

ART REVIEW | 'FASHIONING FELT'

# Humble Fabric Takes Center Stage

By ROBERTA SMITH  
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Felt is the feel-good fabric of all time. Sturdy, cossetting, beautiful, shape-shifting, dye-friendly, it serves many purposes and offers countless pleasures. Some but certainly not all of its latest uses are outlined in "Fashioning Felt," an illuminating exhibition of around 70 items — mostly furnishings and garments — at the [Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum](#). Felt's purely artistic possibilities are also being explored in scattered shows at New York galleries.

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Felt art now on display in Manhattan includes the multiheaded "Bold as Love," by Adam Parker Smith, at Broadway Windows at Broadway and East 10th Street. [More Photos »](#)

Though you may never have thought much about felt, there's a lot more to it than you'd expect. One of the first manmade textiles, it requires almost no special tools, certainly not a loom. It began to be made 8,000 years ago, a millennium before the earliest forms of weaving. Its fairly unadulterated natural ingredients were and remain animal wool, soap and water mashed into a kind of pulp (initially by bare feet), then dried under pressure and made into everything from caps to rugs and capes to yurts.

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On the scale of material culture, felt's elemental longevity places it somewhere between wine-making (the stomping) and ceramics (the malleable natural material rendered useful by drying or baking). Like the smooth surfaces and glazes of ceramics, felt's wet-dry process and variety of colors encouraged the human yen for decoration. Among the Cooper-Hewitt show's half dozen 19th- and early 20th-century precursors to contemporary felt is a Mongolian tea ceremony rug whose salmon-pink field is dotted with pinwheels of circles in red, green and white pinwheel (tie-dyed), and an Iranian carpet whose familiar Persian patterns, freed from the loom, have a wonderful drizzled, drifting effect. In contrast, an Uzbek carpet from the same time magnifies such motifs into big, flat silhouettes.

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We probably all have felt-related memories, and maybe even some felt phobia. Mine include poodle skirts, varsity letters, blackboard erasers, pool tables and the undersides of lamps and heavy ashtrays that I was told to handle carefully. That felt's edges were all, in essence, selvage — no hems required! — attracted people like me who don't sew. Though I think that the closest I came to actually wearing felt was a yurtlike bathrobe with large red, cut-out and flocked tomatoes on its enormous pockets — a Christmas gift from my mother at the onset of my adolescence.

During my first years as a New York pedestrian, I gained a new appreciation of felt's wondrous warmth and density through a simple pair of innersoles that winterized and then outlasted some reliable rain boots. Several of my favorite garments have been made of boiled wool, felt's second cousin, including sweaters that I downsized (not always on purpose) in the washer or dryer. Then there's my sizable collection of yard-sale afghans. Its pride is a blue-checked survivor of a previous owner's washer-dryer experimentation. At first I thought it was a rug. I snapped it up for \$10 and hope to be buried with it. And did I mention the felt-covered couch in my living room? It is seasonal, used only during the cooler months.

The Cooper-Hewitt show dwells largely in the gap between art and functional objects. Aside from room dividers by Scofidio & Diller and Janice Arnold, a neat hanging cradle by Soren Ulrick Petersen and a beautiful large rug in bands of Rothko red by Stephanie Odegard, there is remarkably little here that I can imagine living with or looking at for extended periods of time. It would have been nice to have had some slightly more down-to-earth applications that weren't at least 100 years old, rather than the parade of exotic garments, weirdly shaped furniture and wall hangings.

There are extremes in size, from a felt necklace by Birgit Daamen embedded with coral beads to a giant red-brown installation by Claudy Jongstra that demonstrates degrees of feltness, raw to cooked, through different textures and wools, straight to curly. It reaches a height of about eight feet, resembles the maw of a whale and invites but doesn't accommodate physical contact. Add seats and it could be a pair of booths in a fancy restaurant — say, the Siberian Tearoom. Just a thought.

