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My Journey Home: A Study in Hand-Felted Wool

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Art and Design

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Masters of Arts

by

Ashleigh Robertson

December, 2006

Catherine Murray, Chair

Pat Mink

Wayne Dyer

Keywords: Felt, Layers, Fiber art, Appalachia, Soil

ABSTRACT

My Journey Home: A Study of Hand-Felted Wool

by

Ashleigh Robertson

This is a supporting paper for a Master of Arts Graduate Exhibition entitled My Journey Home: A Study in Hand-Felted Wool, held at Slocumb Galleries October 30 through November 3, 2006. The work in the exhibition represents a concentrated study in the graduate program in Fiber Art at East Tennessee State University. My artwork is an expression of my feelings and emotions toward my family, particularly the women in my family.

The paper begins with an introduction detailing my artistic research and culminates with a reflection of the work shown in the exhibition. The cultural and historical influences that shaped my family and the influences that developed the fiber construction techniques that I use are then discussed. I explain the methods and procedures I employ to construct my artwork and discuss the contemporary artists who have had an influence upon my work and me. In the summary I conclude that the hand-felted wool I construct is an excellent medium to express my ideas and emotions toward my family and my home.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The artwork that is represented in this exhibition is the culmination of influences, personal, political, and academic, that have shaped me and, in turn, shaped my art. These influences caused me to look inward and examine my emotions and relationships with my family. Using felt has allowed me to weld my feelings and love of family and the natural world into one expression. The emotions I feel toward my family are expressed through the colors and composition of each piece and the affinity I have for the earth is reflected in the felt construction and texture.

CHAPTER 2

EDUCATION

My artistic research began in childhood. During these early years, I remember watching my great-grandmothers and grandmothers quilt and hand embroider. As a child, my mother took me to a seamstress, Ms. Irene Holland, to have dresses made. My first venture into fiber construction was making clothes for my cat. In middle school and high school, I began to learn the elements of design and the basic fundamentals of making art. During this time, my mother taught me to how use her sewing machine, and I began making handbags and sewing dresses for myself.

In August 1997, I attended David Lipscomb University, in Nashville Tennessee. I took courses in figure drawing and art appreciation with Professor Terry Thacker. The next year, I transferred to East Tennessee State University and enrolled in the College of Applied Human Science, majoring in fashion design, merchandising, and marketing. Because of my interests in fashion design, I enrolled in a vegetable dying course taught by Doris Louie from the department of Art and Design. After I had taken this course, Professor Louie allowed me to take an independent study in Japanese textile design. In this study I experimented with dying on diverse fabrics. At the end of this course, Professor Louis talked with me about changing my major. She put it: “You should be an ‘art maker’ instead of a fabric seller.” I decided to change majors and focus on fiber art.

During the summer, I attended Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee through the University of Tennessee. I participated in a class taught by Ann Johnston called “Printing on Fabric.” I also took a class, “Felt Making,” taught by Chad Hagan. The experience was wonderful and proved to be a pivotal point in my artwork.

Doris Louie left East Tennessee State University and was replaced by Carol LeBaron. Under LeBaron, I began to experiment with different felting techniques. I tested

different cutting, layering, and embroidery methods. I began trials with “pre-felting.” When wool is felted under normal procedures the colors will blend softly together. In “pre-felting,” wool is felted to a midway point and then laid on unfelted wool. Then the felting process is completed. The result is a sharp, distinctive edge between colors with a minimal blend. Under LeBaron, I also began a more earnest focus on color and color analysis. During this period, I took an independent study course in felt making and constructed a work I titled “Ground Cover.” It was one of my first attempts in expressing my feeling toward the earth and nature. It included earth tone colors with cutting and hand stitching and won the Juror’s Award at the East Tennessee State University Student Honors Exhibition.

After the terrorist attacks in New York City, anthrax, “dirty bombs,” and weapons of mass destruction became household words. Being uneasy with world events, I began printing fabric with designs that expressed my anxiety over the possibility of biological germ warfare at home. The motifs I chose to print were images of bacteria and camouflage. Not satisfied with these images, I began dying washcloths, hand towels, and dishtowels with yellow, greens, and brown colors that reminded me of disease and illness. Still trying to illustrate my worry, I began to screen print and machine and hand stitch images of homes on top of the fabric.

