

WHAT I LIVED FOR

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by  
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## I. INTRODUCTION

*What I Lived For* is an appropriated portion of a chapter title in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. It is in this chapter that Thoreau proclaims “ I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived”<sup>1</sup>. This famous statement is quoted often, as it captures the yearning to connect to nature that so many people express. This quote which both inspired my thesis body of work and then became an ironic commentary on the same. The quote's popularity itself becomes ironic, as those desires are not typically acted upon; it is often the sentiment behind the idea or the projection of this yearning that fills a person's need. The title, therefore, underlines the irony of what is otherwise a body of beautiful, oversized art jewelry pieces. It is not always practical to venture out into the woods, as one typically finds that a true encounter with nature can be uncomfortable, nor would the wearer of this work ever choose to adventure into those woods while donning any of these statement pieces. Instead it is the construction of a person's identity that is transmitted in each piece, full of valid importance yet void of practical application.

## II. FROM BIOPHELIA TO IDENTITY

Prior to starting the body of work that makes up *What I Lived for*, I had been creating art pieces that depicted wildflowers. Those small scale sculptures functioned as adornments for the outsides of buildings, cracked pavement, and even as home decor despite their weedy and wild appearance. I began to dive deeper into the idea of adornment while contemplating my own interest in biophilia<sup>2</sup>, and my personal assertion that nature was a pivotal player in my own life. By placing the wildflower adornments on the body, I would activate the forms. On the body they functioned as a form of identity,

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<sup>1</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Radford: Wilder, 2008), 56.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson in his book *Biophilia* defines the term on the first page of his prologue as “the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes.” A narrow definition at first, he continues to explain that “to the degree that we come to understand other organisms, we will place a greater value on them, and on ourselves.” The rest of the book builds on Wilson's experiences connecting with the natural world and the ways he saw his communion with the world increased his appreciation for it, simultaneously increasing his quality of life. Edward Wilson, *Biophilia*, 1-2.

as the works of art were objects to be worn when a person wished to transmit their ideals and be noticed. The small scale sculptures and building adornments were most successful when the viewer connected to the work through a gained appreciation of nature. By considering the body as site for conceptual artwork, the wearer believes in the work, and the viewer must simply take it in.

A self-proclaimed “lover of nature,” I began to make work that reflected this yearning to connect to the natural world around me. I live on a busy interstate route and have little time, which limits my interactions with nature. In Henry David Thoreau's essay *Walking*, he states that “Life consists with wildness... Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him.”<sup>3</sup> Such thoughts are inspiring to read, yet how often was I being refreshed by the wild's presence? But in the same essay he proclaims, “If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again-- if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man-- then you are ready for a walk.”<sup>4</sup> Evidently no one is ready to experience walking “as it should be practiced” in the mind of that famous transcendentalist. Instead of waiting for the day when all conditions would be right and could access an easily identifiable “wild,” I walked where I could walk- along the same route outside my residence.

My walking preferences sparked my research into biophilia as practiced in urban settings. In urban biophilia, there seemed to be two approaches. One, an approach proposed by Grant Revell and Martin Anda in their essay *Urban Biophilia*, where cities can be planned and architecture can be set aside as green space (possibly in the form of “greenskins”, or living architectures within a city structure<sup>5</sup>). The other approach came from Richard Reynolds' *On Guerrilla Gardening*, a book which explores a citizen's approach to creating plant growth in already present cities that need a face lift. Essentially the book proposes that purposeful planting in odd and unexpected places better the

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3 Henry David Thoreau, “Walking,” in *Nature and Walking*, ed. ReadaClassic. (ReadaClassic.com, 2011), 62.

