pattern, so I focused on drawing that section of the animal.*

*Right: a pencil sketch from my sketchbook of the speckled dace fish, scanned and uploaded to my computer, modified and repeated in photoshop. A key part of my early process was drawing individual animals and symbols in my sketchbook, then uploading them digitally and playing with their potential as different repeat patterns.*

*Source: Abby Olsen*

### **Printing/Material exploration**

Moving to the actual fabrication stage of the making process necessitated a change in mindset once again. A different kind of problem solving happens in the sketching stage than the making stage. I experimented with different kinds of printing on scrap fabric- I tried woodblock printing from a laser-cut woodblock, I tried monoprinting with a plastic sheet and textile ink, and I tried paper stenciling, which entailed cutting out shapes from a piece of paper, attaching the paper to a silkscreen, and printing it as a stencil onto the fabric.

Along with these types of fabric printing, I utilized my knowledge of photo emulsion silkscreen printing in order to get small details to show up in my repeat patterns. This required less experimentation because of its predictability and reliability as a process, and my prior experience with it in past years.

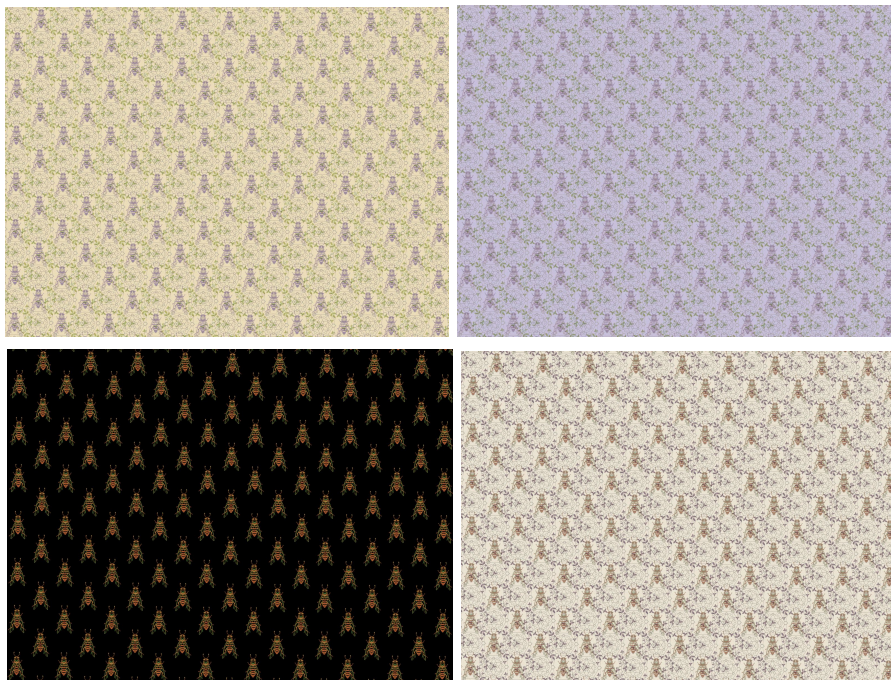
In addition to experimenting with the techniques I used to print on the fabric, I experimented with the fabric itself. Knowing how much water goes into producing new cotton, I avoided the fabric store and instead went to several thrift stores and picked up old king sized bed sheets. Reusing donated sheets solved issues of environmentalism and price in terms of

purchasing large amounts of cotton fabric, as well as providing a unique visual texture to my new designs by seeing the old sheet's pattern beneath mine. I also purchased water based textile printing ink, which means it's devoid of chemicals that are harmful to the environment.

Due to the shift in workspace we all experienced in March, I was only able to experiment with and print three of my final pieces physically, the other three made digitally.

### Digital Visualization

Combining digital and analog methods of ideation became increasingly important to my project as time went on, and eventually molded into a totally digital method of creating by the end of the process. Moving forward from just using my sketchbook images to generate repeats, I utilized an application for iPad called iOrnament to sketch out my repeat patterns. The features of this app allow me to see my image being repeated as it's drawn, making it easy to create seamless repeats, export them to my computer, and manipulate them in photoshop however I need.



