



form function felt

Sarah Nasby

Kathryn Walter is a Toronto artist/designer working exclusively in the medium of felt. Her interest in the material stems from her family's felt business that has been in operation for over one hundred years. Her work ranges from large-scale wall installations to furniture to accessories, all executed in the same standard, grey industrial felt. She has produced a short video, *Deeply Felt*, and handbook, *124 Pieces of Felt, A Primer for the Home*, which celebrate the versatility and many possible domestic applications of the material. *Spool Stool* was featured in Toronto's Radiant Dark 2010 exhibition of new Canadian design and epitomizes a pure example of her chosen material.

Spool Stool is a stout roll of uniformly cut thick, gray felt available in either 20 or 17 inch diameters, 14 or 21 inches in height. The forms are austere in their simplicity; however, texturally they are comforting and homey owing to the soft and unassuming nature of the fabric. At the same time their presence is heavy and solid which mimics the structural qualities of the material. *Spool Stool* elegantly expresses the felt-ness of felt: its strength and durability and its basic organizing principle—the ability to roll for storage. The design extends from the artist's sensitivity to the natural characteristics of the material and the restraint in her control over the fabric. The unforced gesture of the rolled objects creates an open-ended form with proportions that make it appropriate for myriad domestic uses, from stools to tables to footrests to sculpture.

Spool Stool approaches design as an expression of material properties with specific use following secondarily. While Louis Sullivan's familiar Modernist maxim "form (ever) follows function" is commonly cited as the mantra of good design, it excludes the concurrently crucial element of the appropriate use of material with respect to its inherent physical qualities. Frank Lloyd Wright refers to this in "The Meaning of Materials" (1928) writing that, "Each material has its own message and, to the creative artist, its song... Each material speaks a language of its own just as line and colour speak... Each has a story." *Spool Stool* relates to this notion as its form directly follows the vernacular of its material.

When material becomes the driving force in design, Sullivan's adage can be seen as reversed which is evident in *Spool Stool*; its ambiguous nature relies on each person to interpret the function of its form. *Spool Stool* appears timeless through its focus on material rather than a specific design style. This approach would no doubt please Adolf Loos who famously declared ornament to be a crime as it inevitably caused an object to go out of style because of its correlation to fashion. *Spool Stool* succinctly speaks the language of felt with its style and function a reflection of that material lexicon. **O**

Sarah Nasby is a designer, artist and writer based in Toronto. She teaches design at Humber College.

Spool Stools
Photograph: Diana
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