

THAT'S HOW SHE FELT

BENNY CHAN OF FOTOWORKS, COURTESY OF YAZDANI STUDIO OF CANNON DESIGN



ARTIST AND DESIGNER KATHRYN WALTER ELEVATES A BASIC UTILITARIAN TEXTILE TO THE REALM OF THE SUBLIME.

DESIGNER FELT STUDIO
TEXT LESUE JEN

Textiles have traditionally been the domain of female artists and craftspeople—to wit, Canadian practitioners like the late Joyce Wieland and Victoria-based Luanne Martineau, who utilizes traditional and laborious needle-felting techniques in her provocative sculptural work. Artist and designer Kathryn Walter carries on this proud tradition, generating an astonishing range of products independently alongside collaborative installations with other art- and design-related disciplines. However, the industrial quality of the wool felt she artfully transforms provides a definitively gender-neutral complement to hard-edged modern interiors, softening the effect with a literal warm and fuzzy surface that begs to be touched.

Based in Toronto, Walter is no stranger to the world of felt. An immigrant from Germany, her great-grandfather established E.F. Walter Inc. in 1893, a company specializing in the manufacture and distribution of everyday felt products such as boot liners, gaskets, seals and other automotive parts. While not a manufacturer of the textile itself, the Toronto company orders the felt from primarily local sources. Walter's brother Tim is the current president, the fourth generation of the Walter family to run the company.

With a background in fine art, Walter spent years sculpting, curating and teaching, before establishing a new branch of her family's business. In 1999, she curated an exhibition for what is now known as the Textile Museum of Canada—aptly titled *Felt*—which inspired her to get back to her role as maker, this time utilizing the industrial textile that has permeated

her entire life—an irresistible new medium for her art.

In the past, felt evoked memories of Christmas crafts and children's art projects, but in recent years, it has been reinvented as a highly fashionable material with a broad range of applications. With FELT Studio, Walter has been a key player in this realm, designing chic accessories, furniture, soft sculpture, and interior architectural applications. Her initial foray a decade ago began with the production of accessory items such as handbags and briefcases, which were carried in specialty boutiques like Holt Renfrew and the Art Gallery of Ontario's gift shop. The scope of her work gradually expanded to include patchwork quilts and furniture items like a cozy felt armchair and more recently, the *Spool Stool*, beautifully and ever so simply formed from a tightly wound band of thick felt. Eurolite currently distributes her *Hanging Pearl* pendant lamp; its cylindrical felt shade is punched through with a regular pattern of round holes which cast wonderful patterns of light in any given space.

With her products available commercially, Walter began to garner the attention of architects and designers, with whom she collaborates on a variety of projects, both in Canada and the US. In 2002, Bruce Mau invited her to develop signage for the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, rendered most attractively in felt and stainless steel. Shortly thereafter, she designed pleated felt wall installations for Toronto advertising firm Grip Limited and in 2005, she was one of a number of artists asked to individually redesign the guestrooms at the refurbished Gladstone Hotel in Toronto (see *CA*, September 2005), a large-scale art project that has been more than well received.

Since then, she has developed an impressive repertoire of strategies for these architectural installations, attaining a variety of effects. For example, the *Striation* series is one of the most popular and sought-after applications in which strips of felt are irregularly layered in a horizontal fashion, achiev-