*Four colorways of one of the first renderings of Bayer Bees. All drawn and manipulated digitally. Each element of the design was able to be changed individually because I utilized digital layering. I considered visual informational balance between elements as well as aesthetic purpose. This meant I was changing the scale, color, and placement of each element to fit how I wanted the viewer to read the overall textile and which elements people would be drawn to, and which elements they have to work harder to see.*

*Source: Abby Olsen*

The most valuable thing about working with my designs digitally was the ability to change the color, scale, or location of any of my repeat elements. This way I could dive deeply into how I was using color to present my images not only just for aesthetic purposes, but for informational purposes. I made many colorways of each piece, weighing how the colors could disguise certain elements and bring others forward, what kind of mood I could create with different colorways and how the mood of the textile matched the information behind it or not.

## **Creative Work**

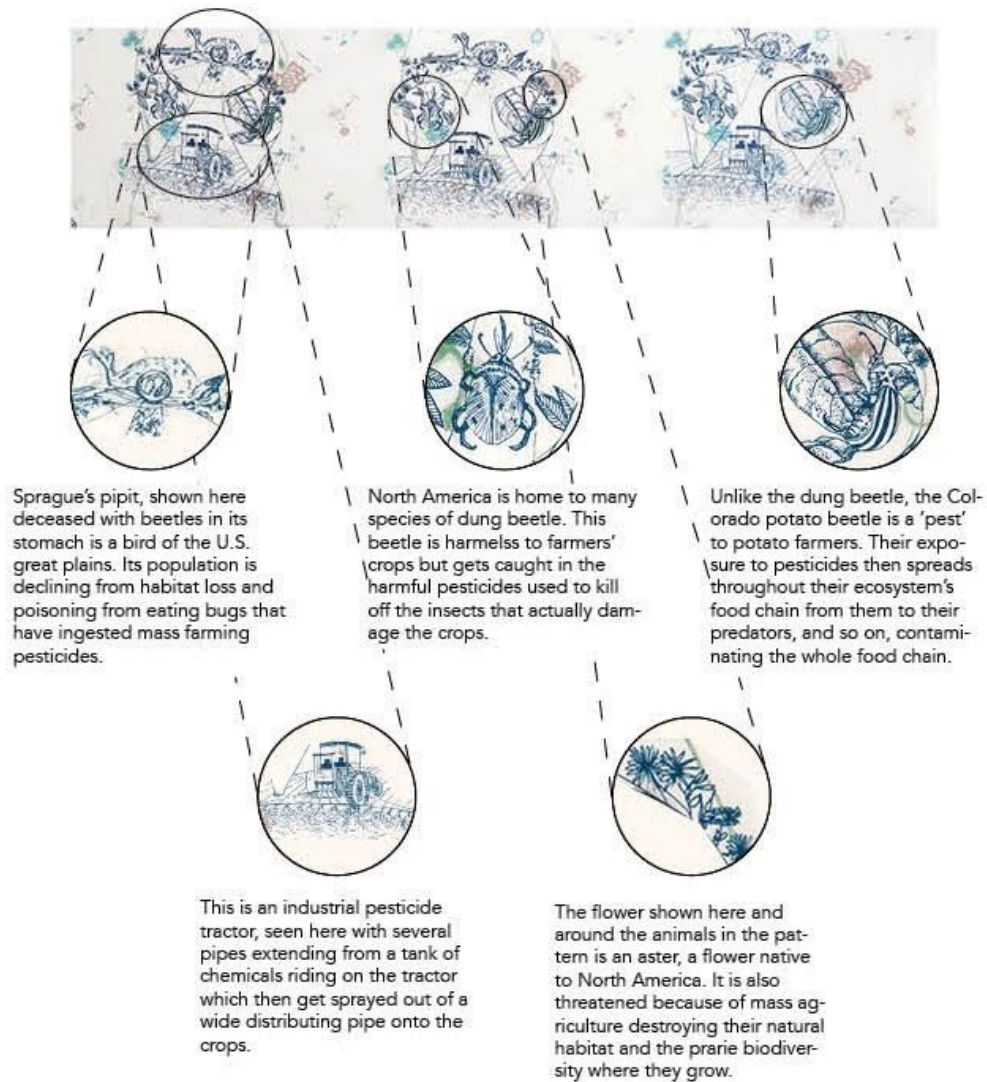
The end product of all of this work consists of three large scale screen printed textiles and three digitally printed textile pattern designs. Each piece is embedded with symbols and motifs that create the story for that particular aspect of big food industry's environmental impact.