Anxiety over the continuing world events led me to seek the love, comfort, and stability of my family. I turned to my art to help express my longing for the safety and security of home. Returning to my “comfort zone,” I began to hand felt wool again. I started a series called “Log Cabin.” These were based upon a traditional quilt pattern of the same name. I pieced together woven wool in a variety of earth tones with natural colored wool that I felted and manipulated with hand embroidery. During the construction of this piece, I realized that I was using most of the techniques I had acquired during my academic career. The multiple methods of construction came together in the completion of the pieces.

Driving to Asheville, North Carolina on the new interstate highway in 2003, I was awestruck by a rock formation at Sam’s Gap on the border of Tennessee and North

Carolina. I had to pull over and study the layer upon layer of rock and soil. I was intimidated by the sheer size of the formation and its strength and stability. The trees and shrubs on top were stable and secure because of the immense rock below them. After my overwhelming experience at Sam's Gap, I saw a parallel between the stability of my family and the security of nature. Soil is made by layers upon layers of organic matter settling over time. Soil, when subjected to heat and pressure, forms rocks. The rocks stabilize the soil, and the soil secures the vegetation. My need to express stability and security caused me to shift the subject of my art to rocks and layering.

Printing, dying, and purchasing commercial fabric, I began a series of quilt-like wall hangings that showed images of rock layers inspired by Sam's Gap. I machine-embroidered the smaller piece, which I titled "Geologic Stress," to add more line and texture. In the larger piece, "Appalachian Thrust Fault," I added overshot weaving to the quilted layers to fabric.

CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL INFLUENCES

Prior to the 20th century, the Smoky Mountains were geographically isolated from the rest of the country. On one hand, the isolation slowed industrial and economic growth; on the other hand, it helped to preserve the traditions and the culture. It was a barrier to educational, social, and political expansion but nurtured a culture of strong, oral traditions in speech, music, and songs. Since the people of Southern Appalachia were isolated, they learned to be self-sufficient. The family passed down all the skills necessary to meet daily needs, including handcrafts (Held 57). The necessity of being self-sufficient led these families to build strong ties and a dependence upon each other. The family became a stabilizing force in the harsh Appalachian environment of poverty and ignorance. It became the center for beliefs, traditions, and values.

The Smoky Mountain culture helped form the traditional tasks that the female members of the family engaged in daily. The traditions of weaving, felting, and quilting are rooted in Smoky Mountain culture. “This region provides a glimpse into a lifestyle related to quilts that no longer exist in more isolated regions” (Irwin 8). These traditions were passed down from past generations to my great grandmothers and my grandmothers. As a child, I remember sleeping under colorful, warm, durable quilts that were made by my great-grandmothers. When I hand-stitch, I am filled with warm memories of the love and comfort of my family. This feeling is a link to my past and memories that survive through my art.

Adhering to Smoky Mountain culture, my family has strong ties to the land. They are outdoors people and have been for generations; many of their favorite activities take place outside. Although most of a person’s life is spent indoors, my great grandparents and grandparents worked in the natural world in order to give themselves a purpose. My great grandfathers were cattle farmers and raised various crops like tobacco and cotton.

My great-grandmothers raised beautiful flower and vegetable gardens. My grandparents are business owners and have cattle, vegetable gardens, and flower gardens. Although the Smoky Mountains seem overwhelming and immense, it becomes very personal and private to those who call it home.

Love and respect of the land is a major component of my heritage, but the connection that links me most with my past is gender. The women in my family are connected to one another through their arts by teaching one another to quilt and craft and by sharing recipes and creating them together. Women in the past performed household duties just as they do now in the modern age. Women of Appalachia depended on each other for the common family necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter. They also depended on each other for love, life, and a sense of belonging and purpose. Pertaining to the aspect of so-called ‘woman’s work’, “Judith Brown in her ‘Note on the Division of Labor by Sex’, provides a key to this question. Ms. Brown asserted that women provided this type of labor in community that was compatible with the demands of child care” (Barber 29). Women made a tradition of art, history, and comfort through their “woman’s work.” Textiles, remedies, recipes, and ways of life are all ingredients of Smoky Mountain women, and this is true of my family as well. The textiles, remedies, and recipes are passed from one generation to the next generation and are highly prized and appreciated, especially in my family.

