



Flora Artificialis

Bailey Geraldine Yonkman
University of Michigan
BFA, Spring 2022

Introduction

Are we uncomfortable with the natural flow of life, instead ignorantly celebrating the eternal? Are we taking away the meaning and beauty of nature? *Flora Artificialis* is an installation of framed compositions including artificial and real plants. The series creates a space where the dualities of artificial (eternal) and real (natural) intersect with people in the middle.

This series was inspired by my interest in conscious consumption, and nature's impact within my life. Initially, the project focused on celebrating the outdoors' beauty through landfill reduction by sourcing materials second-hand (i.e the fake plants, frames & mirrors). However, as I worked, I began to question the intentions behind creating artificial flora. Humans bring nature into our spaces to feel more connected to it, yet in doing so through artificial reproduction, we actually create a larger disconnect. The installation brings light to the irony of the materials as they never die, unlike true nature where death is also the beauty of life.

I am an artist with a concentration in graphic design, illustration, and environmental studies. My inspirations for creating derive from our earthly experience and the beauty we encounter within our environments.

Contextual Discussion

The Nature + Human Connection

When stepping out into the great outdoors, you're greeted with lush forests, glistening water, and fresh air. Nothing can compare to the feeling of being fully immersed in nature, there is a reason we are so drawn to it. Especially in a time post-industrial revolution where so many find themselves immersed in corporate lifestyles away from natural environments. I discovered some research titled "A Comparative Study of the Physiological and Psychological Effects of Forest Bathing on Working Age People With and Without Depressive Tendencies". The scientists behind the study had subjects participate in day-long sessions of forest bathing at a forest therapy base located in Hiroshima. The results showed that with around 2 hours of forest bathing exposure a day successfully improved the physiological and psychological health of the participants.¹ So these disconnects we have with nature can harbor real effects on our bodies and mental health. Wanting to bring greenery back into our spaces isn't an abnormal desire, and has been happening for centuries.²

¹ Furuyashiki, Akemi et al. "A comparative study of the physiological and psychological effects of forest bathing (Shinrin-yoku) on working age people with and without depressive tendencies." *Environmental health and preventive medicine* vol. 24,1 46. 22 Jun. 2019.

² Jacq Barber, "Potted history of houseplants in our houses and collections", *National Trust*.

Bringing Nature into Our Spaces

Ever since humanity moved indoors, there has been a desire to bridge the divide. Florists create arrangements by using plants, painters will capture the beauty of an awe-inspiring landscape, and stores will sell a surplus of artificial plant decor for every season. There are many ways in which people have discovered how to bring nature back into our spaces. One artist, Alexandra Kehayoglou, has a creative practice consisting of textile sculptures and carpets that address topics of climate change and simulate visuals of nature.



Right: Fig. 1, Kehayoglou, "Shelter for a memory II", 2016, 206 x 140 cm, textile tapestry (handtuft system), wool.