In order to assist my audience in gleaning the information I intended from each piece, I created a map with a guide to every symbol used in every piece; where it's found and what it means. Below is the full textile shown, the emphasis in this image being on the repeat pattern and overall effect of the screen print repeat. In order to get the full information about the contents of the pattern, looking at the map section (pages 14, 16, 18, 19, & 20) that corresponds with its matching pattern is necessary.



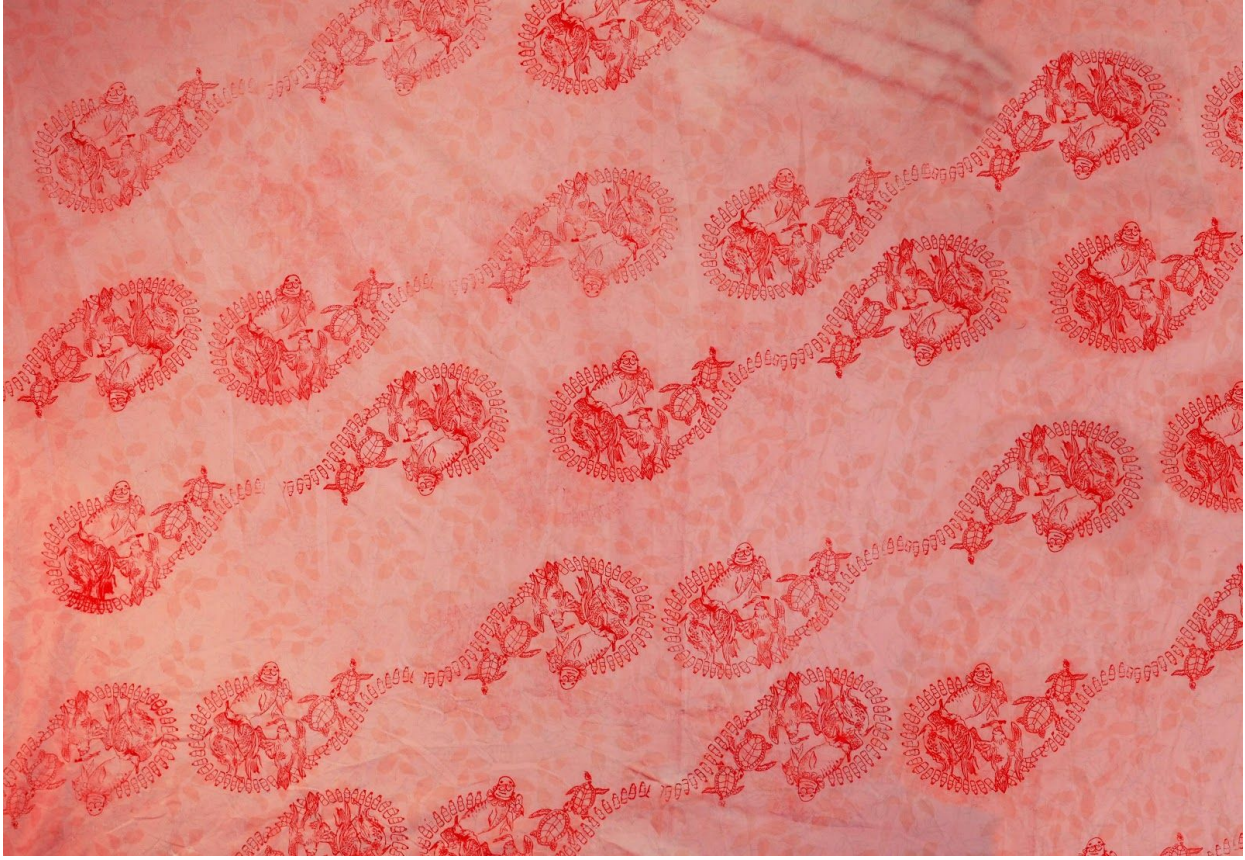
*Full scale image of Industrial Farming Toile.  
Source: Abby Olsen*