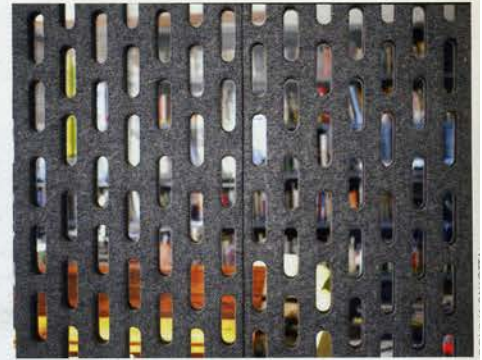
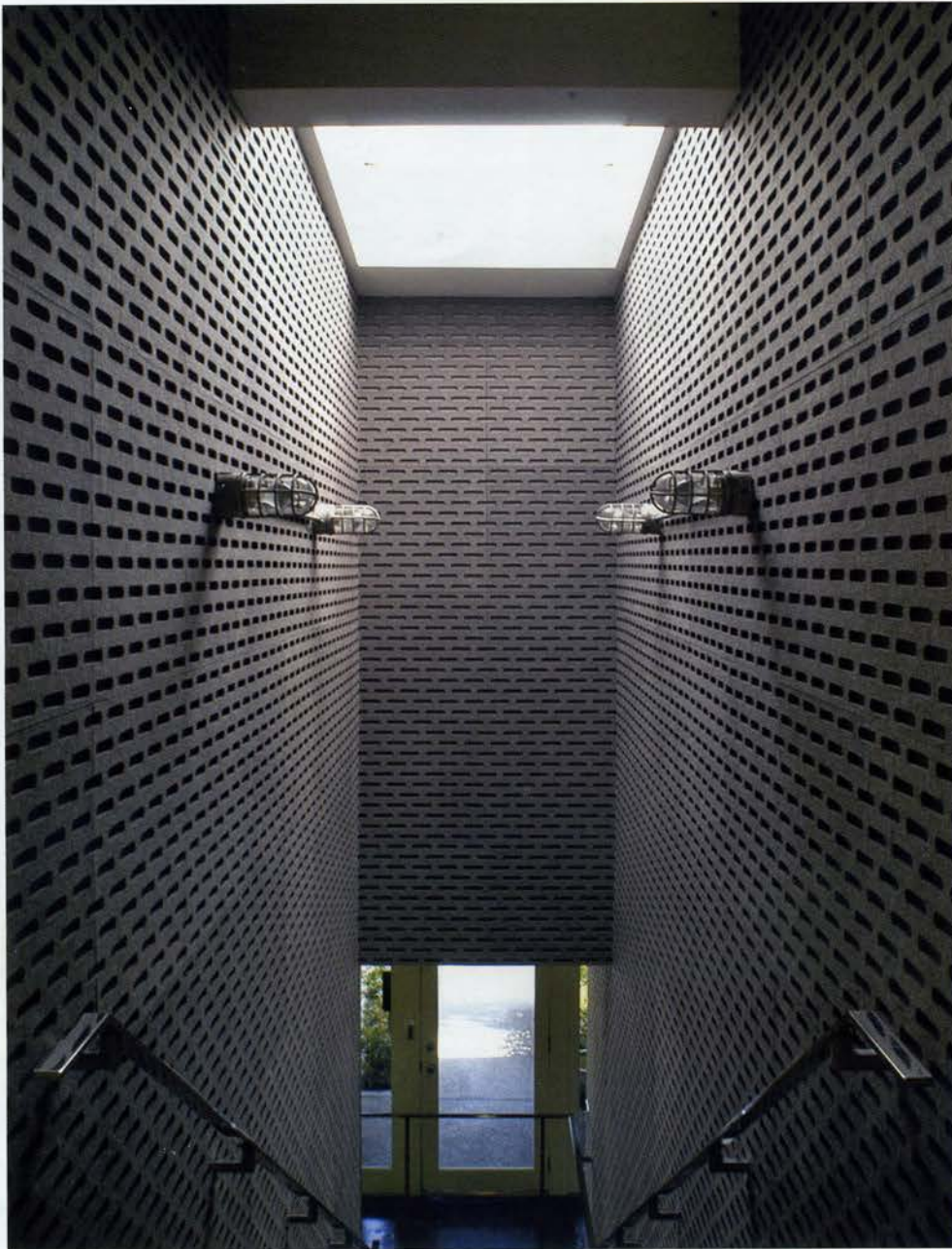
ing much the same effect as a stonemason does. It is a time-consuming endeavour, and Walter likens the process to painting, selecting from her palette of chunky felt strips which vary subtly in colour and texture. The end result is a product of substantial materiality that showcases the thickness and fibrous character of the raw textile. To minimize waste, she uses leftover felt scraps to create these extraordinary bricolages of earth-toned felt that evoke mineral accretions found in nature. Projects that have utilized the striation technique include interior sliding panel doors for the Hamburg Residence in New York's Greenwich Village, interior enclosures for Jamie Kennedy Kitchens in Toronto, and the striking Wosk Theater in Los Angeles's Museum of Toler-

