EMBODYING FIBER: ARTFUL ADORNMENT

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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DEDICATION

For the first Kate,
whose presence in my life was so powerful;
she inspires me still.
EMBODYING FIBER: ARTFUL ADORNMENT

Felt is inherently malleable. There is an immediacy to felt that is both playful and sensuous, and is characterized by unique properties that permit almost limitless exploration. Its primary ingredient, wool, is a non-precious, wholly renewable material that exemplifies textile's longstanding associations with the body and protection. These attributes make felted fiber a dynamic medium for artistic exploration.

The neckpieces in my current body of work synthesize an interest in contemporary art jewelry and non-woven textiles. There is a tacit tactility that is part of both the process of making and the product. Using planar cloth and three dimensional elements, this work pushes at the boundaries of what felted fiber can do, exploring the dichotomous nature of felt—rigidity and flexibility, hardness and softness, density and thinness—while embracing its natural characteristics. This inherent duality can be equally expressed in the delicacy of touch and gesture that must be used to create gossamer thin layers of felted fabric from wispy fleece and in the sheer kinetic energy required to hand-felt thick, hard, rigid felt.

Each piece in this series begins with the raw stuff of fiber, un-dyed, carded wool and is literally transformed by my hands with the addition of heat, moisture and agitation. Through the incorporation of other protein and cellulosic fibers such as mohair locks, tussah silk, soy silk and even cotton, I am able to juxtapose wool’s seemingly endless capacity for absorption with the more lustrous qualities of these other fibers. While it is true that protein fibers such as hair may become entangled or knotted, only sheep’s wool has the microscopic scales and cortical structure that enables it to truly be transformed
into felt. The singularity and sensuality that is attainable in hand-made felt stands in marked contrast with the uniformity and firmness of industrial felt, yet can appear to blend seamlessly, as in “Going green” (Figure 7.)

The intrinsic qualities of the material and my engagement with the process mutually affect each other. Aesthetic decisions about design, texture, line, and form evolve equally from deliberate choices at each step of the planning and making as well as highly improvisational responses to the material itself. It is in those moment-to-moment decisions that my pieces take shape. Rather than work from a fixed plan towards a finished object, I tend to begin by creating a stockpile of elements with which I literally play, physically putting together, removing, and assembling the individual elements to a point of resolution in a process that is highly emergent. I work in a way that is akin to collage, an additive process that involves assembling different elements to create a cohesive whole.

At once whimsical and elegant, these pieces manifest an intrinsic fluidity, a dynamic sense of spontaneity captured. Circles and spheres allude to apotropaic references to eyes and their historic use to ward off malevolent forces. The ways in which each neckpiece encircles the wearer is an additional facet of this theme of protection. Soft, insulating, inviting and sometimes fanciful, the pieces in this body of work move beyond more literal associations of protective armor and skin coverings to include the understanding and recognition that beauty and humor can both be disarming. In these ways, I explore the duality of the word protection itself, both its symbolic meanings and its more explicit physical properties.

Color, or its absence, is a key element and provides an additional layer of associations to organic forms through deep saturated blues and vibrant shades of green
reminiscent of new growth. While linguistically “having the blues” can denote sadness, natural associations with blues abound, eliciting connections with clear skies and water—from swirling ripples and the movement of currents to the ebb and flow of the tide and deep cool eddies. Additionally, the color blue is itself imbued with the protective qualities associated with amulets and talismans. Blues in general, and indigo in particular, are credited historically and in contemporary examples with the power to provide magical protection from the evil eye.

In the course of this exploration, the work has become more and more cloth-like while retaining the essential sense of versatility and mutability. There is a vitality and sense of movement in the synergism of texture, form and rich earthy colors. Alternately, there are spaces and places in which color recedes, becoming almost a non-color. “Patina” (figure 8) reflects this evolution and is a good example of this. The more lyrical qualities of the cloth’s color and drape contrast with the sometimes rigid sense of containment suggested by the three-dimensional geometric elements. In this way, patterns begin to emerge in terms of these relationships.

These artful adornments exist on an intimate scale yet, unlike garments, are not tied to any particular body size—they can be worn by any person regardless of and without limitation imposed by size, age or gender. However, the body is a consideration and presence even in its absence. Therefore, in addition to purely aesthetic decisions, I must be aware of the object’s relationship to the body in terms of how the object eventually sits on and interacts with the wearer.

Designed to be read and situated on the body in a number of ways, there are powerful magnets embedded in several pieces that allow for components to be connected, interconnected and/or interchanged. Similarly, the three hollow forms nested
within the interlacing folds of “Verdant/Verdigris” (Figure 6) attach and detach by small button-like discs which slip through unseen slits in the fabric. This intentional mutability allows for various elements to be removed, repositioned, or potentially replaced so that the piece has the potential to be read and function in diverse ways.

Textiles have strong historic ties linking cloth to dress and domesticity both of which are traditionally linked to the feminine. In my own contemporary time and place we are not bound by sumptuary laws or a rigid caste system that dictates what someone can or cannot wear. Nevertheless, we convey a large amount of nonverbal information about who we are by the way in which we dress, and adorn ourselves.

Throughout this exploration is the understanding that dress and adornment are nonverbal forms of communication—social semiotics that convey information about the wearer, particularly messages regarding gender and identity. Within this framework, the wearer is not a passive armature; there is an implicit performative quality at play. Working within the language of craft, textile, and jewelry enables me to create dimensional objects that not only relate to the body but are also animated by it, allowing for a dialogue between the wearer and the object.
Figure 1

Tendrils (2010)

Merino wool, industrial felt wicking, acid dye, magnets, thread;
15 x 11.5 x 3 inches
Figure 2

**Shibori Pearls** (2010)

Merino and Corriedale wool, Tussah silk, thread, earth magnets; *Size varies with components.*
Figure 3

**Perpetuity** (2010)

Merino wool, acid dye, earth magnets, thread; 10.5 x 10.5 x 1.5 inches
Figure 4

One (2010)

Merino wool, Tussah silk, acid dye;
20 x 7 x .12 inches
Figure 5

Untitled (2010)

Merino wool, acid dye, earth magnets, industrial felt wicking, thread; variable dimensions.
Figure 6

*Verdant/Verdigris* (2011)

Merino wool fiber, acid dye, thread; 11 x 9 x 4.5 inches
Figure 7

**Going Green with interchangeable finials (2011)**

Merino wool, industrial felt, mohair locks, acid dye, magnets, thread; 16.5 x 8.5 x 2.5 inches
Figure 8

Patina (2011)

Merino wool, Tussah silk, Soy silk, acid dye, thread;
27 x 12 x 2.5 inches
Figure 9

*Current* (2010)

Merino wool, acid dye, thread; 16 x 12.5 x 2.5 inches
Figure 10

**Baubles** (2010/11)

Merino, Romney and Corriedale wool, industrial felt, acid dye, thread; 20 x 14 x 7 inches