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Photo courtesy Petra Kleis.

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ALPACA CULTURE



Janice Arnold and Claudia Cornew stretch during the dry layout phase of the immersive installation *Cave of Memories*, created for *FELT DeCoded*.

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FEATURED ARTICLES

- 16 Alpaca Direct Co-Founder Testifies at U.S. Senate
- 20 Meet Bud Synhorst
- 24 Senator Uses Alpacas as an Example of "Tax Loophole" in Video
- 32 British Alpaca Society Judges Recertification
by Mark Steele
- 38 Retail Tags
- 44 Monster Felt
by Meyla Bianco Johnston
- 54 Carcel
Transforming Lost Time into Skills,
Paid Jobs and Brighter Futures
- 66 Alpaca Partners
by Meyla Bianco Johnston

SECTIONS

- 2 Editor's Note
- 3 Our Sponsors
- 4 News
- 12 Online
- 78 Innovations
- 80 Around the Farm
- 96 Spotlight

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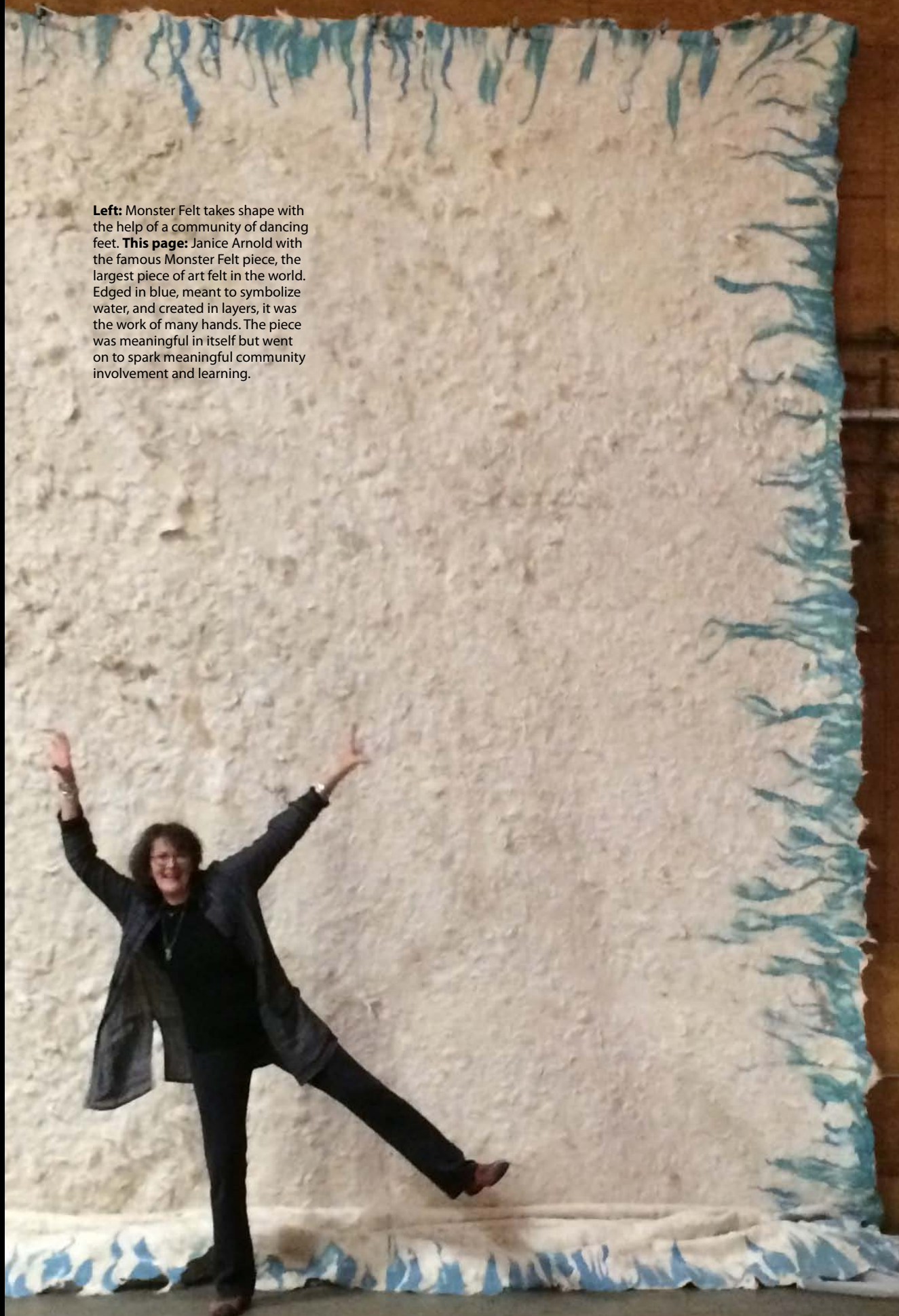