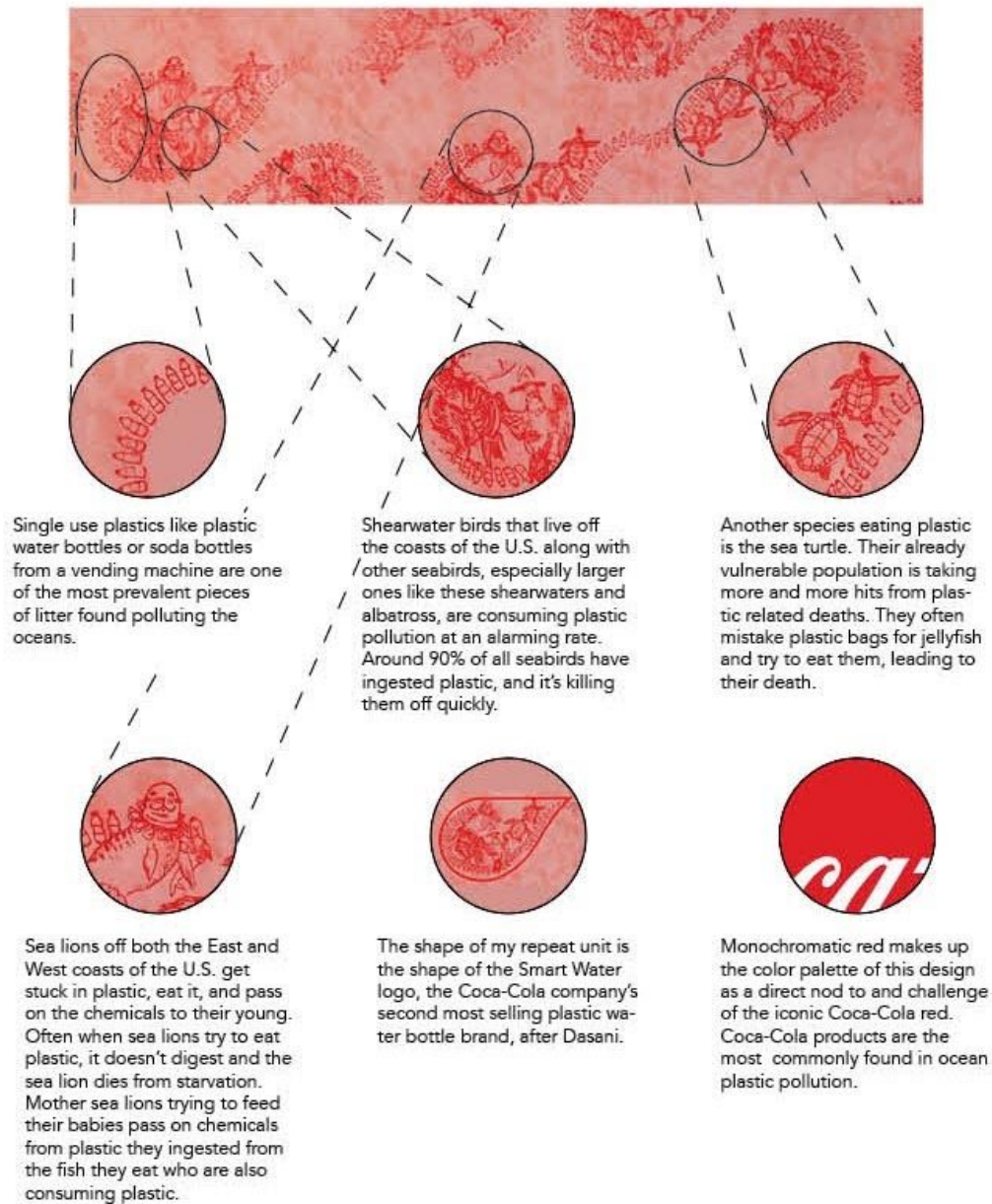
*The Industrial Farming Toile section of the symbols map of Food Chain. Each circle contains a symbol or image used in the repeat unit zoomed in and with a caption explaining its relevance.*