Kathleen Wilson, author and researcher of Appalachian culture, said concerning textiles, “That these artistic creations still survive in their family of origin, is testimony that the quiet work of Appalachian women artists were held in the highest esteem by generations of family members who carefully kept the family stories, records and textiles intact (Wilson, Kathleen xii).” Most of the techniques that I use were passed down for generations in order to satisfy a family’s need, not to preserve a certain art or craft. Textiles are identified and named by their construction. The type of construction depends upon the materials and equipment used (Wilson, Kax 35).

Felt means the dense fabric formed from wool and other hair fibers by application of heat, moisture, and agitation. Fibers’ microscopic – scales become interlocked and

form a solid fiber. This process is irreversible. (Wilson, Kax 75). This is the oldest technique that I use in my art. Felt making was widely used in ancient Asia and Europe. There is no evidence to prove that felt was used before the third millennium (Held 78). At one time, Asia was known as the land of felt because felt was such an important part of the nomadic, sheep-herding culture. Large quantities of wool were used by the nomads to make mats, rugs, blankets, and waterproof clothing (Wilson, Kax 75). Felted wool was used because it protects against sudden changes in temperature, and it will wick water away from the skin. (American Educator 154)

The medium of felt is made of wool, which is an animal protein fiber known as keratin (Fournier 15). Fibers from different breeds of sheep vary in size, length, and color. Common to all wool fibers is their external structure. Scales cover the wool fiber's surface. These scales vary according to the type of wool. Sheep of different breeds have different types of wool. There is fine wool, long wool, and down wool. Fine wool is noted for softness, long wool for luster and strength, and down wool for bulk without weight and maximum elasticity and resilience (Fournier 20).

To construct my felt, I use only fine wool. With its fine fibers (33μ to 17μ), it will felt readily and retain its softness. I use fine wool from Corriedale and Merino sheep. I sometimes blend these wools with fine fibers from kid mohair goats. Corriedale fleece is fine, soft, and well crimped. Merino wool is the finest wool from all sheep breeds. It is extremely soft with well-defined crimp and flat tips (Fournier 37). The two wools felt differently because of their differences in fineness and crimp. Merino wool, being the finer fiber ($24\mu - 18\mu$) with more defined crimps, will felt tighter and form more dense piled felt. Corriedale, being a coarser fine wool ($33\mu - 26\mu$), has a tendency to felt more loosely but remain softer than merino wool (37). These characteristics are advantageous in that they give me control over the softness and texture of my art piece. Layering of wool is required to construct felt. Once the layers of wool are felted, I am able to go back and cut into the felt and expose the under layers of wool. This trait works very well with my ideas of layering rock and soil in my artwork.

Quilting and hand sewing are also techniques I use that have been passed down

from generation to generation. Quilting has been practiced by almost all ancient civilizations. There is evidence of quilted clothing from as far back as 3000 BC that were made by the Egyptians, Greeks, and Chinese (Irwin 8). Most areas in the United States were changed by the Industrial Revolution, which began in America in the 1800s. Everything began to be made by machines, so they no longer needed handcrafts. The southern mountain regions were almost untouched by the industrial revolution, and because of the economic conditions and geographic condition of this region, quilting thrived (Irwin 8). According to the Works Progress Administration Guide to North Carolina 1939, “Colonial handicrafts have survived in North Carolina despite the flood of machine-made products from factories. The influence of tradition, poverty, isolation and some steady local markets has served to keep alive these native skills” (Held 57).

Quilts were made of three layers of fabric with a few stitches holding the fabric together. These important stitch points are known as quilt points, hence, the origin of the word “quilt” (Ickis 255). Quilts were made for the use of the family: “Eliot Wigginton, editor of the Foxfire book series, said: A quilt is something human. Quilts were handmade by people for people. Every phase of their production was permeated by giving and sharing” (Irwin 9). Women have practiced quilting more than other forms of textiles (Irwin 8).

I used hand sewing in my art to add line color and texture to the surface of the fabric. Hand sewing and quilting are important techniques that I used in my artwork. I believe every stitch is saturated with meaning. Hand sewing is a way for me to pay homage to past generations of women and their contributions.

CHAPTER 4

CONSTRUCTION PROCESS

I go through the same basic steps to construct my art. The idea or title that I am working on will determine what technique I choose to use. I have discovered that most of my ideas that I wish to develop can be illustrated with the use of nature. Nature is very important to my artwork and me. As I hike, drive, and relax in the outdoors, I always carry my camera so I can take photographs of roots, rocks, and mountains.

