



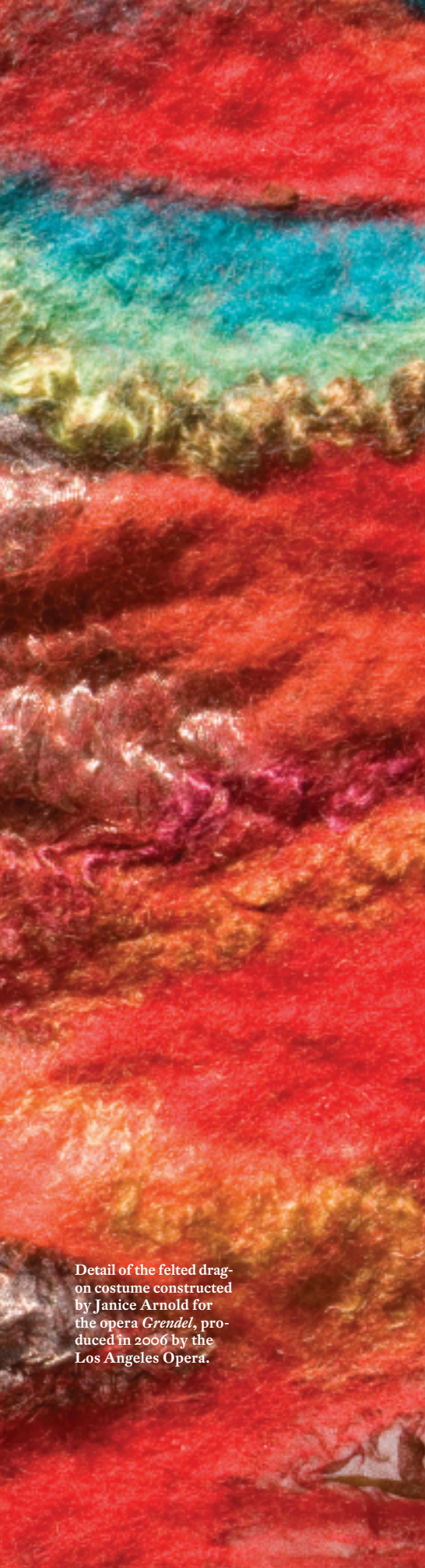
STORY BY
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Deeply Felt



PHOTOGRAPH BY
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Janice Arnold differs from many other artists working with felt because of her interest in organic shapes and the fiber's natural tendency to form irregular textures.

Janice Arnold's *Palace Yurt* of handmade felt was among the most impressive pieces in the "Fashioning Felt" exhibition last year at New York's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum; it will also appear in the San Francisco Museum of Craft + Design's remounting of the show (Oct. 22, 2010–Feb. 20, 2011). Featuring felt as the new "it" design material, the exhibition included water-jet-cut-felt furniture, stacked-industrial-felt walls for sound-proofing cinemas and recording studios, as well as sculptures, wall coverings and dresses crafted from handmade felt. This malleable wool material has been around for ages and has thousands of indispensable applications thanks to its tensile strength. Among all the functional and fashionable felts in the show, Arnold's yurt was like a shrine to the fabric.

Detail of the felted dragon costume constructed by Janice Arnold for the opera *Grendel*, produced in 2006 by the Los Angeles Opera.

While she was installing the yurt on an engineered frame in the museum's glass-walled conservatory, a fellow exhibitor asked if she had a big team. Her answer was simply, "No." Arnold creates large-scale handmade felt objects with a few assistants at a time. She developed the fabric for the 24-foot-tall *Palace Yurt* on her own, enlisting assistants only to help with the logistics of preparing and transporting the large, cumbersome panels. The piece was inspired by traditional yurts of Central Asia. When Genghis Khan reigned, tribal members lived in the collapsible wood-framed felt yurts erected around a more elaborately decorated central palace yurt, which was used for celebrations and performances consisting of song, dance, poetry and storytelling. Responding to the domed shape of the Cooper-Hewitt conservatory and keying her design specifically to its measurements, Arnold went to work at her studio in Centralia, WA, creating a contemporary interpretation of the ancient gathering place. She nodded to tradition by incorporating talismanic symbols and embedding a blessing text at a ceremonial entrance.