*Source: Abby Olsen*



*Full scale image of Cola Ocean.*

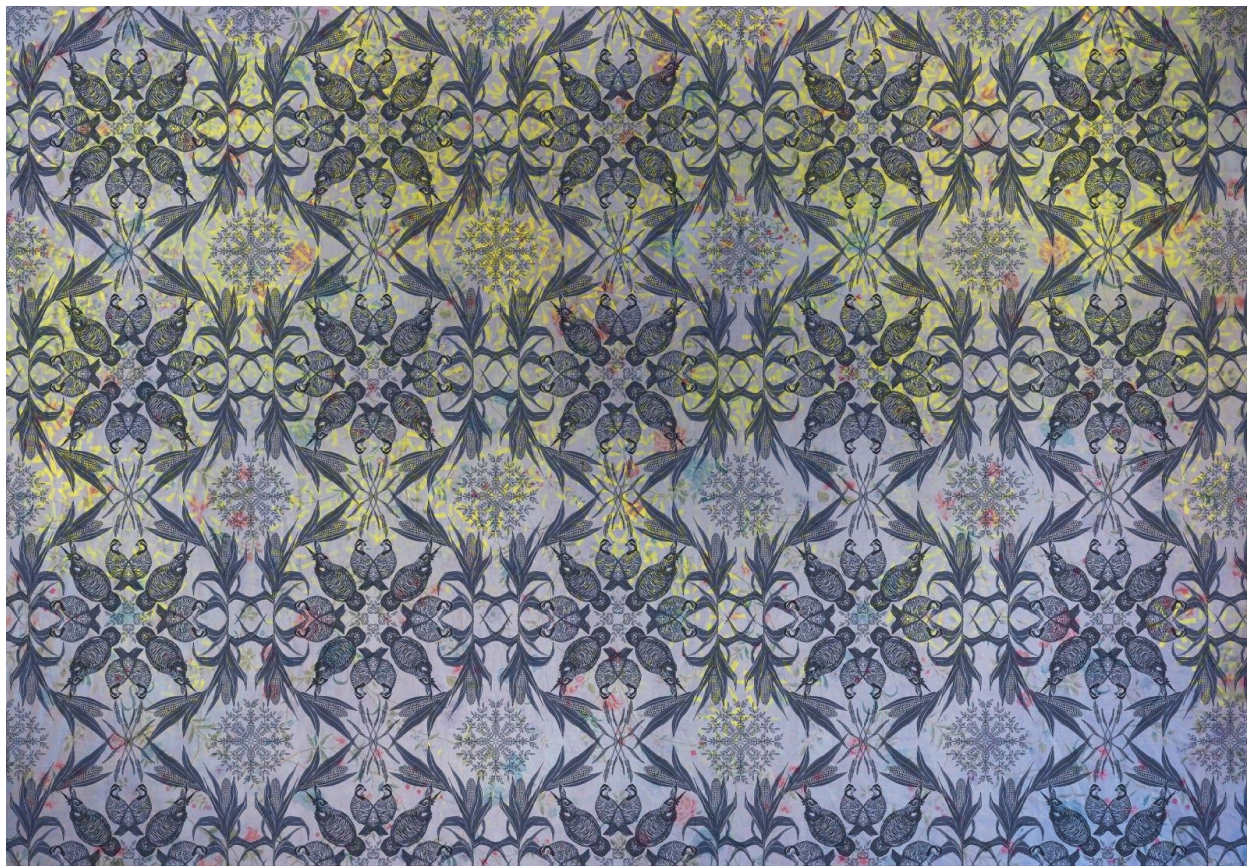
*Source: Abby Olsen*



*Cola Ocean's section of the map.*

*Source: Abby Olsen*





*Full scale image of Great Plains (Walmart)*

*Source: Abby Olsen*



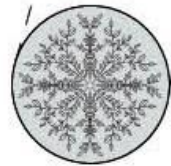
The greater prairie chicken is one of the most threatened birds of North America because of habitat loss due to large scale farming.



The bobwhite quail is also a threatened bird of the great plains in the U.S., dying off for the same reasons as the prairie chicken.



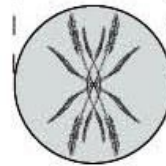
Corn is in high demand as a crop of North America. It is used to produce corn syrup, corn starch, and corn flour as well as able to be eaten plain or canned. The high demand for corn products in most of the food we eat means that it is one of the mass produced crops responsible for the destruction of native prairie habitat.



The design above is made up of soy bean leaves. Again, soy is one of the most prevalent mass produced crops in the U.S.



This yellow repeated symbol is representative of Walmart's six pronged yellow logo. Walmart is the largest produce distributor in the U.S., meaning that they benefit most from mass agriculture, and they perpetuate these harmful farming practices regardless of its negative effects on the environment. They are able to sell their products for such low prices because of their focus on quantity over quality, and using cheap methods of mass production. These cheap methods are often the most destructive to nature.