Flora Artificialis



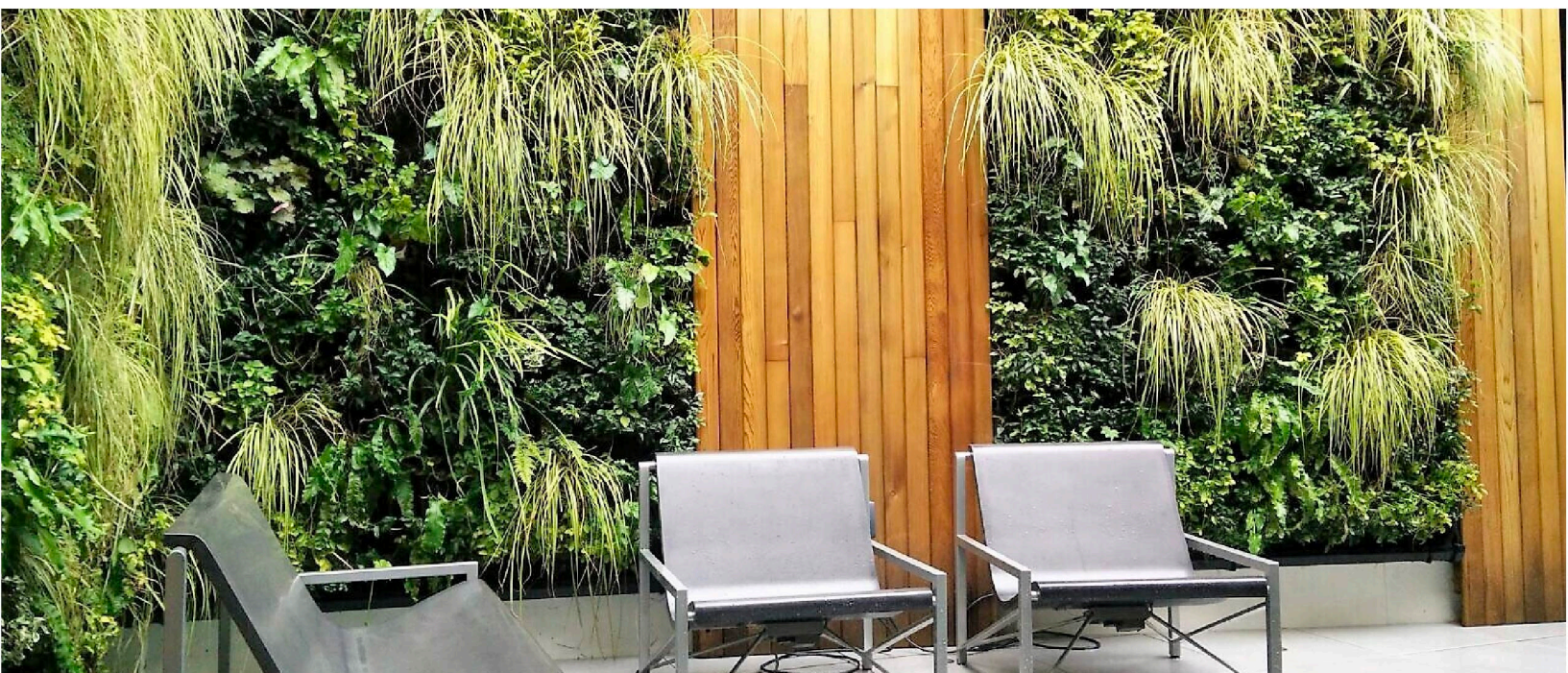
Left: Fig. 2, Kehayoglou, "Senderos Series", 2014-2015, varied sizes, textile tapestry (handtuft system), wool.

Right: Fig. 3, Kehayoglou, "Stele", 2015, 390 x230 cm, textile tapestry (handtuft system), wool.

A majority of her pieces convey an appearance of moss formations and grasses through the different textures she forms. I found this work inspiring because it's an unconventional way to integrate nature into our living spaces, especially in the realm of interior design.

Another recently popular artistic practice is eco-design, something I was introduced to in my Green Building class. Living walls are often displayed as large-scale works within commercial spaces aiming to lighten the workspace and make it more enjoyable for those who spend time there. These walls are typically panels of plants, grown vertically using hydroponics, on structures that can be either free-standing or attached to walls. My series strikes resemblance

Below: Fig. 4, Scotscape, 2020.



Flora Artificialis

to these types of designs, but takes on a different method of incorporating greenery. Using products stemming from a desire to create 'plants that never die' are what make up *Flora Artificialis*. The beginning of modern synthetic foliage began in the 1960s alongside plastic and polyester production. One of the first mass-produced artificial flora products was a nylon-based grass that sought to mimic a "neatly clipped lawn".³

Contemplative Practices with Martha Travers

Outside of artwork, *Flora Artificialis* draws from other inspiration as well. While working on developing a project for IP, I was simultaneously taking two classes instructed by Martha Travers called "Finding Your Way" and "Contemplative Practices". Martha Travers' courses encouraged introspection on the human-nature connection and has provided me a foundation to explore through journaling and meditation. I began delving into ethical themes of conscious consumption, cradle-to-grave systems, and plastic & textile pollution. Writing prompts like "What are your values?", "What principles do you live by?", "Describe your experience of the natural world", and "Describe your relationship with the elements" initiated my realizations of the irony behind my materials. An article from Horti, a house plant business, put my personal realizations into words saying,

"If you think about the ideology behind fake plants, it's one that values appearance over nurtured growth. Buying into this belief ignores why we're drawn to plants in the first place—because they matter to our lives. They form the foundation of ecosystems on land and underwater and they create the air we breathe".

How could someone who feels connected to the elements, be a consumer of plastic-plant products? How could one fall into this illusion, that purchasing artificial flora is a solution to feeling disconnected from nature? Especially when considering the purpose of plantlife—to purify our air. It's an interesting paradox... realizing that "artificial plants could release volatile organic compounds and are potential dust magnets. These plants, when inserted into 'non-living "substrate" lack the advantage of soil bacteria that can break down any biodegradable parts of the trapped particles, which includes most of the dangerous chemicals".⁵ So here I am on a mission to upcycle these products and prompt reflection on their existence.