4 Thoreau, “Walking” 47.

5 Grant Revell and Martin Anda, “Sustainable Urban Biophilia: The Case of Greenskins for Urban Density,” *Sustainability* 6 (2014): 1, accessed January 27, 2015, doi:10.3390/su6085423.



communities in which the planting occurs, while also providing that contact with nature that becomes rare in such places. According to Reynolds, the “guerrilla gardener” (or the person who gardens on land not necessarily owned by him or herself) fights against scarcity and neglect of the land<sup>6</sup>. Land is a “finite resource”<sup>7</sup> and therefore any abandoned or uncared for land can be interpreted as “wasted space,”<sup>8</sup> which aesthetically detracts from a community. Reynolds calls for people to reclaim the responsibility of caring for and improving the visual aspect of their cities through this revolutionary form of gardening.

My walks along the state route did not lead me to activism as much as they lead me to an appreciation of what was already around me. I was able to find myself surrounded by “nature” even in abandoned lots. The first step to processing this was through the creation of building adornments. I would appropriate images of wildflowers, often considered to be weeds in a garden. I would place the object I made in places where those plants grew, but adorned them with gold leaf or brightly saturated colors to increase the value of their presence. Soon, however, I had the desire to move away from what I began to describe as my “billboard” style of adornment. It was a style which only fully functioned if it “converted” the viewer. By creating a series of works which morphed into this project *What I Lived for*, I shifted the “plinth”<sup>9</sup> back to the body, so that the only person responsible for connecting with the imagery would be the wearer of the work itself. The work would instead transmit identity. It would still have impact and would still be open for others to appreciate, successful even when viewed by those who do not experience the notion of biophilia.

Even as I began to create these much more self-reflexive and personal art jewelry pieces, I realized that the investigations into biophilia that I had started were less relevant to the work than I

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6 Richard Reynolds, *On Guerrilla Gardening: A Handbook for Gardening Without Boundries* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008), 61.

7 Reynolds, *Guerrilla*, 62.

8 Reynolds, *Guerrilla*, 71.

9 or “the primary space on an within which an object is placed on view, typically with a protective transparent cover or vitrine.” Damien Skinner, “Plinth,” in *Contemporary Jewelry in Perspective*, ed. Damien Skinner. (New York: Lark, 2013), 39.

originally thought. Instead, as the work came together, I realized that I should be looking into themes of beauty, spectacle, fashion and finding the way these fit together. The works function together to form an individual's narrative. Referencing the work of Cindy Sherman, I wear the works in photographs to assist the overall narrative, but I am not creating a series of self portraits<sup>10</sup>. The need to project identity versus self actualization and realization did not translate as one in the same. Though at first troublesome, after reflecting on the human tendency to proclaim life's successes to others, be it in the old fashioned photo albums that get pulled out and passed around at family functions, or the current tendency to document successes via social media outlets, this work actually captures the timeless tendency to promote the image we wish to project to others.

### III. WHAT I LIVED FOR SERIES

*What I Lived for*, while based and inspired by the notion of biophilia, more effectively transmits (and therefore discusses the nature of) identity and the need to communicate or showcase facets of personality to others. This can be explained by the musings of Christopher Dresser<sup>11</sup> who “stressed 'the power of ornament to express feelings and ideas.' (and) argued that the allegorical symbolism dear to all Victorians could be more successfully embodied in abstract form”<sup>12</sup>. Essentially, through the abstraction of ideas and images, one could successfully create a design that would “express the sentiments of the age,”<sup>13</sup> instead of telling a specific story in the details that one must work to decode. The works created for this series, though created through the merging of multiple images, transmit a feeling generated from the entire piece as described above instead of deriving its meaning in the supporting details. Due to the complexity of issues of identity and the desire to ensure public awareness of it, the purpose of these pieces becomes twofold: while one chooses to own and wear each elaborate

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10 Fig. 1. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #466*, 2008, Chromogenic color print, 8' 1 1/8 x 63 15/16." The Museum of Modern Art, New York. [www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1170](http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1170) (accessed April 18, 2015).

11 Christopher Dresser was an industrial designer renowned for his patterning design abilities which often showcased embellished and abstracted images from botany.