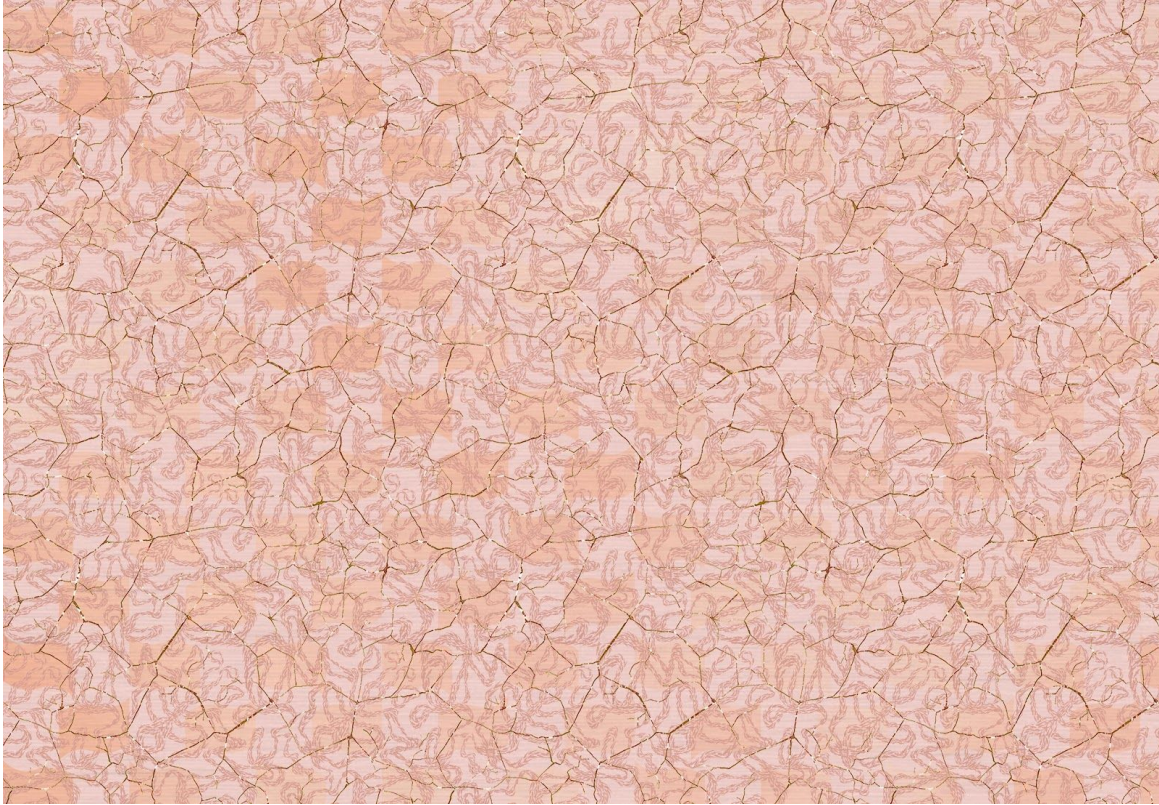


Wheat is also represented in this design. Think about how many food and drink products utilize wheat as a main ingredient. Similar to soy and corn, wheat crops dominate the Midwestern U.S. meaning that wheat is a key crop destroying the habitat for many native species of the great plains.