With the exception of blue entry panels, the *Palace Yurt* was constructed primarily from creamy white felt impregnated with metallic fabrics, which gives the wool a subdued luster. Translucent pieces of white silk were felted into the panels in traditional patterns and as organically shaped windows that let in light. The ceiling pieces were individually formed to reflect the shape of the dome—every diamond of glass was matched by a diamond of felt, while pieces of sheer silk mirrored the mullions. She covered the conservatory's built-in benches using white and gray felt with silky tufts of curly wool that could be touched and toyed with.

Arnold produced some of her most innovative projects as she worked on *Palace Yurt*, including an installation for Cut, a Wolfgang Puck steakhouse in Las Vegas, and curtains for an artists' residency called the Lumber Room in Portland, OR. All three featured

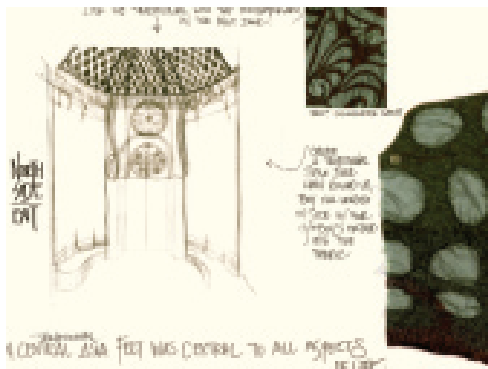
predominantly white felt with an emphasis on texture. In one of her few uses of industrially made felt, Arnold wove 10 rows of broad white strips into a metal warp high on three of the four walls at Cut, two of them 90 feet long. The regular surface in conjunction with the simple basket weave evokes a clean, understated elegance.

For the Lumber Room, an undertaking started by arts patron Sarah Meigs, Arnold went back to organic handmade textures. Meigs's family history is in the lumber industry, so wood became a decorative theme. Arnold made 24 12-by-4-foot handmade felt window coverings with patterns replicating the cellular structure of wood. In each panel, Arnold included tiny ½-inch to 3-inch cell-like silk windows, which allow a considerable amount of light into the space.

Despite the monochromatic treatment in these three works, Arnold is no stranger to color. For the Los Angeles Opera's 2006 production of *Grendel*, she made costumes, designed by Constance Hoffman, with fiery reds, vibrant greens and shiny coppers. "That was the most complex fabric I've ever made," she explains. "Just completely wild." The felt used for the dragon's tongue (a single player's costume) and the dragonettes (a three-person costume representing the dragon's tail) depicted licking red flames alternating with copper fabric from the floor to the waist. The players wore red felt hats with elongated flame-shaped points. In contrast to the scorching dragonettes, Queen Wealtheow's costume was a shimmering ice-blue felt gown, with glacial textures and silk panels similar to those used later in the *Palace Yurt*.

Arnold also played with color when Cirque du Soleil partnered with Celebrity Cruises and asked her to decorate The Bar at the Edge of the Earth. For this ship's bar, she used wool felt with silk, rayon and velvet to transform the art environment and performance space into a haven of ebullient pinks, oranges and blues. The fabrics ▶

Arnold's ambitious projects reflect her intrepid imagination and determination to surmount obstacles artistic and logistic while remaining focused on texture.



Left to right: Process of installing Janice Arnold's *Palace Yurt* in the Cooper-Hewitt's conservatory for the 2009 "Fashioning Felt" show; sketch of the north door, the site for the installation, the artist adjusting the felted fabric.



Left and right:
Arnold working on the
ceiling panels of *Palace
Yurt*; the north door
installed.

Below:
The south end of *Palace
Yurt* installed. The trans-
lucency of the fabric is
achieved through the
felting-in of silk pieces.





“Life is a balance between organization and chaos, and it’s the same with texture.”—Janice Arnold

Above:
Arnold’s felted environment for The Bar at the Edge of the Earth on a Celebrity Cruise ship that partnered with Cirque du Soleil.