12 Widar Halen, “In Pursuit of Truth, Beauty, and Power,” in *Christopher Dresser, A Pioneer of Modern Design*, (Phaidon, 1993), 26.

13 Halen, *Pursuit*, 26.

piece because of the visual and theoretical content that they embody, they also desire to own and wear the work to communicate this identity to others. This raises the question, is identity personal or projected? Is it only important if others can digest it accurately? And is the projection of interests more important than the interests themselves?

The subject matter sent to the viewer from each piece gains additional meaning when the work is activated by the body. In the words of Damien Skinner, “Body as a place for jewelry display is both “a reference point and a vehicle”<sup>14</sup>. Each functional yet sculptural jewelry piece creates a personal habitat for the wearer, surrounding them with an imitation of the natural world to which they are drawn. Each piece is a collage, pieced together from specific wildflowers and plants. Like in the artist Cat Chow's dresses, such as *Measure for Measure*<sup>15</sup>, each work in this series has conceptual meaning in its overall design as well as the content expressed in the details. While the format for *Measure for Measure* takes the shape of a housewife's dress, constructed meaningfully out of a seamstress's measuring tape, the overall format for my work is reflective of already existing articles of jewelry or adornment. While comprised of images of wildflowers, both aspects are critical to the work's concept. I arrange various plant species to create patterns, making the work quite decorative and more open to imagination.

This notion of details supporting the overall form and concept is also reflected and supported through the use of decals in the form of wallpaper that accompany each piece. The decal designs are taken from the digital files used for the neck pieces and transmit a sentiment and connection to the work. The decal wallpaper is installed in vertical, floor to ceiling, three foot wide strips. It serves to visually frame as well as extend the jewelry pieces<sup>16</sup>.

Both the large scale of the jewelry and its visual content create a spectacle. This spectacle

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14 Damien Skinner, “Body,” in *Contemporary Jewelry in Perspective*, ed. Damien Skinner. (New York: Lark, 2013), 67.

15 Fig. 2. Cat Chow, *Measure for Measure*, 2003, measuring tapes, fishing line, buttons. 72 x 20 x 12 in. Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, Cedar Rapids. From: The Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, <http://www.crma.org/exhibition/Detail/Past/Cat-Chow-Material-Girl.aspx> (accessed April 2015).

16 Fig. 3 and 4.

attracts the attention of the viewer, but also keeps said viewer at a distance. The wearer desires to be noticed, while simultaneously distancing themselves from close contact with others. Elizabeth Fischer notes in her article *The Accessorized Ape* that “In shows and advertisements, jewelry has become a way of expanding the brand's message”<sup>17</sup>. Couldn't it be argued that whenever a person dons art jewelry, they are branding themselves with the content of the work? With identity, and the human desire to construct said identity for the public, a correlation between a person and an advertisement is not a radical notion.

To further understand the meaning of the work through issues of beauty and aesthetics, I turned to Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. In this text, aesthetics in art and nature are discussed, but more intriguing are Kant's ideas on what draws a person to an object and how an individual can assess and understand it. Kant discusses a person's conception of an object being “good,” linking the notion of “good” with interest (this interest being preexisting). He actually uses a flower as an example: “Flowers, free designs, lines aimlessly intertwined and called foliage: these have no significance, depend on no determinate concept, and yet we like them.”<sup>18</sup> This signifies that the power of an object relies on the person approaching it.

In Filip Kolen's essay *Symmetry: the Co-constitutive Between*, Kant's statements on personal interest creating an object's power are explained in depth. In the words of Kolen, “In (Kant's) Transcendental Philosophy, the center of the epistemological universe is changed from the object to the knowing subject”<sup>19</sup>. This is tested in my body of work through my arrangements of the wildflowers held dear to the wearer. The wearer of the work may not possess deep scientific understanding, yet their connection that attracted them to the work in the first place is to a certain degree based on an understanding or appreciation of the subject matter. For the wearer, this connection to the work is what

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17 Elizabeth Fischer, “The Accessorized Ape,” in *Contemporary Jewelry in Perspective*, ed. Damien Skinner. (New York: Lark, 2013) 205.