Monster Felt: Big Project, Huge Ideas

By Meyla Bianco Johnston
Photos courtesy Janice Arnold

All felt starts its life as fiber, humbly protecting an animal from the elements and keeping it warm and dry. Once shorn, the separate fibers from each animal begin a journey toward a variety of uses. Through agitation and sometimes the addition of water, the fibers join together permanently to create a cohesive unit. No longer considered fiber, this surprisingly strong and impervious matted material has been used by humans for multiple generations. In fact, it is the oldest form of cloth.

Left: Monster Felt takes shape with the help of a community of dancing feet. **This page:** Janice Arnold with the famous Monster Felt piece, the largest piece of art felt in the world. Edged in blue, meant to symbolize water, and created in layers, it was the work of many hands. The piece was meaningful in itself but went on to spark meaningful community involvement and learning.



Honoring Tradition

Today, felt is used for a wide range of products. You'll find felt used to deaden engine noise in the airplane cabin when installed underneath aluminum airplane panels. It is the eight by ten sheets you may have used in art projects in grade school or even more recently as an adult. Resilient and flame retardant, it does not fray and is tough enough to be exposed to the elements. For this reason, felt's original purpose may have been as the traditional material used to cover yurts, the moveable households of Mongolian nomads.

Felt also happens to be the medium of choice for one artist creating exciting conceptual art. Janice Arnold and her large team have created a very large piece of felt inspired by the rhythms and natural efficiency of traditional, felt-reliant societies.

The Museum of Craft and Design in San Francisco will showcase Janice Arnold's Monster Felt piece and others through June 4 in an exhibition called FELT DeCoded | Wool: Nature's Technology, sponsored by Woolmark.

"I really love this nomadic tradition of community felt making, which is the way felt started," Arnold says. "In the traditional sense, when you make felt to cover yurts to protect your family and keep you warm in the winter and cool in summer, it takes a village to make the felt that big.

"The tradition comes from central Asia, a part of the world sometimes poetically referred to as the "Motherland of Felt."

"It was for the nomads a way that they could survive and become more independent," Arnold says. "Because they could take their dwellings and move to new areas where they could reap the benefits of the environment but also they could transport their homes to follow better weather." Thick, weatherproof, strong and insulative, felt is perhaps the earliest high-tech building material.

"It really gave freedom to early people. I just think it is great to honor the tradition and also recognize how it is a metaphor for modern times in that we are all nomads in a sense. So here is a material that has been protecting and supporting a traditional way of life for thousands of years and the fact that we can recreate it and have people learn about it from that perspective helps people understand material, fabric and textiles in a new way."

Monster Project

Dubbed "Monster Felt," this is more than an art installation viewed from a distance and as an expression of one person's vision. Arnold characterizes the project

as a community building commission.

"I saw this as an opportunity to re-create that tradition and in so doing, not only educate people in the community about the resource of wool but also to build community and give the people the opportunity to reenact this thousands and thousands of year-old tradition that isn't being done anymore," Arnold says.