OPPOSITE THE WOSK THEATER AT THE MUSEUM OF TOLERANCE IN LOS ANGELES BENEFITS FROM THE AESTHETIC AND ACOUSTIC PROPERTIES OF KATHRYN WALTER'S STRIATED FELT WALLS. **ABOVE** THE ARTIST BUSY AT WORK IN HER STUDIO. **BOTTOM** THREE DETAILED IMAGES ILLUSTRATE THE VARIETY OF EFFECTS THAT WALTER HAS ACHIEVED WITH FELT: DIFFERING WIDTHS OF FELT STRIPS ARE WOVEN INTO A SCREEN, 3D FELT WALL TILES ENTITLED *GRID* CONVEY A STRONG SCULPTURAL QUALITY, AND LEFTOVER STRIPS OF VARIEGATED FELT ARE LAID HORIZONTALLY IN THE *STRIATION* SERIES.

ance. For this space, Yazdani Studio of Cannon Design commissioned Walter to sheathe the curving walls with the variegated felt strips to create an attractive and superior acoustic environment. And this month, the BC Museum of Mining in Britannia Beach will unveil a striation installation by Walter, who has appropriately incorporated copper—a mined substance—amidst the felt bands.

It's important to note that aside from some occasional machine-cutting, Walter produces virtually everything by hand, an incredibly painstaking process. For instance, the felt bubble tiles she created for the guestroom wall at the Gladstone Hotel are not embossed or machine-formed, but instead are made individually. She begins by cutting a circle out of the centre of a perfectly square felt tile, into which a slightly larger circular





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE GEORGE YU ARCHITECTS SPECIFIED WALTER'S CAD-CAM-CUT PERFORATED FELT WALL TILES FOR THE OXYGEN MEDIA STUDIOS IN LOS ANGELES; A CLOSEUP VIEW OF THE PERFORATED FELT AND POLYCARBONATE PANELS USED IN DILLER SCOFIDIO + RENFRO'S STUDIO IN NEW YORK; A GRID OF HANDCRAFTED FELT BUBBLE TILES COVERS THE WALL IN SUITE 416 AT TORONTO'S GLADSTONE HOTEL; SLIDING DOOR PANELS ADORNED WITH FELT STRIATIONS ENCLOSE A SCREENING ROOM IN A PRIVATE NEW YORK RESIDENCE.

disc of felt is pressed and manipulated by hand, resulting in a convex semi-spherical bubble.

Less labour-intensive are Walter's perforated tiles and panels, which provide an intriguingly patterned and textured surface. For the tiles, the holes are CAD-CAM-cut and applied to a felt backing, an approach that George Yu Architects commissioned for the entrance and stairwell walls of the Oxygen Media Studios in Los Angeles. Similarly, large rigid felt-and-polycarbonate panels on a steel frame were specified as spatial interior dividers for Diller Scofidio + Renfro's

architecture studio in New York. The perforated panels create wonderfully porous surfaces which also afford some degree of visual privacy.

More recent developments include the standard process of weaving varying widths of felt into wall surfaces. Felt strips behave as individual fibres at a highly enlarged scale, woven into a cushiony-soft and appealingly tactile product. In 2007, venerable interior design firm Yabu Pushelberg commissioned Walter to design a woven felt artisan screen for a model suite in Seattle's Hotel One. And Walter has also moved

into the realm of large-scale iconic motifs for Native Child and Family Services in Toronto, where a thunderbird-inspired graphic defines softly sculptural double-sided sliding walls that are rendered in felt bas-relief, a collaboration with Levitt Goodman Architects and Seventh Generation Image-Makers.