18 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 49.

19 Filip Kolen, “Symmetry: the Co-Constitutive Between,” in *Objectivity After Kant*, ed. Gertrudis Vand de Vijuer and Boris Demarest, (New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 2013), 58.

validates the art objects as appropriate for his or her own adornment.

Kant later continues in his *Critique of Judgment* that “whenever we make a judgment declaring something to be beautiful, we permit no one to hold a different opinion, even though we base our judgment only on our feeling rather than on concepts.”<sup>20</sup> The neck pieces created for this body of work do not rely on the acceptance or future appropriation of identity of others so much as the acceptance and enthusiasm of the wearer. The work itself is successful even if the viewer does not become a converted follower of beautiful nature. The wearer must adopt and transmit the imagery as identity, but seek to be an individual with such an identity. No one else need follow or maintain such ideals supposedly held dear to the wearer. The viewer's job is to take it in; the work functions with no regards to the satisfaction or instruction of the viewer, so long as the work catches the eye.

#### IV. WHAT I LIVED FOR- INDIVIDUAL WORKS

The work titled *Blooming Taxonomy*<sup>21</sup> is modeled after a feather boa. The name *Blooming Taxonomy* is a play on Bloom's Taxonomy<sup>22</sup> which was created to explain how one masters knowledge. Taxonomy in a broader sense refers to scientific classification, which is here applied to leaves and wildflowers. I created this “boa” using individual specimens identifiable through the use of taxonomic keys<sup>23</sup>. The linear and linked format of the work can be interpreted as both a system of documentation or a time-line, representing when and where the plants grew or the times when they were collected. *Blooming Taxonomy* is different from the rest of the works as it has kinetic movement through the linking mechanism which creates a chain. This allows the piece to function as a feather boa, which can be used to send a variety of messages depending on the wearer's mood and movements. Feather boas have been used by entertainers to enhance their movements or through the manipulation of the prop, send a message. While feathers have been reserved for royalty and the social elite due to the scarcity

<sup>20</sup> Kant, *Critique*, 89.

<sup>21</sup> Fig. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Table 1. Sarah E. Boslaugh, “Bloom's Taxonomy,” *Salem Press Encyclopedia* (September 2013): *Research Starters*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 20, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Wildflower guides typically come with a system of identification using the specific traits of each species to narrow down information about their identity, in the form of a key.

and preciousness of ostrich, peacock, and other highly valued plumage, boas in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been used to communicate sexuality through entertainment instead of class standing<sup>24</sup>. While *Blooming Taxonomy* can move and be worn in a variety of styles as a typical feather boa might, the weight and edges of the pieces complicate the movement so it must be premeditated. A mood must be set and the positioning must be planned by the wearer<sup>25</sup>. This ties the work to the theme present in each piece of this series; it is both playful and guarded. While a feather boa signals sexual availability, this piece like others in the series keeps the viewer at a distance.

The work titled *Graduated Growth*<sup>26</sup> is one necklace that is comprised of four separate rings which can be stacked together around ones neck, and are reminiscent of long strands of pearls. *Graduated Growth* showcases images from the full field to forest transition which would occur naturally over the course of 200 years<sup>27</sup>. Each ring highlights a category of transition. This is an idealized view of reforestation, symbolized by the increasing intensity of green from one ring to another.

The work *Primrose Ruff*<sup>28</sup> due to its size and bright colors, creates a spectacle while simultaneously keeping the viewer at bay. This oversized ruff is reminiscent of the popular starched ruffs worn for centuries, but most often connected to Queen Elizabeth I<sup>29</sup>. While a ruff may have been used in the past as an interchangeable collar for an outfit (and a way to keep said outfit clean longer), the ruff also functioned as a frame, adorning the face of the wearer. *Primrose Ruff* frames the face by drawing the viewer's eye in and forcing the gaze upwards. While the wearer of this piece wishes to be seen, it is the face which becomes celebrated here, versus the sexualized body. There is a level of

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24 Andrew Bolton, *Wild: Fashion Untamed* (New York: MOMA, 2005), 81.