Measuring 30 long by 15 feet wide, the piece was created over a period of about four years. Arnold planned for it to be that size based on how much wool she had and what the maximum size could be. She also spoke with the community about what their collective goals were.

She offered a caution up front, explaining to the participants that she had never made a piece of felt that big before and lowering expectations in case it failed to materialize perfectly. Arnold even said it might not work at all; it was new territory for her as an artist. She focused instead on the work being process driven, a learning experience, a community building experience versus a product. Arnold made it clear that they may not end up with a beautiful carpet at the end and said that as long as they all kept a process-oriented mindset, she was satisfied.

In keeping with the communal theme, the source of the alpaca fiber is a local farm and the overall piece is made almost entirely of donated fiber. "In a community-building project like this I try to work with as many local growers and farms as possible," Arnold points out. The alpaca fiber came from Maggie DiUlio of Casa de Arboles Alpacas in Monroe, Washington. Maggie DiUlio donated about 25-30 pounds of alpaca seconds. DiUlio has since moved her farm to England.

Incubating Creativity, Repurposing Dreams

The Monster Felt piece was created with additional help from Mighty Tieton, an incubator for artisan businesses based in Tieton, a central Washington town.

Founder of Mighty Tieton Ed Marquand had seen a project Arnold had done at the Grand Rapids Art Museum in Michigan and wanted to make it happen in his town.

Arnold describes Marquand as the visionary behind seeing Tieton as an incubator community. He created a model for what is happening around the country where agricultural buildings are no longer being used for their original purposes because of how technology has changed.

In this particular example, the practice of refrigeration of apples has evolved and has left many empty buildings. One of these old apple warehouses served

