



In Review

San Francisco, California

Reviewed by Barbara Shapiro

FELT DeCoded / Wool: Nature's Technology San Francisco Museum of Craft and Design

In San Francisco, the heart of high tech, it is all about coding. Appropriately, **FELT DeCoded / Wool: Nature's Technology** deciphers the many facets of this fascinating fiber. The exhibit at the **San Francisco Museum of Craft and Design** (February 11–June 4, 2017) explores every aspect, from the science of wool and age-old traditions to contemporary artistic and architectural uses. Visual artist and curator **Janice Arnold** created most of the objects in the show, attesting to her profound mastery of material. Her sensually attractive recent work throughout the exhibit is both technically and conceptually strong.

At a highly magnified and cellular level, *The Science of Felt* display in the anti-chamber explains how wool is uniquely suited to create a nonwoven material. A Proscope™ allows visitors to see how individual fibers migrate through the process of wet friction to create durable textiles. A classic blackboard provides an exquisite technical drawing of wool's cellular structure by **Heather Taylor**, with imagery sourced from CSIRO Research. Other visual aids, including digitally printed 3D forms, clarify the many steps required to transform raw fleece into fabric.

In the main gallery, *Arnold's Cave of Memories* is a huge tent-like canopy created from eighteen 40-foot panels of the finest handmade long staple Wensleydale fleece. With only 7 grams of wool per square foot, the 4000-square-foot textile retains a swirling lacy quality. Subtle rivers of indigo visually link together various panels of this impressive meditation on life and care giving. The time-consuming process of making felt is Arnold's response to the 3½ years she recently devoted to the care of her aging parents in their final years. A technical tour-de-force, the open quality of the work belies its actual strength.

Objects under the canopy also speak eloquently about the passage of time. *Folded Time* is a 230-pound pyramid of folded blue and white wool felt pieces, with recycled coffee bags and metallic organza sandwiched between the layers. It suggests the memories that get folded into our brains as time passes but cannot always be retrieved.

Leaving the nurturing embrace of *Cave of Memories*, we explore architectural uses of felt with several of Arnold's commercial commissions. A woven wall of elegant white industrial felt created for a restaurant, a colorful display of sound-absorbing felt veneer tiles, various furniture collaborations, and the *Topography of Time* wall piece all muffle noise and comfort the body.



FELT DeCoded installation view of **JANICE ARNOLD's Cave of Memory** (2017, wool, indigo-dyed lyocell, human hair, wet felting, 50' x 70') and **Folded Time** (2016, recycled burlap coffee bags, wool, reclaimed metallic organza scraps, mohair, lyocell, wet felting, 277' of folded handmade felt with widths between 18"–38", 48" x 46" x 38"). Detail **RIGHT**.
Photos: Henrik Kam.



Meandering through the exhibit are seven 12-foot-tall "soft walls" chronicling Arnold's recent projects that push the limits of her material while progressing from traditional motifs to contemporary aesthetics. Nearby we learn of felt used in piano construction and other industrial applications. The *Forms of Felt* videos differentiate machine-made felt, dry-processed felt, and mostly wet-processed handmade felt created for art, interiors, and clothing.

BELOW: FELT DeCoded installation view of **JANICE ARNOLD's Architectural Sound Baffles**, **Stratigraphic Felt Bench**, and **Topography of Time** wall piece (detail **TOP LEFT**). All images shown courtesy of the artist and the San Francisco Museum of Art and Design.





INSET: FELT DeCoded installation view of JANICE ARNOLD's "soft walls," interior design explorations, and Cave of Memories. Detail of JANICE ARNOLD's Arabian Mosque Panel (2017, de-warped linen burlap, wool, lyocell, silk fiber, wet felting, 18' x 5').

BELOW: FELT DeCoded installation view of Janice Arnold's The Science of Felt anti-chamber.

The main focus of the back wall is *Mighty Tieton Monster Felt*, a gigantic rug created under Arnold's supervision by volunteers from Tieton, Washington, using regional wool and alpaca fibers. This collaborative project was the largest communal felt object and the first nomadic horse felting event in North America. Projected on the giant rug is **Christine Martens'** video of traditional Central Asian nomadic felt making by regional artisans.

A few examples of traditional felt clothing lead to the grand finale, a huge *Artist's Chronology of Wool and Felt*. This invaluable teaching aid stretches from Deep Time and the Distant Past through Nomads and Poodle Skirts, ending with a hopeful Comeback in the present. Arnold's exhibition (sponsored by **The Woolmark Company**) truly fulfills her goal to offer a "a global view of a remarkable, naturally renewable material that embodies the wonder and wisdom of the natural world." Visitors of all ages and cultural backgrounds will agree that "wool and felt have stood the test of time!" www.sfmcd.org

Janice Arnold: www.jafelt.com

The Woolmark Company: www.woolmark.com

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