25 Fig. 6.

26 Fig. 7-8.

27 Table 2. M. Pidwirny, "Figure 9i-1," From, "Plant Succession," *Fundamentals of Physical Geography, 2nd Edition*, 2006. Available from: PhysicalGeography.net, <http://www.physicalgeography.net/fundamentals/9i.html> (Accessed April 21, 2015.)

28 Fig. 9.

29 Fig. 10. is reminiscent of the Elizabethan style, a purposeful documentation of the work due to the ruff's historical ties to Queen Elizabeth, though it has been employed over centuries and for both male and female use.

helplessness that comes with wearing the *Primrose Ruff*. Once on, one loses access to his or her face, hair, and any adjustments needed must be done by another. The dependance on others to maintain a graceful appearance is reminiscent of the help which the aristocracy received on an everyday basis.

The work *Dueling Ideals*<sup>30</sup> is a simple, visual representation of the dueling ideology between a wild and perfect beauty found in untouched nature and the carefully constructed beauty of nature manipulated by humankind. The back of the necklace shows nature without human interaction. The front is pruned and perfect. Both are attractive, but the payoff occurs when the wearer turns away from the viewer. Actually, contact with wild coneflowers in a field would be itchy, scratchy, and better to appreciate from a distance. Like the memorable moment in Adolph Huxley's *Brave New World* where the children are enticed by beautiful flowers and then electric shock conditioned to find no pleasure in the countryside their people once loved, we often are drawn to the fields by their beauty only to find ourselves uncomfortable with the realities of it, until we, like the infants in the book, do not wish to spend much time there. Still, the payoff of this piece lies in the surprise the viewer receives when the wearer turns away to reveal the back.

The work *Flourishing Stole*<sup>31</sup> is the last piece in the series, taking on the format of a fur stole that securely slides over the wearers shoulders. The color for this piece is a dark ruby red that is reminiscent of a lustrous coat of fur. This red metal stole is quite comfortable to wear, yet the wearer is confined and movement is limited. Much as in *Primrose Ruff*, once on, the wearer is meant to display the work and appear stately, reinforcing the body as plinth.

## V. PROCESS AND INSTALLATION

I engaged a number of processes in the creation of this thesis work; some of them allowed me to work at a larger scale and faster. Each piece was designed using Rhinoceros software<sup>32</sup>. The files were

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30 Fig. 11-12.

31 Fig. 13.

32 Rhinoceros, often referred to as “Rhino” is a 3-D modeling CAD program which I used to draft an exact image in scale and shape of each piece of metal I wished to cut. From the program, I then sent the work off to be cut. Because of the capabilities of the program, I was able to know exactly what shapes and sizes I would get back, making the creation of the files extremely important to the creative designing and making process.

created by combining my personal photographs and drawings of wildflowers. Additionally, the overall size, style, and shape of each piece was predetermined through my preliminary design process, making it easy to achieve the scale and aesthetic I desired. After arranging the floral components, I created a flat 2-D file that could be sent out to be laser cut or water jet cut<sup>33</sup>. I chose to explore water jet cutting, as my designs called for multiple layers of the same pieces, and that technology allows for stacks of metal to be cut through. Aluminum was chosen as the perfect material due to its durability and light weight.

Once cut, I formed the work and attached each piece with cold connections. Colors were chosen based on the local color of the flowers depicted or the colors associated with the garment or adornment referenced. Powder coating provided an even and durable coating. After each piece came together, I was able to reference its final form and also use portions of the digital files to create the vinyl wallpapers.