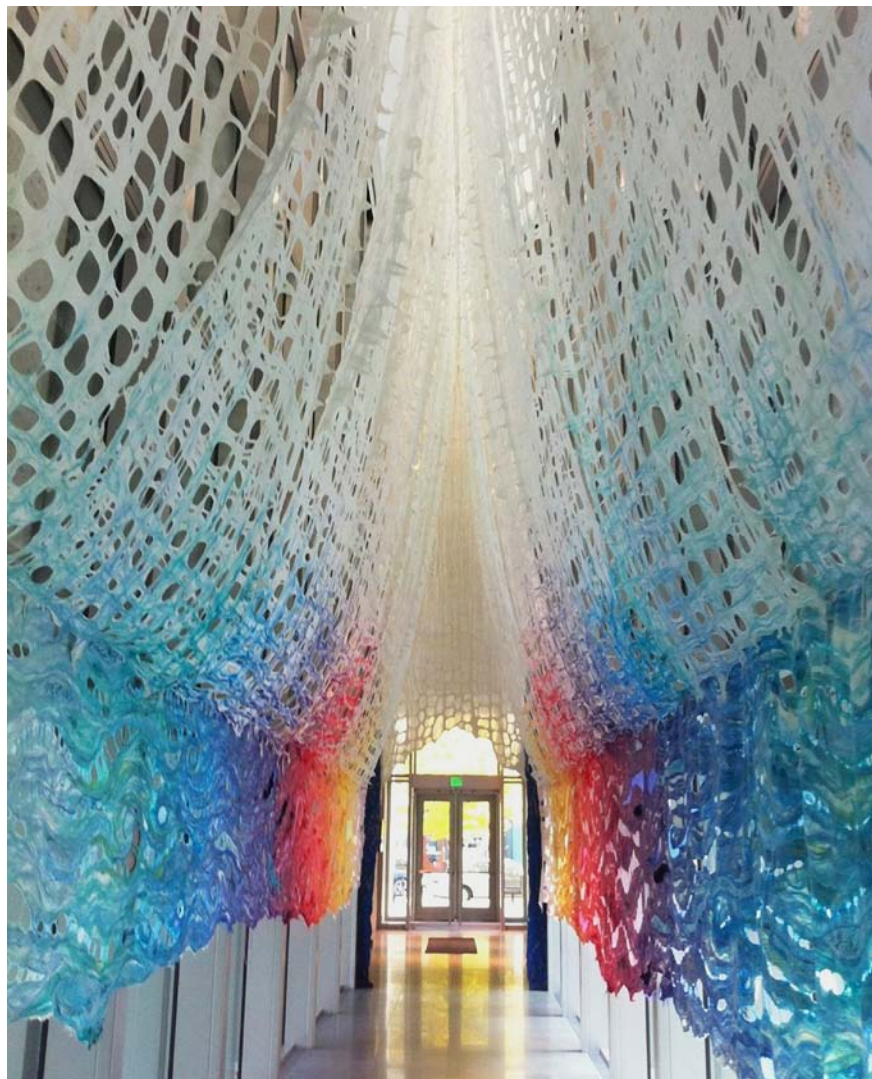


Janice Arnold and Claudia Cornew stretch to arrange fibers "just so" during the dry layout phase of the immersive installation *Cave of Memories*, created for FELT DeCoded.

OTHER WORKS



BY
JANICE
ARNOLD



Above: "Chroma passage" creates a tunnel the observer is enveloped in as they travel through. Felt artist Janice Arnold says this was a site specific immersive installation at the Grand Rapids Art Museum in 2010. It "pays homage to the interaction between water and light." **Far left:** "Cave of Memories," hanging out to dry. This gauzy, lacy work was photographed with the wind moving through its voids. Arnold says, "This series was designed to be hung separately or connected in various ways to respond to the installation site."



Left: "Rock Party," felted rocks in natural colors photographed in the natural world, where they originated in the larger sense. Arnold explains, that she likes whimsy; here she begins with objects normally considered hard and cold and gives them a new perspective in wool – cozy and warm.

as the perfect space for working on the felt project. “Without these massive buildings there would not have been a place to dry the Monster Felt between sessions of felting,” Arnold says.

Marquand’s reinvestment in the community took the form of employing resources and people in new ways. He saw the art as an opportunity to bring back the traditional way of life, invest in local community and bring artists in.

Sum and Substance: the Actual Material and How it was Made

Physically, the felt is layered. The alpaca fiber is on the surface of the work and the base of it is a blend of domestic American wool. It includes a number of types, everything from Romeldale to Corriedale to Wensleydale – coarser, strong fibers suited to making a large piece of felt with structural integrity.

Created in the traditional way, the felt was first prepared. Arnold says, “As a community, we picked the fiber apart by hand as they do in Central Asia. It wasn’t carded by machines – it was all hand-picked. Then I gave people the opportunity to use hot water in buckets and carefully wet all the fibers.”

The fibers were agitated in a variety of novel ways – one of which was a dance party at the old apple warehouse.

Arnold laid the picked wool down on a tarp, then added a layer of netting on top. Next, the DJ started spinning and the people were set loose with their moves to add agitation to the wet wool.

The dancing was partly in celebration of making felt – an acknowledgement of the process – and of the material itself. The music catered to a variety of tastes. Some was hip-hop, a few retro tunes were played and even a little swing took its turn.

The variety of the music echoed the range of people taking part. Arnold said, “What was amazing was that here was a community that has a lot of Mexican Americans, a lot of art patrons from Seattle, people coming from the Portland, Oregon area and they all converged for this weekend event and they were all dancing together on this material, which was a metaphor for how we bring world peace about – by working together. And felt, as a medium, is a perfect way to bring that example; one fiber is not strong on its own. But when felted together it becomes durable and strong and you can’t rip it apart. So when people work together and make something together they are far stronger than they are as an individual.”

After the dancing, the felt was dried and put into “hibernation” because at the time, Arnold was “caregiving for my elderly parents and I could not spend more than a few days at a time away from them.”

