

A FEEL FOR FELT



A series of high-end architectural commissions is helping Toronto artist **Kathryn Walter take one of the world's oldest textiles to new places**

By Olivia Stren

Kathryn Walter answers the door of her Toronto house wearing felt Birkenstock-style sandals and a buttermilk-coloured felt vest. The wall in the entranceway is lined with the same material (it insulates against the cold), while shoes rest on felt mats (it wicks away water). Evidently, even the two family cats are fans: a well-clawed felt stool, about the size of a maple tree stump, sits in the living room, awaiting the next assault.

As if there could be any doubt about her medium of choice, Walter states the obvious: "I'm kind of obsessed with felt."

She studied visual arts at Emily Carr University of Art and Design in Vancouver, and spent years as a curator and creator of installations before mounting an exhibit about felt for Toronto's Textile Museum of Canada in 1999. Then something about the material spoke to her as a creator. "I realized its scope, its versatility, and how many applications it could have," she says. "I thought, 'I could make stuff out of this.'"

So she did. She made felt bags, wine carriers, notebooks and coasters, selling her creations at a range of high-end Canadian retailers, from the established (Holt Renfrew) to the avant-garde (Vancouver's Bruce). In 2002, Toronto architect Johnson Chou commissioned her to create panels of corrugated felt (its look, curiously, at once steely and snug) for the office and lounge of a Toronto ad agency. Around the same time, Bruce Mau asked her to develop a form of tactile signage that was eventually adopted for the Walt Disney Concert Hall in L.A. It didn't take long for her to become felt maker laureate to the design world. For the Wosk Theater, a screening room at the Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance, she lined curving walls in striated, subtly colour-variegated felt to create a cave-like, Flinstonian effect. These Striation panels have been featured at the Cooper-Hewitt in New York (and will be re-exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Craft + Design, beginning in October), the Le Germain hotel's new Calgary location, and at *Zoolander* screenwriter John Hamburg's private Manhattan residence (where the panels serve as screening room doors).





1 In 2006, Walter covered New York architecture firm Diller Scofidio + Renfro's perforated office partitions with felt.

2 Walter in her studio.

3 Released this year, Walter's simple, almost primitive-looking stools recall felt's origins as our oldest textile - but their minimalist shapes befit modern settings. \$550, madedesign.ca

4 For the 2009 exhibition Fashioning Felt, at New York's Cooper-Hewitt, Walter devised felt moulding to mimic the woodwork in the Georgian manor house where the museum is located.



Walter's connection to the textile is arguably a birthright. Her grandfather, who emigrated to Canada in the 1890s, imported industrial felt from his native Germany and sold it for use in cold-weather apparel (boot liners, hats) and later in car parts (gaskets, filters, seals). Walter is loyal to family tradition (and so is her brother, from whose manufacturing company in Toronto she sources her felt supply). Unlike many crafters, who tend to make their own felt – essentially pressed wool – by hand, she favours the basic shapes, stolid nature and clean cuts of felt born by machine.

When asked what she loves most about felt, what Walter summons is more ode than explanation: "It has a primal quality and is kind of alive: it stretches and shrinks, is fussy in terms of care, and demands to be in higher-end spaces." The material's contradictory qualities have continued to captivate her: felt is strong enough to resist fire, but also capricious, and vulnerable to its environment. It ranges from hockey puck hardness to "cushiony" (an actual industrial felt term); works happily in both the industrial and domestic spheres; and while it claims ancient origins (it's believed to be the first man-made cloth, and Mongolians have for centuries used it to build carpets and yurts), the textile remains not only relevant but fashionable.

Felt owes some of its recent resurgence to the general organic revolution. Design collectors are buying Kathryn Walter's felt stools for the same reason they're buying, say, canvas grocery totes and fair trade coffee. "Felt is sustainable and has an organic aesthetic," she says. Though her application of felt is innovative, her highly contemporary workmanship is rooted in a tradition of reuse. "I'm a *bricoleur*," she says. "I'm interested in using what already exists."

Walter's home decor accessories are indeed a pastiche of leftovers: her felt bowls, which have the vaguely unwieldy look of unfinished pottery, are made from remnants of her Striation series, while her patchwork quilts are constructed out of roll ends and offcuts. One of the driving forces behind her work is the potential for new uses for the material. She picks up a square of felt, like any artist with a blank canvas, considering the infinite. "I'd like to make hats before I die," she says. **AZ**





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8 A woven panel, 1.2 metres by 2.8 metres, was conceived as a wall treatment for a Seattle hotel project by Yabu Pushelberg.

9 5 Yard Vessels, a former exhibit now in the collection at Ontario's Cambridge Galleries. Each container was fashioned from a single strip of felt.

10 Walter makes custom quilts from the remnants of her other projects. feltstudio.com

11 Disk-O wallpaper, now used in numerous projects. The panels consist of disks on a solid background, and can be rolled and fitted together like wallpaper.



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5 For the Wosk Theater, at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, Walter lined the screening room's rounded walls with fabric panels. "Felt softens a space, both aesthetically and acoustically," she says.

6 Entrance to the Wosk Theater. Walter created the technique for layering strips of felt, now her Striation series, as a commission for Cannon Design's Yazdani Studio.

7 Room 416, one of a series of artist-designed guest rooms at Toronto's Gladstone Hotel. Pop-up tiles are accented by lamps that scatter soft light, for an integrated felt environment.



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