³ Horti, "What's so bad about artificial plants?", Brooklyn, NY: Horti.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Sonia Singha, "Plastic nature: The irony of fake plants in our homes", Medium.

Methodology

The beginning of my IP journey looked very different from where it ended up. Coming into IP as a graphic designer, there was this preconceived notion that what I made had to be a product driven by entrepreneurial efforts. The fall semester consisted of a project rooted in similar ideologies, but channeled through a different medium; I initially planned on creating a card deck and book called In-Take. The In-Take card deck had the user reflect on the many ways they consume (i.e. mind, body, and spirit), and inspire them to become conscious & sustainable about it. When presenting this to the winter panel, I received feedback and criticism on how including so many facets of consumption was actually taking away from the depth of the experience. Being perceived as superficial was the exact opposite effect I was aiming for, so I was then encouraged to zoom in on one aspect of consumption, and really expand on it.

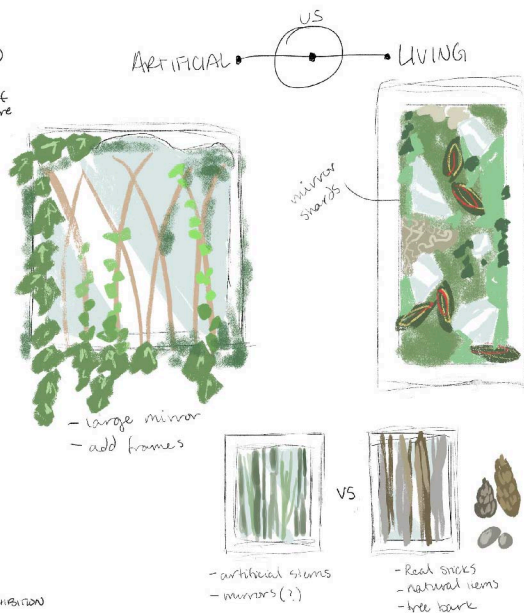
The series

exploring the intersections of humans' admiration of nature and ironic expression of it.



- artificial plants
- moss (in between)

? DEAD PLANTS IN FRAMES
LIVING PLANTS IN FRAMES
* LIVING FLOWERS/PLANTS @ EXHIBITION



I decided to step back and approach IP in a completely different mindset, seeing this as an opportunity to try something new. This is when I decided to translate my 2-dimensional graphic design methodologies into a more physical experience. With Stamps providing us studios to have an installation, I felt called to create something that would engage the audience in a more impactful way. I chose to expand upon consumption through an environmental lens with an emphasis on plants. Exploring the

preservation of it, the polluting of it, and the longing of having it around and within our spaces. The overall way in which I went about this project was an organic progression of planning, making and finalizing. I had some method to the madness by establishing a general outline of my vision. Making note of the materials, and planning what needed to be done so I could begin creating. However, I personally like to see where life takes me, so the series was birthed by a go-with-the-flow mentality.

Above: Fig. 5, sketch of generic idea for new project.

Accumulating Materials

I knew I wanted to be as sustainable as possible and integrate landfill reduction, so I decided to source my materials through donations and shopping second hand. Through posting on facebook, I received a large amount of donated artificial plants, flowers, and trees that would have otherwise been thrown out. I also was able to incorporate some of my own belongings into the work, like frames, mirrors, and plants. With being provided some grant money from STAMPS, I was able to purchase materials like the preserved mosses, glues, and frames.

Right: Fig. 6, myself and the donated materials I had to work with.



When out thrifting, I would always be looking for frames that had details and ornate design. The intention behind choosing ornate frames over regular ones was to physically symbolize humanity's celebration of nature, and how we put it on display for its beauty. Similarly for the mirrors within some of the pieces, I'm symbolizing our place within these narratives, as we're a part of the bigger picture.

Left: Fig. 7, original thrifted Madison Clock.



Middle: Fig. 8, repainted Madison Clock to fit into series.



Right: Fig. 9, in progress of "Beauty in Death".



Creation Process

When it's time to design a composition, I take a moment to gather the frames and flora that I'd like to use. When matching flora to a frame, I take into consideration the character of the materials and feel what energy they give off. If there was an obvious synch and/or match in my mind, I would pair materials together. For example, when making "Hanging Wisteria", the base mirror is made of a material that reminds me of stone and castle ruins - something that I would categorize as whimsical. When considering plants that provide a similar feeling, I immediately thought of wisteria, so then I decided that they would work together to form a final composition. I also added individual florets from the artificial dead hydrangea to push the 'ruins' aspect of the frame; showing the 'decay' of passing time and simultaneous overgrowth of it.