Little by little, technique by technique, by way of hundreds of dancing feet, the Monster Felt began to take shape.

Kicking it Down the Road

Arnold later worked on it with disadvantaged youth who needed to do community service. “We unrolled the piece outside on a tarp and they took sun-heated water and then beat it.” This is another central Asian technique: “kicking the felt down the road.”

Arnold explains, “Here were these kids who were troubled in school, they come from very challenging backgrounds, and in the Yakima Valley area, they have a lot of crime and a lot of displaced kids. At the end of the day, they were completely empowered by the fact that they now had a skill and knew how to make something that nobody else they knew was familiar with. Not everybody gets to work on the largest piece of felt in the world.”

Besides human energy, the project next harnessed some horsepower, too. Arnold explains that pulling felt behind a horse is a traditional Mongolian technique. A dressage horse from the community, General, owned by José Muñiz, was located. Highly trained, dressage horses are very responsive. Muñiz noted that General had done some logging previously and knew how to pull a load as well as to step carefully.

Arnold set up a 15-foot long PVC pole and they hooked it up behind the horse. When the felt was wet, Arnold guesses it weighed between 600-700 pounds. It was a bit of a learning curve for the horse, but it worked. The felt got even stronger.

The blue part of the felt that frames the piece is a reference to water because Arnold likes to honor it as an element. Arnold says that water is often included in her work as an element because “water is integral to water, life, to felt and the planet.”

The Exhibition

FELT DeCoded | Wool: Nature’s Technology includes several galleries, which as a whole, make up the felt exhibition where the Monster Felt will be shown.

Having her work shown at the Museum of Craft and Design in San Francisco is, to Arnold, “A great honor and a lifelong dream come to fruition.” She wanted the museum visitor to understand wool as the “amazing, miracle material that it is.”



Above: The Monster Felt piece holding pride of place at Janice Arnold's Felt Decoded | Wool: Nature's Technology at the Museum of Craft and Design. Being used as a screen here, video and images of traditional felt manufacture were projected upon it. Always mindful of the culture felt was born in, Arnold pays homage to central Asia, the "Motherland of Felt" by including a traditional Mongolian felt costume with ornate detail in the foreground. Image courtesy Henrik Kam.

Left: The exhibit itself ran from February to June 2017 and showcased not just the Monster Felt piece but other felt art and practical items. Educational vignettes illustrated methods of making felt, the uses of felt and the world cultures surrounding it. Image courtesy Henrik Kam.

The exhibition is mostly art, she explains, but art with context and chronology of felt and wool starting many billions of years ago with the evolution of sheep and alpacas and other early animals.

The Science of Wool lab shows the process of making felt the nomadic way, the formula for which has not changed in eons. It incorporates video, photographs and opportunities for museum patrons to touch the material to gain experiential knowledge.


Special scopes allow visitors to look at knitted fiber, felt and woven wool magnified between 50-300 times. Visitors can then examine a 3D printed model of Wensleydale wool, Merino wool silk, cotton and polyester. Each is highly enlarged and can be touched, driving home concepts.

The Monster Felt is also being used as a projection screen at the museum and will show a 30-minute loop of footage of contemporary felt being made in Asia. The

visitors will have just learned about how felt was made. The video will then allow them to see how felt making takes place in real life, providing a cultural reference point and showing the continuity of an ancient art form in the process of evolving.

As for the future, Arnold hopes the interactive show can eventually travel so more people can learn about felt.

Felt, a humble material, may not seem at first to be a catalyst for change. By all accounts unassuming, this felt project nonetheless raises questions. Can felt unite cultures? Can felt heal wounds? Can felt magnify positivity? Can felt create joy?

The Monster Felt project proves it can! 

Watch videos of the felt being created using horses and humans:
www.AlpacaCulture.com > Magazine > Video Page.

SOURCES:

- Personal interview Janice Arnold.

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