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Felt

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FELT

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in

The School of Art

By
Yvonne James
B.F.A., Nichols State University, 2002
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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Images</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Images</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Images

1. *Felt* – installation detail ................................................................. 7
2. *Felt* – floor installation detail .......................................................... 7
3. *Felt* – Pockets #1-12 ........................................................................ 8
4. *Felt* – Pockets detail .......................................................................... 8
5. *Felt* – wall installation of select pieces ............................................. 9
6. *Felt* – wall installation detail ............................................................ 9
7. *I Wanna Walk With You* ................................................................. 10
8. *Kindred Spirit* ..................................................................................... 11
9. *Lost Wishes* ....................................................................................... 12
10. *My Gift to You* .................................................................................. 13
11. *My Gift To You detail* ...................................................................... 13
12. *Peace Without Illusion* ................................................................. 14
13. *Peace Without Illusion detail* .......................................................... 14
14. *Recorded History* ............................................................................. 15
15. *Sanctuary I* ....................................................................................... 16
16. *Sanctuary III* .................................................................................... 16
17. *Sanctuary IV* .................................................................................... 16
18. *Through the Years* ........................................................................... 17
19. *Time For Mending* ........................................................................... 18
20. *We Will Carry Him* ........................................................................... 19
21. *Where the Water Meets the Sky* ...................................................... 20
Abstract

My work is largely autobiographical and the way I express myself is the product of memories and life experiences. I grew up as one of a family of ten children and learned early the values of sharing and helping others. We were also taught not to waste anything. We learned to recycle as part of our daily life. As you will see in my work almost all of the materials I use are found objects or recycled materials.

In growing up as part of a large, rural, southern family, there was also a tradition of ‘women’s work’. Nearly all of my female relatives did some kind of handiwork, such as tatting, knitting, sewing, or quilting, oftentimes as part of a larger family gathering. I often feel that when I am working there is a direct cultural connection to the women I admire.

Over the last five years I have been spending a week at a time on Louisiana’s barrier islands and I have come to realize how similar our lives are to the lives of the barrier islands. While both lives endure hardships and great loss, they are also filled with moments of extraordinary beauty and creation. Collecting found objects is both a physical and spiritual release for me. The objects I select are special finds that I associate with both loved ones and memories, and the process of collecting evokes primeval memories of man as a hunter and gatherer.

The materials I work with have similar qualities that I associate with women. My use of these materials, in conjunction with found objects, symbolizes a release from the past, the transformation of the present, and prayers and good wishes for the future. I use reliquaries to symbolize the fusing of memories, past experiences, and the process of the transference of life. My enjoyment of process and simple, repetitive movements are a
source of peace and tranquility in my daily life. My hope is that the viewer will take
away a sense of spiritual connection, peace and healing.
Felt

My work is largely autobiographical and the way I express myself is a product of many childhood memories. I grew up as one of a family of ten children, five boys and five girls. I was the sixth child and third girl born to a devout Catholic mother. As a member of a large family we learned early the values of sharing and helping others. We knew we would be wearing clothes my mother had made for us or had been passed on to us by older cousins. We were also taught not to waste anything and we learned to recycle as part of our normal existence. As you will see in my work, almost all of the materials I use are either found objects or recycled materials.

My paternal grandfather was half Native American and half Irish, and my maternal grandparents were Irish and Scotch-Irish. This contributed to the clannish or tribal nature of my family. We were always referred to as the Pierce tribe. While we were often boisterous and rambunctious amongst ourselves, we were shy and avoided being singled out when outside of our tribal family. As in any large family, although we had many shared secrets, there were also experiences and memories we did not speak aloud. As I have matured as an artist, I have found that I can now share some of those memories and experiences in my work although I still prefer to speak visually in a soft, subtle voice.

In growing up as part of a large rural southern family, there was a tradition of “women’s work”. Nearly all of my female relatives did some kind of handiwork, such as tatting, sewing, quilting, knitting or crocheting. These were often tasks which occurred as part of larger family gatherings. By the time I was in junior high, I was making some
of my own clothes. Being exposed to such artisanship from an early age has strongly influenced my love of processes. This is evident in the way I use materials. I often feel that when I am working there are silent voices guiding my hands. The entire creative process is important to the work because it is a direct cultural connection to the women I admire.

In such a large and extended family, chances are that you will begin to experience the death of loved ones from an early age. Although I have experienced sorrow at the loss of many of my older relatives, it is much more difficult to deal with the death of a young life stopped short. There are also many moments of joy that come with the birth of a new family member. I am reminded that to be alive comprises many experiences, all of which, whether sweet or bitter, tender or harsh, joyful or sad, add value to my life.

Over the last five years I have been spending a week at a time on Louisiana’s barrier islands collecting objects from beaches that have since become part of the sea. While on the islands, I came to realize how similar our lives are to the lives of the barrier islands. While both entities endure hardships and experience great loss, they are also filled with moments of extraordinary beauty and creation. Both will continue to survive and exist, though forms may change. In this body of work, I choose to speak about inner struggles of the cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth.

My earliest memories of collecting began with my grandfather. When we would visit him on his farm or during a family swim in the local gravel pits, he would ask us to collect special rocks or artifacts. I can still see him pointing with his cane toward items he wanted us to pickup. By the age of six or seven, I could spot an arrowhead in the upturned dirt of the potato patch or a fossil amongst the gravel around the pits. These are
happy memories; the whole family was playing together and adding mementos to my grandfather’s collection. When I am out collecting today, flashes of those memories are with me and add a special spiritual dimension to the pieces I choose to keep.