When an idea for a piece begins to form in my mind, I look through my books of photographs and select the pictures that relate to my idea for the artwork. From the chosen photographs, I take colors, textures, and shapes that directly correspond to the thoughts and emotions I have about the idea. To begin illustrating my idea, I start by making small drawings and sketches to determine the composition of the piece. After I am satisfied with the composition, I will begin thinking about adding color. I use colors found in my photos, but I manipulate them to highlight the emotions I feel about the subject or the relationship I want to illustrate in the artwork. To accomplish this, I start with small water color paintings of the composition. I use water colors because the colors blend in a way similar to the blending of the fabric dyes, especially when hand-felted. Once the composition and colors are selected, I begin to make samples. A sample is a small experimental artwork. This allows me to make mistakes and discoveries without ruining a large art piece. Once my sampling has been successful, I will start the actual art piece in the chosen technique and work until completion.

CHAPTER 5

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

I first came in contact with felt making in 2001. I was taking classes at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts through the University of Tennessee. Arrowmont was opened in Gatlinburg, Tennessee in 1912 as a settlement school. This school was built to aid in teaching arts and crafts and to offer better educational opportunities for the people in the Smoky Mountains (Held 57). The instructor for my felt making course was Chad Alice Hagan. She has been instrumental in my development as an artist. Not only did she teach me the process of making felt from raw wool, she also opened my eyes to the immense possibilities of its use in my artwork.

Pamela Farmer, a contemporary felt maker and embroiderer from Australia, has been an influence on my artwork. Specifically, her fiber art piece "Earth Blanket", incorporates three-dimensional felt shapes on a background covered by machine and hand embroidery. The undergrowth – leaves, twigs, and branches – that gather on the forest's floor inspires her work. She likes the shimmering, reflective qualities of wool and the endless possibilities of hand felted wool as a fiber technique. (Stephenson 54)

CHAPTER 6

EXHIBITION ARTWORK

My exhibition titled “My Journey Home: A Study in Hand Felted Wool” is comprised of two series of artworks. One series is titled “Family Roots”, the other series is titled “New Growth”. Each artwork in the series “Family Roots” is constructed in the same manner. The background of each piece is made by layering Merino wool and Corriedale wool mixed with Mohair from Angora goats. By layering the different wools and then hand felting them, I can mimic the texture of the layers of dirt, rock and organic matter that form the mountains. The colors of the wool roving I choose to use to construct the root forms are a combination of colors found in the background and colors found in nature. I cut the layered wool to add texture that resembles roots and bark. The root forms are hand sewn to the background. The colors of wool roving I select to use in the construction of each piece correspond to the different values my family members have instilled in me. The root forms are representative of myself and illustrate both my growth and my dependence on my family.

The second series of artwork is titled “New Growth”; it is comprised of three pieces. All three pieces are constructed in the same manner; each is made with a mix of merino and corriedale wool that has been layered. Added to this mix is a vegetable fiber called Ingeo, a type of coco fiber. Ingeo fiber when used alone will not felt properly. This characteristic allows me to add texture and dimension to each piece. To do this in each piece, the Ingeo fiber would felt if it was layered with wool, but if the Ingeo fiber was layered with more Ingeo fiber it would not felt. At this point the vegetable fiber will extend loosely from the piece. The visual effect of this trait is one of green growth coming from a background of rock and soil. As I have returned to my core values in the series “Family Roots”, I have redeveloped my feelings in the series “New Growth”. The three artworks illustrate my feelings of belonging, nurturing, and strength.

The series “Family Roots” is comprised of four art pieces. They are titled for different values that I received from my family. The pieces are “Love” (fig. 1), “Faith” (fig. 2), “Kindness” (fig. 3), and “Hard Work” (fig. 4). Three artworks make up the series “New Growth”. They are titled “Belonging” (fig. 5), “Nurturing” (fig. 6), and “Strength” (fig. 7).

“Love”: Love is very important in my family. I was showered with love not only from my parents but also from my extended family. My parent always told me “You may do things we don’t like but we will always love you.” Love is special; it requires time, effort, and care to be expressed fully. I represented love in this piece with the more elaborate hand stitching. I have shown that love in every stitch I placed on the piece.