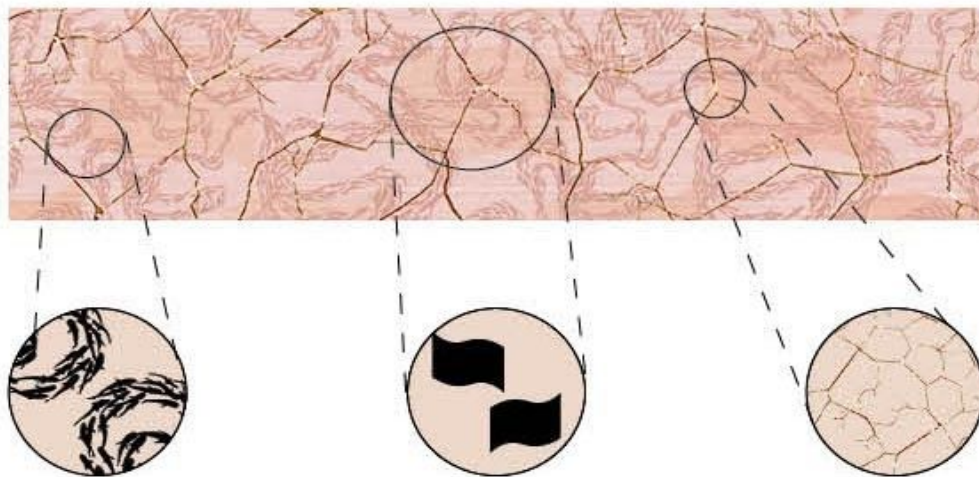
*Great Plains (Walmart)'s section of the map.*

*Source: Abby Olsen*





*Full scale image of Nestle Fish.  
Source: Abby Olsen*



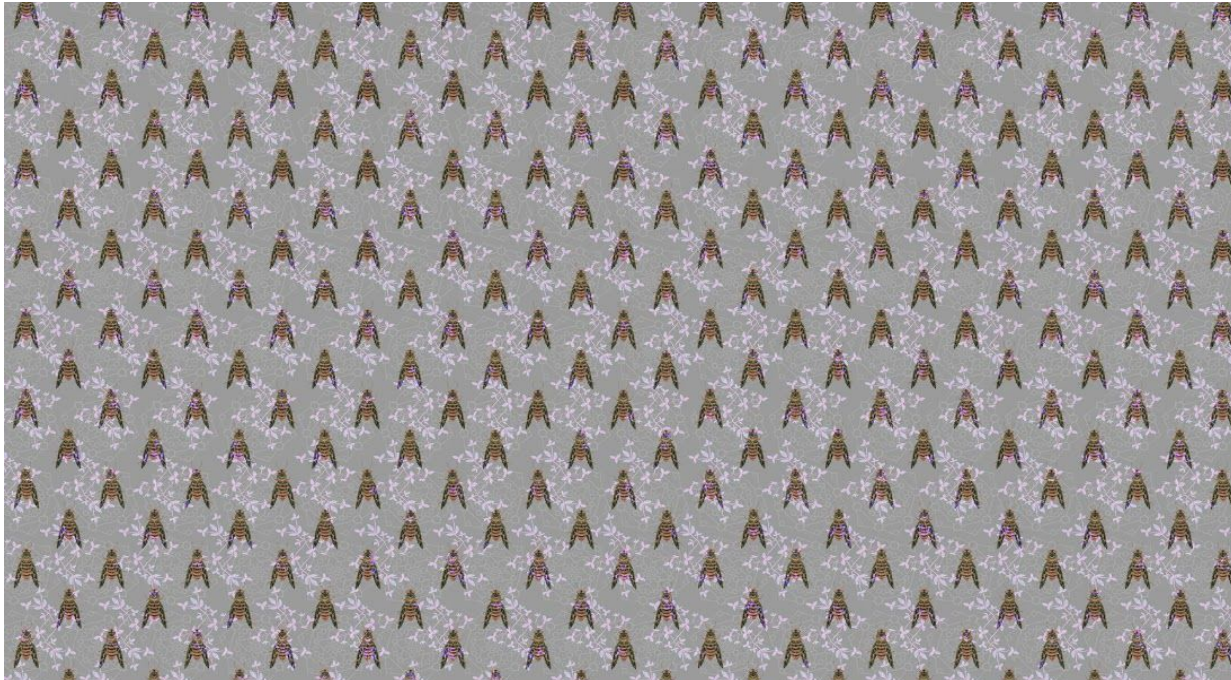
The fish shown swimming here is called the speckled dace. This is the species of fish that disappeared from the San Bernardino forest ecosystem in the early 2000's due to draught caused by excessive water extraction.

Subtly in the background of this pattern is a checkered repeat of the silhouette of the Nestle Pure Life logo. This is the product that Nestle took the water from San Bernardino for.