The installation process included displaying the works on neutral gray toned mannequin dress forms, pairing each piece with their specific gray wallpaper decal pairing<sup>34</sup>. The works were physically installed around three of the four walls of the gallery space<sup>35</sup>, the fourth wall being utilized for the display of large printed photographs of the work on the body<sup>36</sup>. The mannequins are stationed at the average body height which allow the viewer to imagine themselves wearing the jewelry. The wallpapers frame each piece in the gallery setting, while also linking the work to the home. Finally, the photographs firmly create a narrative of ownership and functionality, solidifying questions of “can it be worn?!” that a viewer might have.

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33 A two dimensional vector line created in a CAD program is all one needs to have work cut. Laser cutting and water jet cutting are two methods available through local industries. I chose to employ water jet cutting through WardJet because of the water jet process which can cut multiple layers of metal in the same design at a time.

34 Vinyl cutting is a process often used in the making of signage. While I did cut my name and show title out of vinyl for my installation, its application in the embellishment of walls is ideal. Individual designs can be cut, arranged, and transferred on a wall; a time consuming process up front that pays off in its ease to take down and its lack of damage to the gallery walls. Additionally, extra vinyl stickers make a great favor for guests of the gallery to take home!

35 Fig. 14.

36 Fig. 15.



## VI. CONCLUSION

The experience of conceptualizing, creating, and fully realizing *What I Lived for* took me on a journey. Even after installing the work in the gallery, I did not completely understand what I had created, though I could sense that the work was sincere and full of truths. While the creative process of designing, creating, and fabricating the work was intellectually engaging, my understanding of the work's purpose grew with each step and I was constantly challenged along the way. The works function on two levels: As a transmitter of identity to the viewer, and way for the wearer to experience biophilia. The wearer, though not actually placing themselves in the harsh realities of their imaginary beloved nature, will find they are still fulfilled by wearing the work and pondering how much they enjoy the outdoors.

Each piece references a form found in fashion and is made larger than life by its scale and color palette. Each piece also extends beyond the humble expression of a love for nature and at its core, is about construction and communication of one's identity. While it would be easy to feel disappointment regarding my conclusions that a projected identity may not be as authentic as we might wish, I find comfort in my realization that this trend is not new. E.M. Forster wrote in his novel *A Room with a View* that “Life is easy to chronicle, but bewildering to practice.”<sup>37</sup> This sentiment supports the tension that exists between construction and application of identity. Even while reading through the writings of Transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau, I found myself tired by the often self-righteous and pompous tirades that would take over the writer's original intents to talk about life, nature, and simplicity. Kant also proved limiting, and I found that his most helpful thoughts were the ones which opened up value to the individual. While such identities we construct for ourselves may not hold up over extreme testing, in the completion of this thesis body of work it became clear that they are nonetheless critical for self awareness.

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37 E.M. Forester, *A Room with a View*, (Acheron, 2012), 161 Kindle edition.



Figure 1  
Cindy Sherman. *Untitled #466*. 2008.  
Chromogenic color print, 8' 1 1/8 x 63 15/16"  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Figure 2  
Cat Chow. *Measure for Measure*. 2003.  
measuring tapes, fishing line, buttons,  
72 x 20 x 12 in.  
photo James Prinz.



Figure 3  
*What I Lived for* Installation View of Decals no. 1  
Grey Vinyl Decals  
3'x9' installations