“Faith”: Religious belief was the central focus in my family as I was growing up. My grandparents and parents always emphasize the importance of faith in my life. In the Bible the Gospel is referred to as the river of life. I incorporated a blue stream in the composition of this piece to symbolize that ‘river’ and the strength I draw from it.

“Kindness”: My family stressed respect for all people and all living things. I was taught to follow the golden rule. Treating others with kindness and consideration gives me a sense of balance and harmony.

“Hard Work”: I was taught the importance of work from an early age. My family members would say “success is not the product of magic, but the result of hard work”. To represent hard work I chose a color palette of muted, subdued, and toned down colors.

“Belonging”: Everything requires help from something else in order to survive. A close secure relationship with my family supports my growth in all aspects of my life. I am connected to my family and that feeling of belonging will foster my continual growth.

“Nurturing”: All living things require nourishment and sustenance. My family has always supported and promoted my growth and development. Not only did I receive food, clothing, and shelter; but I also received encouragement, discipline, and guidance.

“Strength”: Even though all living things need nutrients and support to live and grow, they also require strength to sustain them under times of stress. During my upbringing I received strength, stability, and security from my family.

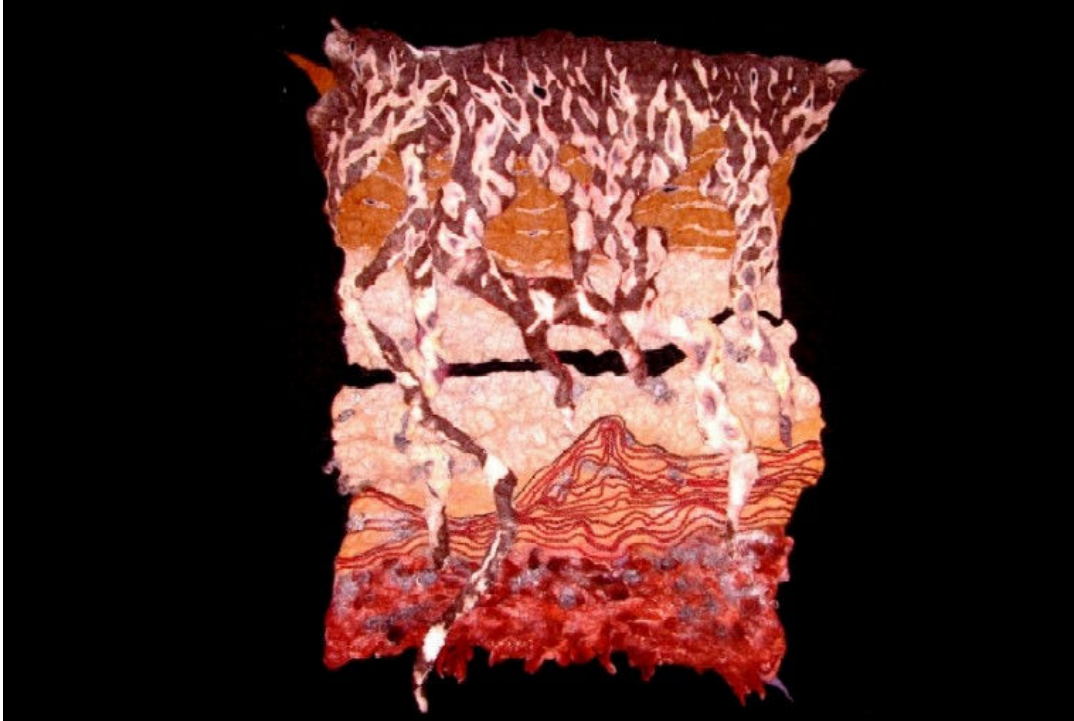


Fig.1 “Family Roots: Love”

The piece “Love” is 39 inches tall and 31 ½ inches wide. When looking at the piece, the top portion is camel colored wool that blends into oatmeal colored wool that flows into gold colored wool. The background’s lower portion is a mix of maroon, red, and gray colored uncarded wool. The root forms in the piece begin at the upper portion of the work and extend downward through the entire artwork. These forms are layers of red, flesh tone, brown, and gray wools that I have cut to expose the under-layers of wool.

