



LOCAL  
COLOUR

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## — INTRODUCTION

Our access to land, nature and wilder spaces is both essential for our wellbeing, and historically complex: in an era of extractivism, climate warming, global challenges, and loss of biodiversity, there is a pressing need to reconsider our relationship with the natural world and how we both design and consume.

A key area of exploration was at the intersection of nature and textiles. What materials can I use which will have a lower environmental impact? How can I create with colour and print in a way which connects back to nature? Should there be a limit to the resources we can or should use, to lessen our impact on spaceship Earth? I wanted to attempt to answer these questions within my practice, and speculate on better ways of producing textiles for the future.

Textiles have always been a medium of history, trade and culture, however in an era of ultra-fast fashion and global sourcing we have become disconnected with the origins of our materials. The spotlight has been on the fashion and textiles industry to change and become more ethical and transparent in how it treats its stakeholders; whether garment workers, or consumers (who are bombarded with tempting marketing across digital media). It is recognised that this trillion-dollar industry is unsustainable with issues of waste, pollution

and carbon emissions. The circular economy and 'better materials' have been widely offered as solutions, but do these just allow us guilt free shopping and a continuance of business as usual?

Whilst researching problems and solutions there were contemporary fields of research and practice that I repeatedly came back to. I drew on concepts found in the book 'Designing with Nature' (Fletcher, St. Pierre and Tham, 2019) which proposes that we go outside and work directly in nature. Their book investigates the role of direct experience in design; with an aim to draw design closer to other species; the authors write of 'experiencing awe as a way of design engagement; developing a practice of working within integrated relationships.'

They propose that action research and working with others is key to affecting change. I also drew on theories of regenerative design (Rodale Institute, n.d. & Fibreshed, n.d.), which recognize and value the interdependence of human and natural systems.

Working with nature has limitations: How much do I need to alter and intervene to reveal imagery with attractive aesthetics (as is so often demanded by the design world)? Can I allow nature to 'speak' within the work?

In an era of climate change, mass loss of biodiversity and species loneliness, it is essential that we re-assess our complex relationship with nature

Image author's own, 2021

## — COLOUR FROM PLANTS

Natural dyes have been promoted as a more sustainable way of achieving colour within fashion and textiles; however, within my own practice, I found that walking and foraging for dye plants allowed me to connect with nature in new ways. I had to learn the names of plants and my curiosity led me on to learn more about their properties - I realised that all plants have their own requirements in terms of soil, moisture, light and altitude.

Further research enabled new understanding of their medicinal benefits and how important some were for pollinators (including insects, butterflies and moths) and the interconnectedness of the ecosystems around me.

I looked at my garden differently, maybe a few weeds weren't problematic, and could I mow less to help insects? I also started to thread dye plants through the beds.

In these times of the Anthropocene and Plantationocene (Haraway and Tsing, 2019), when approximately 70% of global biodiversity has been lost in the last 50 years (WWF, 2020), humans must build better connections with more-than-humans (Abram, 1997), for as Prof David Macdonald of Oxford University (Guardian.com, 2018), bluntly states, "Without biodiversity, there is no future for humanity".

The loss of human-nature connections is exacerbated by increasing urbanisation, as author Helen MacDonald (2019) suggests "the only way to save the world is to re-enchant it... people don't want to protect something they don't know".

“People don't  
want to protect  
something  
they don't  
know”

MacDonald, 2019

Image author's own, 2021

## — RESEARCH INTO BIODIVERSITY

// The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries on earth.

// Between 1970 and 2013, almost half of UK species declined

// 15% of species in the UK are at risk of extinction

// In the last 100 years we've lost 97% of our wildflower meadows

// The UK is ranked 189th worst out of 218 countries for the amount of biodiversity left

97% of  
wildflowers have  
disappeared in  
the last 100  
years

(RSPB, 2021)

Image author's own, 2021



## — LOOKING FOR YELLOW FLOWERS

During the 2020 lockdown, shops were shut and workshops closed, and I was forced to look to my local environment for resources for my art and design practice. I started working with natural dyes as a source for colour. Daily walks allowed me to learn about new plants and their colours, and allowed me to connect with different areas of my city and form unexpected bonds with pockets of biodiversity within my city.

Over the year some of these habitats drew me back time and again: what other plants were to be found? Were they in flower?

The car park at work seemed so rich in wildflowers, yet also, so vulnerable to being sprayed with weedkiller, or being slabbed over, due to the high value of inner city land and the needs of business.

I also started growing some of my own dye plants, Dyers Chamomile for golden yellows, Dyer's Coreopsis for oranges, Lady's Bedstraw for reds and Woad for blue. Some of these plants would take three years to yield colour, forcing me to work in slower ways according to nature's timeframe.

Birmingham Ring Road.  
Image author's own, 2021.

## — LOCAL COLOUR

In my practice I am trying to find ways of working within nature's limits - it was easier to obtain soft shades of yellow, gold, olive and brown but harder to develop reds and blues.

So, I decided that I would develop a palette that celebrated localism, and work within the limitations of the plants and colours

growing in my local area.

In the summer of 2021, I started printing with the dyes I had gathered, and some that I had grown in my garden.

I developed a colour palette from six plants, mixing and carefully modifying them to create tonal variations.

Highbury Community Orchard, Birmingham  
Image author's own, 2021.

— LOCAL COLOUR

Birmingham Ring Road  
Image author's own, 2021.



— CURATION

Some plants had already disappeared in the later days of summer, underlining the transience and fugitive nature of dyes from plants.

Image author's own, 2021.

## — CURATION OF VIDEO

I decided to curate the work in situ. The most practical way of doing this was to create a frame (that could be carried and easily dismantled) with an aim to film at times of the day to catch the light and ambient background noise, whether that be cars or birdsong.

I created a film that takes the colours back to their origins, making the connection between process and place explicit.

Some plants had already disappeared in the later days of summer, underlining the transience and fugitive nature of dyes from plants.

## — LOCAL PRINT

Using the local colour palette as a point of reference I then created screen prints with plants which had been exposed directly onto the screen, using not only the flowers for colour, but also form.

Local print made with locally gathered natural dyes on handwoven linen, a fabric known for its sustainable properties. Photographed in domestic garden.

Localism favours  
the use of nearby  
resources, place-  
specific knowledge,  
community self-  
reliance

(Fletcher & Tham, 2019)

Image author's own, 2021

## — EMBROIDERY

Using eco-printed fabrics and local colour palette for colour reference, I developed an embroidery which is based on narratives of today, and the problematic relationship between humans, nature and climate change. Eco-printed base fabric colours are fugitive and will fade with the passing of time and exposure to light, echoing issues of the mass loss of biodiversity in the era of the Anthropocene.

In an era of climate change, mass loss of biodiversity, and species loneliness, it is critical that we reassess our complex relationship with the natural world – and move from extractivism, towards designing with nature

Image author's own, 2021.

## — LINKS & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

High quality version of document with further pages can be found [here](#)

All videos of the work can be accessed [here](#)

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Wildflower farm, Leicestershire  
Image author's own, 2021.

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