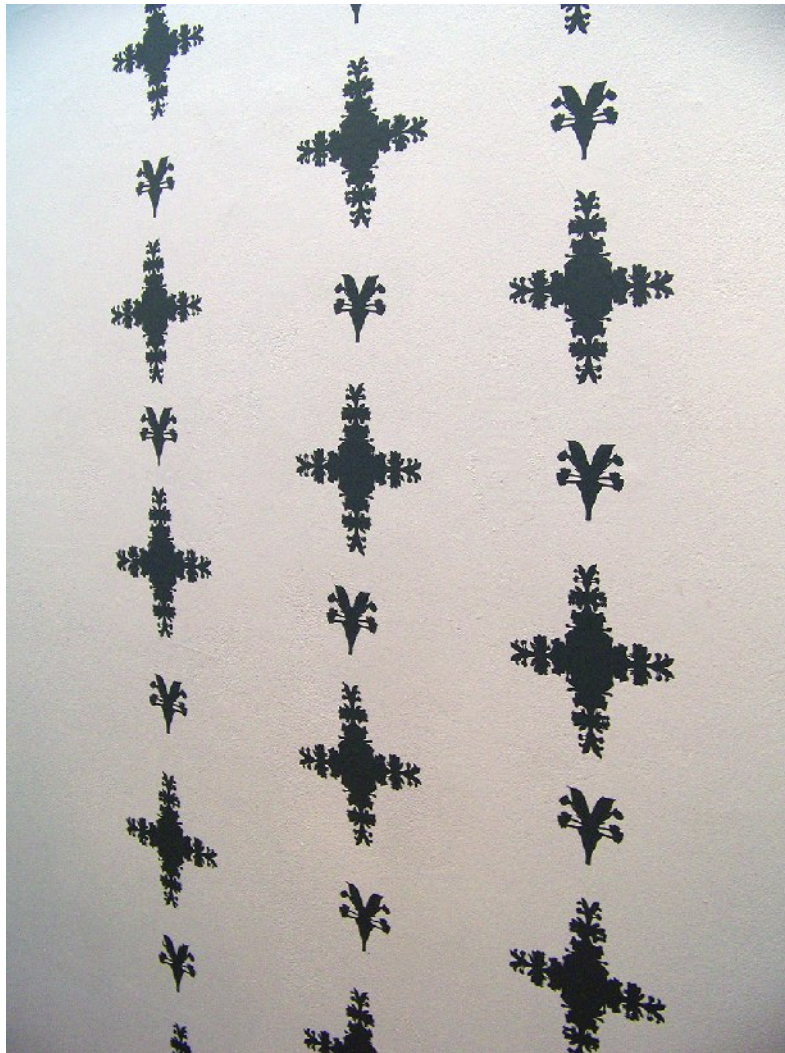


Figure 4  
*What I Lived for* Installation View of Decals no. 2  
Grey Vinyl Decals  
3'x9' installations



Figure 5  
*Blooming Taxonomy*  
(installation view)  
Water jet cut aluminum, powder coat  
5"x6' (individual dresses)



Figure 6  
*Blooming Taxonomy*  
(detail)  
Water jet cut aluminum, powder coat  
5"x6' (individual dresses)



Figure 7  
*Graduated Growth*  
(installation view)  
Water jet cut aluminum, powder coat  
2'x2'x5"





*Figure 8*  
*Graduated Growth*  
(detail)  
Water jet cut aluminum, powder coat  
2'x2'x5"



Figure 9  
*Primrose Ruff*  
(installation view)  
Water jet cut aluminum, powder coat  
2'x2'x9"



Figure 10  
*Primrose Ruff*  
Water jet cut aluminum, powder coat  
2'x2'x9"  
Photograph by Kathleen Browne



Figure 11  
*Dueling Ideals*  
(installation view no. 1)  
Water jet cut aluminum, powder coat  
3'x 8"x6"



Figure 12  
*Dueling Ideals*  
(installation view no. 2)  
Water jet cut aluminum, powder coat  
3'x 8"x6"



Figure 13  
*Flourishing Stole*  
(installation view)  
Water jet cut aluminum, powder coat  
1.5'x1.5'x3'



Figure 14  
*What I Lived for* Installation View 1



Figure 15  
*What I Lived for* Installation View 2  
20"x30" photographs  
photographs by Kathleen Browne



