

Photos: Jane Remm, Anna Aurelia Miney



A good way to see beauty in dying and withered plants is through drawing. A reason for plant blindness is the way they are entangled, and because it is difficult to distinguish individual specimens we tend to perceive them as a green mass. This makes the drawing of plants fascinating: when drawing lines it is interesting to follow and record how a plant intertwines with others, reflecting the choices it has made throughout its life. The workshop “The Beauty of Decay: Plant Patterns on Textile and Traces on Paper” at the Tallinn Botanic Garden focused on drawing wilted plants.

Photos: Marta Kononov ja Kärt Petser.



In Marta Kononov’s practice, garments that have lost their original design gain a new look through added layers of colour. These colours, created through natural processes, are unexpected, uneven and change over time. The aim is to create an aesthetic that embraces change. Stains, wear and tear, and repairs speak of a long, emotional and enduring relationship. By changing the appearance of our clothes, in collaboration with them, we resist the uniformity and disposability of fast fashion.

AESTHETICS OF TANGLEMENT, DECLINE, WEAR AND TEAR



This method looks for ways to nudge the perception of aesthetics away from orderliness and cleanliness towards an appreciation of the beauty inherent in natural processes. It includes exercises that direct our attention to wear and tear, loss, chaos and decline as part of a constantly changing pattern. Tanglement, in this case, manifests itself firstly in its interwovenness and the richness of relationships, and secondly in random connections and undefined endings. Relationships and the stories that accompany them add layers of meaning. These exercises support emotional connection with nature and imagining a degrowth aesthetic. In a world where our choices are influenced by our perception of beauty, shifting the boundaries of aesthetics can help us adapt to postgrowth.

Processes in nature are cyclical, constantly moving between decline and reawakening. Flourishing and decaying alternate – one cannot exist without the other. These processes are necessary and beautiful. The canons of beauty in human culture tend to prefer some processes over the other. For example, many of our ideas about order and cleanliness have been invented to make us buy more products to achieve this. A narrow minded appreciation of the forms and colours in nature can lead to ecological problems.¹ It is the tangles and thickets next to the ordered and tidy that provide many creatures with a place to grow and shelter. The peripheries support natural and social biodiversity. By understanding natural processes and relationships and engaging with them we are better able to appreciate their beauty and as a result expand the conventional understanding of what is beautiful.

Artists and designers have a key role in altering aesthetic perceptions. Ideas about beauty are largely culturally constructed to encourage consumption. We discard objects mainly because we lack an emotional connection to them, even if they are physically long-lasting.² What if clothing was considered beautiful precisely because of the addition of visible layers of wear and repair? What if, instead of being consumers, we related to garments in a way that valued them as expressions of inner richness?³ Often people don't associate their everyday choices with aesthetics and leave all that to professionals, yet our everyday decisions play a crucial role in collectively shaping our world.⁴ We have the opportunity to act as initiators and mediators, allowing natural processes to unfold and offer us aesthetic surprises.

¹ Saito, Yuriko 1998. Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms. *Environmental Ethics*, 20/2 1998, pp. 135–149.

² Chapman, Jonathan 2015. *Emotionally Durable Design Objects, Experiences and Empathy*, 2nd edition. Routledge.

³ Kononov, Marta; Kuusk, Kristi; Valle Noronha, Julia 2023. Layers of Repair Increasing the Emotional Durability of Fashion and Textiles. The 5th Product Lifetimes and the Environment Conference. *Aalto University publication series ART + DESIGN + ARCHITECTURE*, 3/2023, pp. 518–523

⁴ Saito, Yuriko 2022. Everyday Aesthetics. – Benjamin Hale, Andrew Light, Lydia Lawhon (Eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Environmental Ethics*. Routledge, pp. 741–751.

Exercises

- Make your garden more biodiverse by creating different types of habitats – dry and damp areas, a variety of hiding places, such as piles of twigs, unmown areas or rocky mounds. To protect all species, follow⁵ the recommendations of conservationists.
- Map the biodiversity and appearance of your garden. Who lives where? What conditions do they need? In the garden, park or elsewhere, notice where habitats meet.
- Find a place that you consider to be ugly. Knowing that beauty is in the eye of the beholder and species-specific, consider for whom this is necessary for their life and interpretative processes – and therefore beautiful.
- Go into nature in autumn when life is fading. Create a spot where you can watch this process unfold. Look closely at withering and decomposing plants, draw, paint or photograph them, looking for their hidden beauty. The colours of decay are ochre, yellow and brown – these can be captured using paints made from earth pigments.
- Find a place where natural relationships are especially dense. Does it seem like chaos or a system? Try to understand who is influencing who and how – are these relationships about food, partnership or environment? Try to document these places and encounters by focusing on the relationships rather than on the subjects or objects.
- Find an item in your closet that seems at odds with commonly held ideas of beauty. If you can't bring yourself to part with it, wear it. For example, wear gloves that have lost their original partners.
- Repair or reinforce holes and stains on your clothes with visible mending. Observe the damage and try to recall the moment it happened: where were you, who were you with, what emotions did you feel, what were the smells?

⁵ See: Nature needs everyone's help to cope, *Eestimaa Looduse Fond*. <https://www.elfond.ee/what-we-do/volunteers> (accessed 31.12.2024) and Meadow maintenance, *Nordic Botanical*. <https://nordicbotanical.ee/niidu-hooldus/> (accessed 31.12.2024).