Once I match the materials, I then prepare them for construction by disassembling frames, and wire cutting the artificial flora. A majority of the frames had pre-installed art prints with secured backings. Figuring out how to effectively remove the backings without damaging it was a process I learned as I went, as I've never done it before and had to be careful with how I did it. If the flora had a joint base, I would cut it so I could have individual stalks rather than a big bouquet. By doing this, it was easier for me to have control over where and how the plant could adhere to the frame-base.

After preparing the materials comes the harder part, deciding placement. This process was a balance of intuition and underlying knowledge of gestalt principles. I wanted each piece to have an individual theme and not look as if I simply threw material onto the canvas and called it 'done!'. Like I mentioned earlier, I would work with the characteristics of the materials to help the decisions of placement. The length of making would vary depending on the scale and my indecisions - some compositions would take 4 hours, where others took 9 hours. However as I worked, I definitely became more comfortable creating with my materials as I was figuring out what was successful and what wasn't. For example, when filling the background with moss, I found that cutting the sheet moss into specific shapes made the process much more efficient, compared to gathering the individual mosses onto areas of hot glue.

Flora Artificialis



Top: Fig. 10, timelapse stills from the making of "Bed of Wildflowers".

Bottom: Fig. 11, timelapse stills from the making of "Purple Petals".

Flora Artificialis



Top: Fig. 12, placement and process of "Hanging Wisteria".

Middle: Fig. 13, placement and process of "Evergreens".

Bottom: Fig. 14, placement and process of "A Symbol of Love".

Finalizing and Installing

After finishing all my frames, I began to digitally ideate what the installation space would look like. Originally, my exhibition space was to have 3 walls, but due to the nature of my project I switched spaces so one wall could be windows. I felt my themes could be better explored in an area where the outdoors become a part of the series as well, hence why there are two frames on the windows.



Right: Fig. 15, sketches for installation.

When beginning the physical installation process, I ran into a couple unsuspected problems. I knew how I wanted things to look, but figuring out how to suspend a tree branch and ivy curtains without damaging the space took some brainstorming. There was also a moment of distress when I brought in the carpet and realized it was smaller than intended and planned for. That is when I realized the space would need more activation in order to provide the proper experience. Reflection through mirror-work is a theme within the series, so I decided to bring in the mirror that I personally use for this practice. By placing it across from the wall, viewers can see the work from a different perspective by sitting on the ground and viewing its reflections, as well as their own. It also helped balance out the negative space of the white walls, as well as hide some outlets. To create a smoother transition from the carpet to the walls and floors, I brought in some tree stumps to place along the corners. I added ivy around these so the floor could also feel as if it's a part of the series. There was still a spare tree branch, some house plants, and artificial greenery that I felt could be the final touches. So I went and thrifted two pots that tied in the frames from the series, and added them to space, and then it was complete.

