

Ashes to Ashes

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Design Mentor Statement. The purpose of this mentorship relationship was to assist Apparel Design and Manufacturing students in exploring global events/issues to develop interculturally competent citizens. A studio-based class of third- and fourth-year apparel design students were challenged to research a chosen global theme or problem and utilize the information found while designing a garment. The student designer in this study chose to focus their garment on deforestation. This design was chosen to be sponsored based on its high quality of construction and the significant meaning brought to the piece through materials and techniques used during construction. This student successfully communicated their desired message to the viewer.

Design Statement. The relationship between man and nature was intended to be symbiotic. However, as history has run its course, colonization, capitalism, and the lust for power have led mankind to believe that because we have the ability to destroy the planet we were given, it is our right to do so. The practice of desecrating the world's forests while simultaneously neglecting to counter this devastation is rooted in a mindset that puts profit over people, and competition over conservation.

This project, foremost, is intended to draw awareness to the issue of deforestation, the causes of it, and its impact on the environment. Deforestation, usually through controlled burning of vegetation, emits very high levels of CO₂ and is directly correlated to rising global temperatures (Carrington, 2021). The leading industries responsible for deforestation, driven by profit, are agriculture, encompassing crop and cattle production, which use slash and burn techniques to



Figure 1: Tiling Deforested Land

remove forestry and then replenish soils, and lumber, which follows the practice of chopping down trees, diminishing the presence of the planet's natural air purifying systems (Anderson, 2019 & Heimpel, 2021). Brazil's largest leather producer, JBS, has direct ties to fast fashion companies such as H&M and Zara, and more established high-end designer brands, such as Coach and Fendi. JBS, however, has been under fire in the past for its contributions to Amazon deforestation (Pitcher, 2021). Both the agriculture and lumber industries negatively impact global ecosystems but the consequences don't stop there. As agriculture and lumber industries grow, they continue to release CO₂ and other toxic VOCs (Volatile Organic Compounds) into the atmosphere be it through the excessive slaughter of animals, or the production of compressed material goods that rely on

formaldehydes and other dangerous compounds (Carrington, 2021). In the Amazon, which is home to over 3 million plant, animal, and insect species, excessive deforestation has led to dramatic population imbalances, which only heighten the natural decay of these biomes and make them more prone to naturally occurring forest fires.

Ashes to Ashes is a three-piece ensemble, including a black base dress, pecan bark over piece, and removable faux leather peplum, representing the effects of forest burning. The garment itself was intended to be visually striking, instilling a sense of foreboding on the viewer through the smoky drape of the base dress and the ragged, burnt appearance of the pecan bark bodice. When seen side by side with images of deforested areas and agricultural land, the visual qualities of the faux leather peplum take on meaning. Simultaneously, the materials used to produce the garment represent goods that can be produced as an alternative to the products that come as a result of deforestation. The faux leather peplum plays two roles, depicting the tilling of burnt forestland (Figure 1) to maximize crop output while also providing an alternative material to leathers, produced as an indirect result of deforestation. While many faux leathers are not a viable or environmentally friendly alternative to real leather, recent innovation in the industry has produced vegan leathers from any range of plant-based materials that cancel out the negative impacts of both real leather and chemically bonded poly-leathers. The sculptural bodice was made from pecan seed pods to produce a piece that resembles the burnt appearance of desecrated forest land. This experimental process also represents an up and coming wood alternative: nut shells. In recent years, shells and seed pods have been used to create plywood and MDF and could even take the place of wood pulp in viscose or rayon textiles (Graham, 2011). These materials do not require trees to be cut down and by combining them with soy-based glues and lignin resins, compressed particle boards have been produced that are equally as strong as traditional building materials (Peura, 2020, Zhang, 2017, & Bernstein, 2010).

The construction of this piece was a tedious endeavor. Starting with the bottom layer, the black mesh dress was carefully draped and periodically handsewn directly on a dress form with a single cut of fabric. By pulling, folding, and stitching the fabric in place, the piece came to life with careful precision (Figure 2). The final look is reminiscent of an atmosphere plagued with undulating clouds of smoke. The bodice was created with an experimental material composed of ground up pecan seed pods and a non-toxic, acrylic pouring medium (Figure 3). To create the armor-like bodice piece, I first draped and sewed a fitted dress on which I outlined the shape of the bodice. The seed pod mixture was then applied to the surface of the dress and rolled across the fabric base. Once dry, I was able to remove the entire piece and trim the edges to the shape I wanted. The side peplum adds a visual factor that references the most



Figure 2: Draping Base Dress



Figure 3: 'Pecan Bark' Process

common reason for which forest area is cleared: profitable agricultural production. After burning, the charred vegetation is tilled to provide a nutrient rich bed for new crops. The effect, when seen from an aerial perspective, is a striking display of flowing linework alternating between light soil and darker stripes where the wood char has been incorporated into the ground (Figure 1).

Although each component of the garment is visually distinct, the heavily conceptual themes of the garment tie each piece together. With eye-catching details and a built-in narrative on the issue of deforestation, the piece provides a unique outlook on prevalent environmental issues. The lowest layer represents the smoke rising from the fires, the pecan bark bodice depicts the broken and burnt skeleton of the forest, while the oversized peplum represents the conversion of these areas into crop land and simultaneously embodies the overpowering drive for mankind to destroy the world in the name of profit.

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