Collecting found objects is both a physical and spiritual release for me. The found objects I collect provide me with a vocabulary that allows me to share my feelings about the cycle of life and my relationship to nature through my work. While walking along the beaches of our barrier islands, or the shoreline of a river, looking for new treasures recalls happy memories and experiences shared with others. The process of collecting evokes primeval memories of man as a hunter and gatherer. The objects I select are special finds that I associate with both loved ones and memories past and present. Some stones are selected for their sculptural appeal, others because of the way they fit in my hand. I look for shells that have been worn and eroded by the forces of nature and are ready for a new life. I collect the “leafy jewel box” barnacles (chama myceraphylla) because of their color and dual life. When they are attached to something in the water, their sharp edges are dangerous, but once they are on the beach, they become a thing of beauty and wonderment. Fish bones I collect for their spiritual symbolism in Christianity and bird bones for their delicate structure and distinctive forms. When I am collecting, it is with the awareness that it is the beginning of a process that will end when I have either placed the object in a piece of sculpture or the object will become a sculpture in itself.

The materials I work with all have similar qualities which I associate with women. Copper wire contains a certain amount of strength, it is resilient and beautiful. The way the wire is worked with an irregular weave, is a reflection of life out of control,
of not being able to keep loved one’s completely safe or out of harms way. The copper wire allows me to express my own frustrations as a woman in terms of the tensions of being pushed and pulled in many directions at once. In the traditional roles I occupy as daughter, sister, mother, wife and grandmother, there are constant demands for my attention. When I weave the separate pieces together, it allows me to release those tensions and frustrations and form a new identity for myself as an artist. I also like copper wire because it becomes more visually interesting as it ages. I purchase the wire from a scrap yard before it is sent off to be melted so I feel like I am giving it a new form and life in my work.

I use paper as a symbol of communication and to interpret my feelings and emotions. Paper is a material that is delicate and fragile but changes character when you place it on a form where it can tighten as hard as a drum head with a surprising amount of strength. Covering wire with paper gives both materials a new substance which becomes a part of the vocabulary of my work.

I began using wool after a visit to the LSU Sheep Unit. I discovered that it was being burned for disposal and decided to reuse this very special material. I gathered several bags of scrap and in my studio began to work the wool in the traditional manner which includes: skirting, washing, dyeing, teasing, carding, wrapping and turning it into felt.

Perhaps the most basically satisfying aspect of felt making is its directness and simplicity. The inherent characteristics of the material – wool - are not changed in the process. On the contrary, they are beautifully revealed... The quality of handmade felt
that stands out above others is its rich, tactile, and textural surface, its primal wooliness.

Beverly Gordon

I have since discovered felt has many symbolic references in man’s history as evidenced by this quote from Dante’s Divine Comedy when Virgil prophecies the coming of a savior. He shall not feed on either earth or pelf, But upon wisdom, and love, and virtue. Twixt Feltro and Feltro shall his nation be. The reference here is to the Gemini constellation Castor and Pollux, the twins who were always pictured with felt caps on their heads, between the rising of one star and the setting of the other star. In the Rome of Virgil, felt was a symbol of freedom. When slaves were freed, they immediately shaved their heads and donned felt caps. In Christian teachings the wool that felt is made from is associated with the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. The symbolism of the Christ is also release, transformation and freedom.

I associate wool with comfort, protection and warmth and the wonderful feel it has in my hands when I am working with it. My use of these materials in conjunction with found objects, symbolizes a release from the past, the transformation of the present and prayers and good wishes for the future.

I use reliquaries to symbolize the fusing of memories and past experiences. The reliquaries are a gift of healing. I made each reliquary with a specific loved one in mind whom I felt needed prayers and good wishes. The objects placed inside have a shamanistic power and were chosen specifically for each person. Sometimes, the person may have been with me when I picked up the object. The object for me captures the

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1 Felt Making, pg. 52
2 The Myth of Felt, pg. 2
special moment in time that I was filled with laughter, joy, or love which I can then pass on through my work.

Fish bones are used as a religious reference and are my equivalent of prayers. Stones symbolize long life and shells represent health and joy. Placing paper over the copper wire represents a person at their most fragile and vulnerable times of need. The wool is the final wrapping which surrounds the work, giving it protection and comfort. Everything is carefully chosen and when it passes through my hands the sense of touch is the same as a caress or hug.

There are also a number of found objects I have felted over or simply wrapped and bound with thread. I realize that many people will not see the beauty in some of these objects, such as bones, and may even avoid touching them. In order to protect these objects and encourage people to handle them, I have covered them in wool and anointed them with oil, so when the viewer handles them they become part of the transference of life.

This body of work developed over the last three years has marked a period of time that has been a rite of passage for me. I have made new friends and wished them well in the reliquaries and I have created a new vocabulary for myself as an artist. The vocabulary is reminiscent of the inner circle family language that evolves from shared memories and experiences. Also during these three years, I have increased my enjoyment and understanding of rituals as a vehicle in the search for meaning and spirituality. The simple repetitive movements of creating work have become a source of peace and tranquility in my daily life. My hope is that the viewer will take away a sense of a spiritual connection, peace and healing.
*Felt* – installation detail

*Felt* – floor installation of select pieces
Felt – wall installation of select pieces

Felt – wall installation detail
I Wanna Walk with You
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Peace Without Illusion

Peace Without Illusion detail
Recorded History
Sanctuary I

Sanctuary III

Sanctuary IV
Through the Years
Time For Mending
We Will Carry Him
Where the Water Meets the Sky
Bibliography


Vita

Yvonne Marie Pierce was born in Valpariso, Florida, on July 10, 1958. She moved to Sun, Louisiana, and later moved to Covington, Louisiana, where she graduated from Covington High School. She earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana, in May of 2002 and began a Master of Fine Arts program at Louisiana State University in August, 2002.