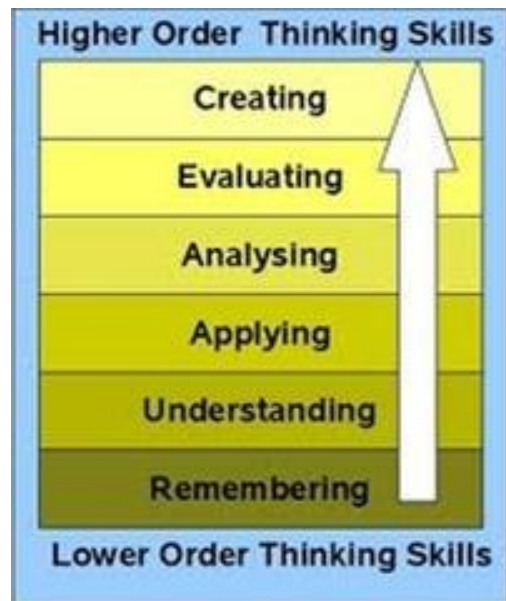


Table 1  
Bloom's Taxonomy

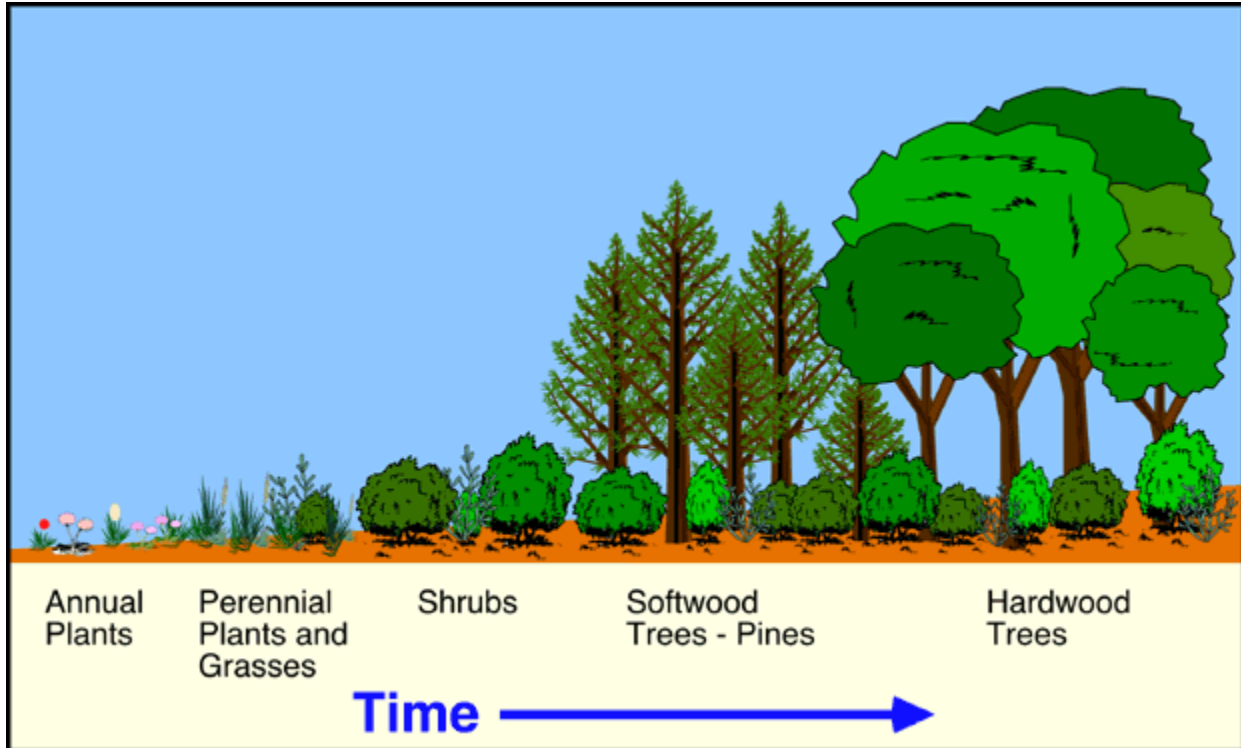


Table 2  
Forest Succession

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