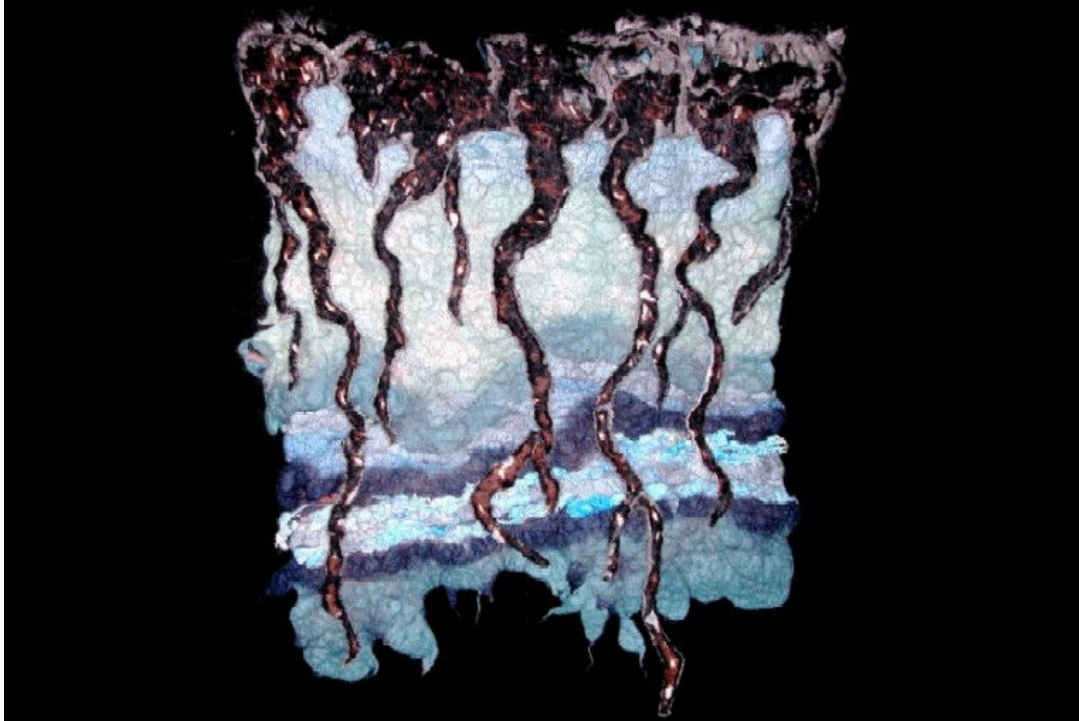


Fig.2 “Family Roots: Faith”

The piece “Faith” is 47 inches tall and 40 inches wide. When looking at the artwork, the background’s upper portion is a mix of blue, green, and natural colored wool. This mix of colors is then followed by stripes of many different values of blue. The root forms are hand stitched to the background and extend downward the entire length of the piece. These forms are constructed by layering, blue, white, brown, black, and gray wool.



Fig.3 “Family Roots: Kindness”

The artwork “Kindness” is 42 inches tall and 43 ½ inches wide. When looking at the piece, it begins with a mix of green corriedale wool covered with natural colored Angora goat hair. These wools then blend into gray corriedale wool. The lower portion of this piece starts with a stripe of green that blends into brown and then salmon colored wool. The background ends with a mix of mauve colored merino wool.



Fig.4 “Family Roots: Hard work”

The artwork “Hard Work” is 38 ½ inches tall and 49 inches wide. The background of this piece begins with gray merino wool blended with natural colored Angora goat hair that blends into a line of black merino wool. The lower portion of the background starts with natural color corriedale wool that flows into a skin tone color of corriedale wool. And finally ends with a stripe of oatmeal colored corriedale wool.



Fig.5 “New Growth: Belonging”

The art work “Belonging” is 36 ½ inches tall and 42 ½ inches wide. When looking at this piece, it begins with wool and vegetable fiber. The corriedale and merino wools are brown, red/brown, green, and yellow colors. The Ingeo vegetable fibers are bright green. The next portion is a stripe of gray corriedale wool covered by Ingeo fibers and green merino wool. The lower section of this piece begins with a stripe of green, gray, and yellow corriedale wool. It is followed by a stripe of white and earth toned merino wool and ends with a stripe of dark brown, a line of warm brown, and a stripe of chocolate brown.

