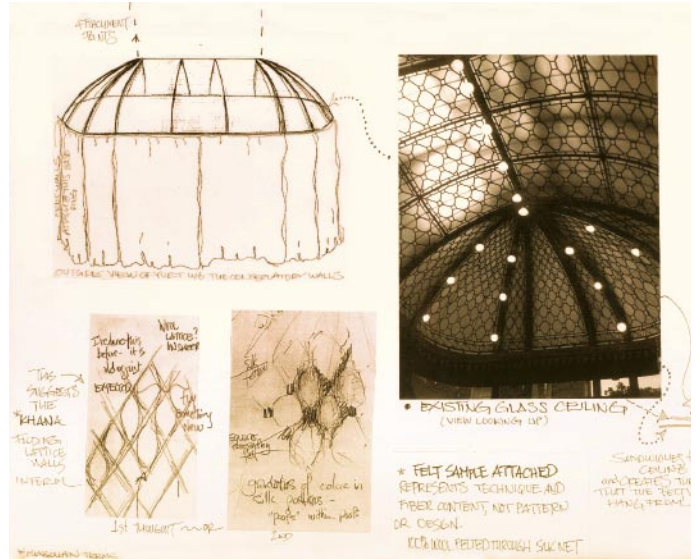


CREATIVE PROCESS | BY JANICE ARNOLD



The Palace Yurt



IN CREATING A FELT PIECE for the Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum's Fashioning Felt exhibition in New York (March 6–September 7), I wanted to honor the rich historical origins, rituals, culture, and qualities of this humble textile. My second goal was to create an interactive piece of art that elegantly enveloped the observer, showed the medium's wide diversity, and created a respite nearly outside time. It was the museum's conservatory that inspired me to create the *Palace Yurt* (2009) and to transform the space into an homage to the form and function of a yurt—the movable home of nomadic cultures for thousands of years. While the traditional yurt is always made from heavy, thick

felt, this reinterpretation was informed by the architecture and lightness of the glass room it was to fill.

My ideas often come easily. It's the process of bringing everything to reality that calls on every ounce of my imagination, inventiveness, artistry, and tenacity. Essentially, I wanted to line the entire conservatory with felt by creating fifty-eight interrelated pieces ranging between fourteen and seventeen feet high with varying widths. They would hang from a free-floating custom frame that mimicked the shape of the conservatory's domed glass ceiling and interior space.

One of my goals was to show the range of handmade felt I could make, from featherweight to thick, smooth to highly textured, and patterned to free-form. To create the actual pieces, I used a multitude of techniques, all beginning with raw wool fleece layered with other raw fibers, some nonfelting, such as silk and linen. Wool shrinks dramatically (forty to forty-five percent) in the feltmaking process, so sampling and precise calculation was required to ensure everything would fit perfectly together. I used a rolling machine on some of the pieces, accomplishing the same rolling action used in Central Asia behind a horse or camel.

I also wanted the *Palace Yurt* to be cohesive from a design and architectural perspective, with each piece of fabric speaking on an intimate symbolic level.

ABOVE, LEFT: Janice Arnold, shown here with a model for her *Palace Yurt* (2009) at her "dry" studio in Olympia, Washington. ABOVE, RIGHT: Janice Arnold's original *Palace Yurt* proposal sketches for ceiling concept, 2008. LEFT: Janice Arnold hanging window panels in the Cooper-Hewitt conservatory, 2009. Photo: Christine Martens.

The two entrance arches are a good example. Traditional feltmaking is steeped in ritual and blessings, so to honor this historical aspect, I embedded an ancient, traditional Mongolian palace blessing within the layers of raw wool, silk, and linen—subtle but visible to the careful observer. The first arch uses the English translation, and the second larger arch depicts the original Mongolian prose. In addition to the visual experience, I wanted the space to invite physical and emotional interaction, so I designed thick felt bench covers, allowing visitors to touch the felt, rest on it, and reflect on its inherent natural qualities.

Every project of this magnitude has at least three areas of focus: artistic, logistical, and technical. Besides directing the artistic vision and logistics, I also led my collaborative team. KPFF Consulting Engineers, New York, handled the technical details of the framework, while assistants and volunteers helped in the laborious aspects of making felt this size and scale.

To overcome the challenge of designing such an intricate installation, I built

a scale model of the conservatory in my Centralia, Washington, studio. This came after several months of preliminary work—reading, sketching ideas and concepts, writing proposals, traveling, and doing research, including a trip to Mongolia to meet with felt scholar Dr. L. Batchuluun and assisting in the video documentation of traditional felt-making. This was followed by meetings, measuring, calculating, designing connection systems, experimenting with new fibers, making samples, and inventing new textures.

I try to work with, rather than against, the materials in a collaborative creative process. They show me what they can do, and I am occasionally guided by mistakes. I watch and listen carefully, relinquishing and controlling only as much as I need, and learn from each and ev-

ery resulting piece, which in turn informs the next. With these processes, the *Palace Yurt* emerged from the top down, window by window, in a balance of organic and patterned panels honoring the old, the new, and the untamed. 🌿

Janice Arnold's website is www.jafelt.com.

BELOW, TOP LEFT: Construction of Palace Yurt ceiling. Olympia, Washington, 2009. Photo: Bob Iyall. BELOW, TOP RIGHT: Preparing to raise Palace Yurt ceiling in the conservatory of the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, New York, 2009. Photo: Christine Martens. BELOW, BOTTOM: Palace Yurt (south end ceiling window panels and valance), 2009; felt fabrics made by JA FELT: lyocell and merino wool, mohair, silk, metal, linen, soy, Tencel; felted, sewn; 25' x 15' x 25'. Photo: Lisa Klakulak.