Right:
Ice-blue wool and silk felted costume (and detail) for Queen Wealth-eow in the opera *Grendel*.



hung from the ceilings like waves in places and like stalactites in others. Included in the installation were ottomans called *Sushi Furniture* made of her white felt wrapped in a black (nori-like) band with a splash of color in the middle. She also made felted curtains, projection screens, stage curtains and interior tents to transform the bar in a whimsical Cirque du Soleil style.

Arnold is essentially self-taught in the art of felting large sheets. She'd worked in advertising and photography for Nordstrom in the days before stylists. She eventually left the company to establish her own business, working as a consultant on store window displays. In the fall of 1999, Nordstrom requested large garment-inspired sculptures in fall colors—deep aubergines, mustards and rubies. Arnold was looking for texture and color that seemed “alive,” but was dissatisfied with the palettes of industrially made felts, so she set out to learn how to make felts herself. A friend who made small pieces taught her the process and told her where to source wool, but then she was on her own. On a trip to New Hampshire, where she had a crash course in wool, Arnold purchased hundreds of pounds of fleece dyed in the colors she needed. “I embarked on this journey of how to make felt, and no one in this country knew how to make these giant sheets. In this first project I made over 1,200 square yards of handmade felt.”

Arnold is currently experimenting to develop new felt fabrics for a permanent installation in the New York offices of KPFF, a firm of consulting structural engineers that was responsible for installing the wooden frame for the *Palace Yurt* at the Cooper-Hewitt. “When the KPFF people saw my fabrics and the pattern and texture, they were really drawn to that quality because it is a respite from the world they work in,” she says. The pieces will add color and texture to the office as well as sound abatement for the 5,000 square feet of concrete and glass. The largest piece for KPFF will be a 40-by-8-foot site-specific, highly textured wall covering. Arnold estimates she'll make up to 40 samples that incorporate different colored wools and pieces of silk, muslin and burlap before choosing at least four that will be well suited to the project. “Mistakes guide me—materials guide this process,” she says.

While her work is akin to that of Dutch designer Claudy Jongstra (claudyjongstra.com), who uses natural dyes and often wool from her own sheep, Arnold differs from many other artists working with felt because of her interest in organic shapes and the fiber's natural tendency to form irregular textures. She doesn't follow the lineage of artists such as Joan Livingstone, whose resin-fortified felt sculptures of the 1990s only subtly resembled the fabric's texture, or Robert Morris, who was more interested in symmetry and the draping of industrially produced, uniformly textured felts in his 1970s works.

Arnold's ambitious projects reflect her intrepid imagination and determination to surmount obstacles artistic and logistic while remaining focused on texture. “We need relief from an organized sense of the world,” she says. “Life is a balance between organization and chaos, and it's the same with texture. It's so basic to our well-being.”

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Sheets of felt bundled for the “fulling” phase being dragged by a camel on the Mongolian plains.



Forming Felt

Felt may have been made as early as 9,000 years ago. It's the oldest textile known to humans, and the process remains the same, requiring only wool, moisture and agitation. Textiles are thought to be fragile and impermanent, but felt is durable and impenetrable to moisture and wind. The tight masses of fibers and the natural lanolin oils repel rain and snow and can stand up to the harsh conditions of Central Asia, including long stretches of below-zero temperatures. Seventy percent of Mongolians still live in yurts and make felt. “People are born in felt, they live in felt, and they die in felt. They're wrapped in felt when they're buried,” explains Arnold, who has traveled to Central Asia on several felting missions.

Like the Mongols and the felt makers of Kyrgyzstan, Arnold lays out wool fibers in layered sheets, which she calls lay-ups. She incorporates other fibers and fabrics to add texture and then wets the lay-up with warm water, which encourages shingle-like structures in the wool fiber to flare, predisposing them to tangle. A touch of dish soap aids the process. The sheets are rolled into cylindrical bundles for the “fulling” phase, in which agitation encourages the fibers to bind. Central Asians frequently drag rolls behind horses or camels, or kick them down roads. Though Arnold initially dragged rolls behind her car and even had her son drag one behind a bicycle, she now has an electric roller. She makes the dry lay-ups inside an old school where she and her husband, an electronics designer, have studios, and then carries them outside to wet them and to put them into the roller. Felts may shrink up to 40 percent during processing.—E.L.