There are also extremes in frivolity and function, some from the same source, as with Kathryn Walter, a designer whose family has been in the textile business for four generations. Ms. Walter's gray felt molding bulkily mimics the fluted and floral relief designs of traditional ceiling molding, which seems hard enough to keep dusted as it is. But her "Striations" wall, made of leftover felt scraps built up in horizontal chips like shale, is a sound-proofing solution, and it recycles.

Among the show's most interesting themes is hybridization: the increasing practice of combining felt with other materials, whether fabric, plastic or even light-emitting diode lights (a rug designed by Yvonne Laurysen and Erik Mantel). Jorie Johnson and Clifton Montieth collaborate; she makes felt vessels; he lines them with lacquer. Their works have a striking contrast of matte and shiny and hard and soft, although their practical applications are hard to gauge. Janice Arnold has draped the museum's conservatory with "Palace Yurt," an imposing installation of white-on-white wall hangings, each combining felt with silk, linen, mohair or Terzel in different patterns and motifs. The same principle is found on a smaller scale in the fashion designs of Christine Birkle and Françoise Hoffmann. And the felt-covered stones of Stephanie Forsythe and Todd MacAllen are an unusually compact combination. They come in gray, green and white and seem the perfect thing to lie down on if one's back is tight. They must be better than tennis balls. These are not to be confused with Pernelle Fagerlund's "Textile Stones" cushions, which are made entirely of felt.

Felt has a history in postwar art, starting with Josephs Beuys's use of it in his

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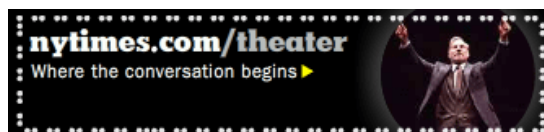
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performances, abstract sculptures and his dour felt suit pieces. And few things say Process Art like Robert Morris's elephantine, industrial-strength felt wall pieces and Barry LeVa's scattered floor pieces of felt scraps, with or without shattered glass.

The less dour aesthetic possibilities of felt hit me several years ago via an unforgettable cluster of little felt reliefs hanging in a hallway of an art building at [Virginia Commonwealth University](#) in Richmond, Va. Nothing special, just an assignment from a textiles class, but the variety of color, textures and forms seemed like a remarkably fresh way to merge painting and sculpture. Wow. Major in that.

At the moment, the New York galleries showcasing felt include David Zwirner, at 525 West 19th Street, where Adel Abdessemed has used expanses of beautiful white felt to stretch three small airplanes into extended snakelike bodies. I also recommend two new sculptures by R. M. Fischer on view in "Old Dogs, New Tricks," at K.S. Art at 72 Leonard Street in TriBeCa, along with impressive sculptures by John Newman and paintings by Hermine Ford. Mr. Fisher, who is best known for making aggressively utilitarian fountains and lamps from found, mostly metal objects, seems to have been shaken to his roots by some kind of SpongeBob SquarePants epiphany. His new sculptures are soft stuffed forms sewn from felt and other hardy fabrics like vinyl imitation leather; they achieve an unlikely stasis between the sexual and the toylike, not to mention abstraction and representation.

Then there is "Bold as Love," a show of the work of the young artist Adam Parker Smith that can be seen around the clock at Broadway Windows, a display-only curatorial space in the windows of a [New York University](#) building at Broadway and East 10th Street in Greenwich Village. Inspired by [Goya](#) (and the Chapman brothers), Mr. Smith is showing three dozen life-size severed heads, mounted on spikes, and more comedic than gory because they are made entirely of felt. The heads echo too closely the work of Tom Friedman and Ryan Johnson, but they are vivacious and various and make good use of felt's colors, mutability and hem-free edges. In a way, their main subject is the wonder of the material itself.

*"Fashioning Felt" continues through Sept. 7 at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, 2 East 91st Street; (212) 849-8400, cooperhewitt.org.*

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