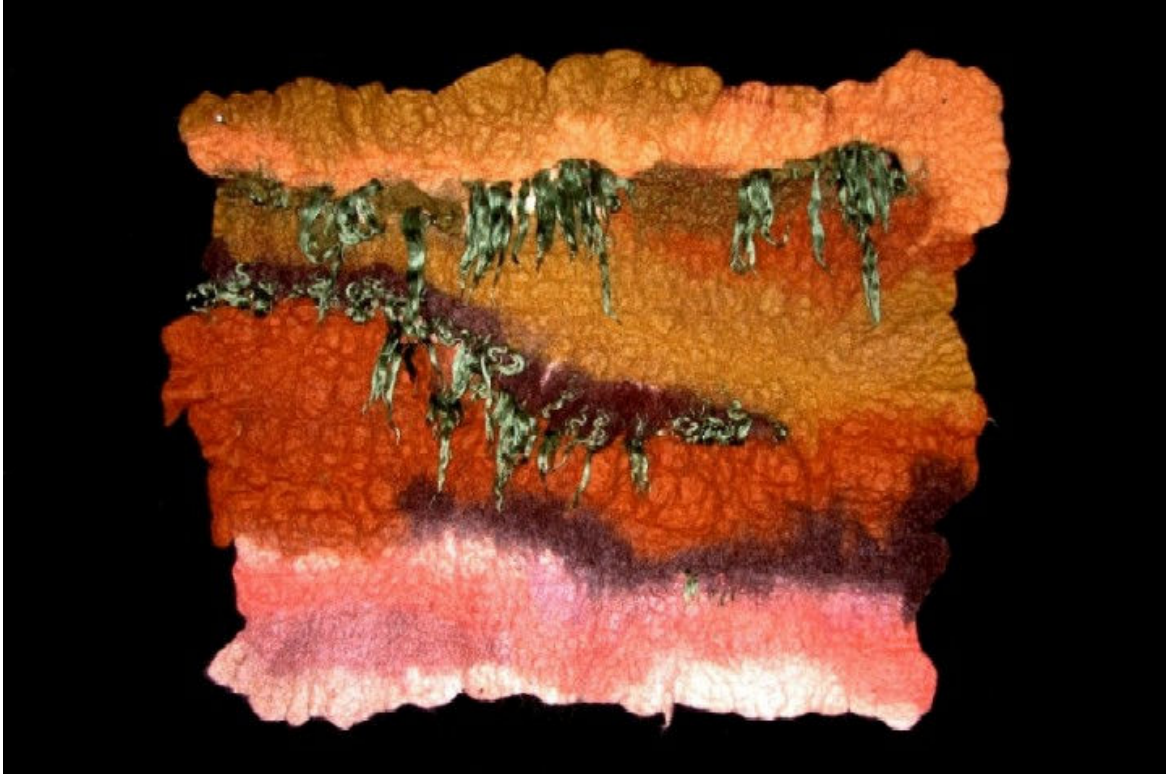


Fig.6 “New Growth: Nurturing”

The artwork “Nurturing” is 31 ½ inches tall and 39 inches wide. When looking at this at this piece, it starts with a line of green, then a line of yellow wool. The middle portion is a stripe of Ingeo fibers. Under the Ingeo fibers is a stripe of brown, green, and dark brown wool. The bottom portion of this artwork is a mix of purple, pink, and white wools.



Fig.7 “New Growth: Strength”

The artwork “Strength” is 35 inches tall and 31 inches wide. The upper portion of this piece is a mix of brown, white, yellow, green, and brown/red. The middle section has red/brown wool and dark brown wool mixed with Ingeo fiber. The lower portion of this artwork is a mix of gray wool and white wool mixed with Ingeo fiber.

CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY

My art expresses my relationship with my family, particularly the women in my family. Each piece of art reflects my personal roots in the past, drawing strength and ability from my maternal ancestors. Just as the layers of wool construct the piece of art as a whole, the women in my family and their experiences have contributed to my life and my art. The knowledge and lessons I experience in my life will be added to the generations of the past to serve as a strong foundation for future generations.

Family and earth are closely intertwined in my life. The artwork in my exhibition is an expression of this relationship. Since seeing the layering of rock and soil, the idea of layers has become an important element in my art. The mountains, comprising layers of sediment, are strong and stable. These qualities are reflected in my family. My grandparents and great-grandparents set down layers of life and knowledge from which I draw strength, security, and continuity. My life is rooted in my family's past.

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