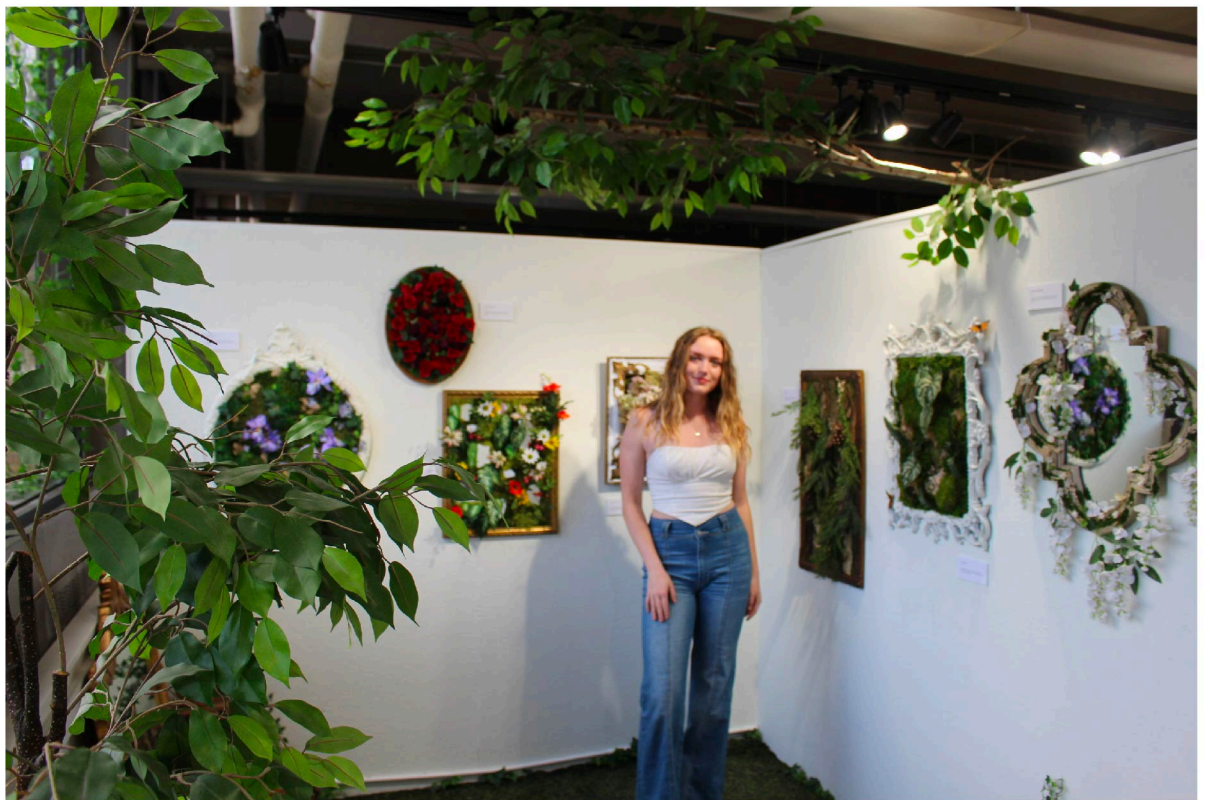
Flora Artificialis



Top: Fig. 16, wide view of exhibition space.

Bottom: Fig. 17, ground level view of mirror.

Flora Artificialis



Top: Fig. 18, view of window-side wall.

Bottom: Fig. 19, context of viewer for size of art.

Creative Work

In the end, *Flora Artificialis* became a series of seven framed compositions. "Purple Petals", "A Symbol of Love", "Bed of Wildflowers", "Beauty in Death", "Evergreens", "Forest Floor", and "Hanging Wisteria".



Above: Fig. 20, view of artwork on left wall.

Flora Artificialis



Top: Fig. 21, view of artwork on right wall.

Left: Fig. 22, viewer engaging with "Hanging Wisteria".

Right: Fig. 23, artwork reflected through mirror.

Flora Artificialis



Top: Fig. 24, "Purple Petals".
Bottom: Fig. 25, "Forest Floor".

Flora Artificialis



Left: Fig. 26, "Bed of Wildflowers."

Right: Fig. 27, "Beauty in Death"

Conclusion

Flora Artificialis was a project unlike any that I have done in the past two years, especially as a student specializing in graphic design. This entire IP experience has reminded me that my personal art practice has no limits. I have re-instilled confidence as an artist – confidence that I have felt dwindling over the past couple years. I have proven to myself that I am capable of learning from mistakes and adapting to change. I learned that it's okay to start fresh, and sometimes it's for the best. When I was rethinking my project back in winter 2021, the best thing I did for myself was choosing to acknowledge the stagnance in my project, and act upon it by doing something different. At the moment I was worried about being perceived as 'quitting' or 'giving up', but in reality, making this decision helped me get out of doing a project that I was failing to give my all to.

Coming out of this, my appreciation for living plants has significantly grown. After working with these artificial materials and reflecting on my conscious consumption ethics, I have recognized that the easy way does not equal the right way. It may be easier to buy something knowing we don't need to give it attention, but that act of consumption directly supports a products life cycle where materials cannot return to the earth in a safe way. Giving purpose back to these discarded materials that were once desired, without fore-thought of where they'd end up, has been rewarding; particularly because these materials (plastics and textiles) are some of the leading pollutants on our planet. Moving forth in my creative practice, I plan to continue these series when opportunity (i.e. materials) arise.

Bibliography

Barber, Jacq. "Potted history of houseplants in our houses and collections", *National Trust*.

Furuyashiki, Akemi et al. "A comparative study of the physiological and psychological effects of forest bathing (Shinrin-yoku) on working age people with and without depressive tendencies." *Environmental health and preventive medicine* vol. 24,1 46. 22. Jun. 2019.

Horti, "What's so bad about artificial plants?", Brooklyn, NY: *Horti*. Accessed Jan, 2022.

Kehayoglou, Alexandra. "Shelter for a memory II", 2016, 206 x 140 cm, textile tapestry (handtuft system), wool.

Kehayoglou, Alexandra. "Senderos Series", 2014-2015, varied sizes, textile tapestry (handtuft system), wool.

Kehayoglou, Alexandra. "Stele", 2015, 390 x230 cm, textile tapestry (handtuft system), wool.

Scotscape. Untitled Image, 2020.

Singha, Sonia. "Plastic nature: The irony of fake plants in our homes", *Medium*.