With hands-on experience as an artist and maker of objects, Walter bridges between designers and tradespeople effortlessly. While she is brought into a project early on by an architect or designer, she is equally active at the installation stage of a project, working side by side with millworkers and other contractors to physically complete the work. This truly collaborative process at all levels of the project enables her to maintain creative integrity and quality control of the initial concept right through to the final in-



stall. And despite the highly practical nature of the architectural projects in which she's involved, Walter occupies the enviable position of straddling two worlds: she is a designer who creates very-much-in-demand functional objects and installations, but she also gets to operate purely within the realm of art, conducting explorations in her desired medium with materials of her choosing. Fine art and curation is still a very big part of her practice, and some of her feltworks are not necessarily intended for commercial production. For instance, the highly amusing *Butter for Beuys* is a lidded container—ostensibly for butter storage—which pays homage to seminal 20th-century German artist Joseph Beuys, whose material preoccupation with felt and fat originated from his claim that Tatar tribesmen rescued him from a World War II plane crash, nursing him back to health by wrapping his broken body in felt and fat. In this realm of soft sculpture, the butter dish appears to be a progenitor or variant of her spiralling *Vessels* series, where bowls of varying sizes and shapes are crafted from one single long strip of felt, wound into shape and glued into place.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE A THUNDERBIRD MOTIF IS MANIFEST IN FELT BAS-RELIEF THAT FORMS DOUBLE-SIDED SLIDING WALLS AT NATIVE CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES IN TORONTO; A HANDSOME LOG CARRIER FASHIONED FROM FELT IS ONE OF WALTER'S EARLIER PROJECTS; DISTRIBUTED BY EUROLITE, THE HANGING PEARL LIGHT FIXTURE CASTS INTRIGUINGLY SPOTTY PATTERNS. **BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT** BUTTER FOR BEUYS IS A LIDDED CONTAINER THAT DELIGHTFULLY ACKNOWLEDGES 20TH-CENTURY GERMAN ARTIST JOSEPH BEUYS AND HIS PREOCCUPATIONS WITH FELT AND FAT; THE VESSELS SERIES—SOFTLY SCULPTURAL CONTAINERS CRAFTED FROM A SINGLE STRIP OF SPIRALLING WOOL FELT GLUED INTO PLACE; WALTER MOVES INTO THE REALM OF FURNITURE DESIGN WITH THE SPOOL STOOL.

A self-produced publication entitled *124 Pieces of Felt: A Primer for the Home* (2006) quirkily demonstrates the numerous potential applications of felt. In it, Walter instructs readers to “make your own furnishings and accessories from a collection of household wares in this do-it-yourself guide to rustic modern living.” Examples of the items she has crafted from felt include bowls, placemats, coasters, furniture liners, window coverings, blankets, pillows, quilts and a log carrier, among others. She acknowledges that the textile does have obvious limitations on a practical level, but this slim volume illustrates that the artist is boldly exploring, expanding material boundaries, and most importantly, creating.

It's clear that Walter is passionate about felt; she is seduced by its rawness, complexity,

warmth and mythology. Moreover, she displays impressive knowledge about the textile—how it's made, where it can be sourced, and the versatility and appropriateness of its use. In keeping with her love of the multidisciplinary collaborative process, Walter's considerable skills with felt are currently being exercised in an exhilaratingly novel fashion—as a costumer and set designer in a dance/theatre workshop that takes place this October. **CA**

Kathryn Walter continues to exhibit her work in Canada and the US, and is currently featured in FABRICation: Studio Production Textiles for Interiors, a group exhibition of Canadian textile artists on show at Cambridge Galleries Design at Riverside until October 17, 2010.