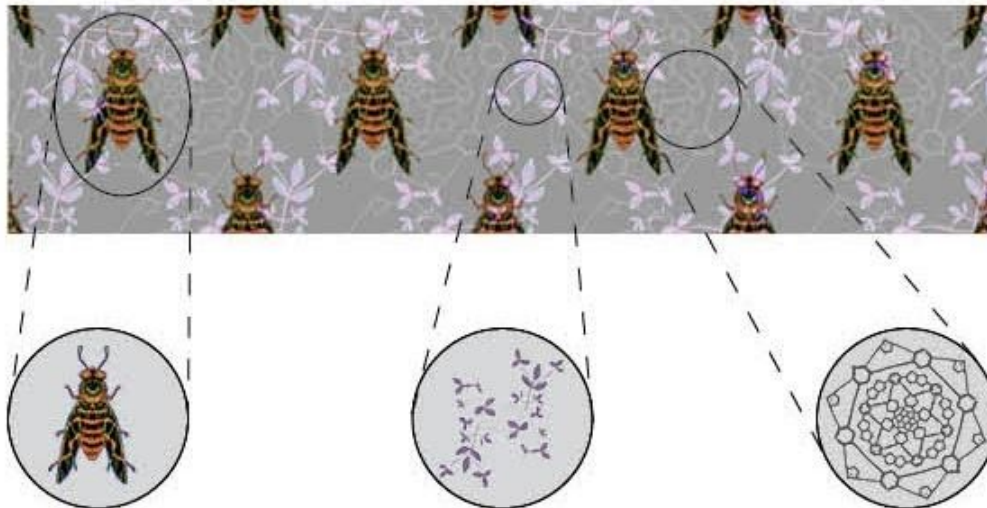
The gold lines across the top of the pattern show dried cracked earth that you would find at the site of a dried up stream.

*Nestle Fish's section of the map.  
Source: Abby Olsen*





*Full scale image of Bayer Bees.  
Source: Abby Olsen*



Honey bees and other pollinators are essential to the North American ecosystem. Mass farming practices are threatening their species because of pesticide use and loss of habitat.

One of the most prevalent crops in North America is soy. Methods used to grow and farm this plant are detrimental to pollinators because the mass planting of one crop in one place reduces native biodiversity, making it almost impossible for native species to continue to live there.

This is a hexagonal take on the atomic makeup of a popular neonicotinoid-acetamaprid. These are the types of pesticides killing bees at the fastest rate.

*Bayer Bees' section of the map.  
Source: Abby Olsen*

Along with the images of the textile repeats only, I created HD interior home spaces and inserted my images as wallpaper in each of them. This gives my audience a concrete idea of the intended use of these pieces. They are ultimately meant to be decorative wall hangings in interior spaces, occupying the corners of people's vision, but never the center of attention.



*Bayer Bees wallpaper seen here in an alcove off of a master bedroom.  
Source: Abby Olsen*





*Industrial Farming Toile on the stately walls of a traditional country dining room.  
Source: Abby Olsen*



*Great Plains (Walmart) as an accent wall of a breakfast nook.  
Source: Abby Olsen*

## Conclusion

Food Chain highlights a few very specific ways that corporate greed in the big food industry is destroying wildlife in North America. Most people in the United States are passive consumers who participate in the destruction of our environment through supporting companies like Nestle, Coca Cola, and Walmart. These giants of the food industry have monopolized how we consume and purchase food in the U.S., making our unknowing participation in their system almost unavoidable. Unless we educate ourselves and take responsibility for our shopping habits, we continue to be a part of this destructive system. Through viewing and learning about Food Chain, my audience should begin to think about their individual purchasing habits in relation to the brands represented, and connect the dots between their purchases and the suffering of wildlife.

An important part of this project was me taking responsibility for my role in the future of sustaining the planet. Being an artist and a young person in 2020 means facing a future of restructuring our existence to undo the damage to the Earth generations before us caused. Where does a creative profession fit into this future canon? As someone entering a field of making, creating, and designing physical objects it's essential to keep the environment in mind. Especially in the context of home interiors, living spaces, it's crucial to my point of view as an artist and human to be incorporating nature and preaching its value through my work. Food Chain was a way for me to start carving out a space for myself in the world of environmental art and design. Using recycled materials like the ones in this series has started to play an important role in the way I think about creating new things, and will become an increasingly crucial part of the way artists and designers think in the future. Food Chain points me toward using my artistic practice to help myself and those who come in contact with my work to rethink our current way of existing on Earth and move toward a more sustainable way of being.

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