

# Wild About Wool

*In work incorporating embroidery, quilting, dye-work, and felting, four Australian artists explore a fiber.*

By Fran Kenneley Stephenson

Wool is a practical fiber. It has been used for warmth and shelter since ancient history and adapted to a myriad of uses because of its availability, versatility, and insulating properties. Australia, the world's largest producer of raw wool, grows nearly 30 percent of the world's supply. It should come as no surprise, then, that many Australian textile artists use wool in their expression. In very different ways, Judy Turner, Paull McKee, Pamela Farmer, and India Flint are exploring this fiber's qualities.

Judy Turner, from the capital city of Canberra, began making wool quilts in 1995. Turner is well known in Australia and the U.S. for her "colorwash" quiltmaking method, detailed in her 1997 book, *Awash with Color*. In colorwash quilts, a large variety of commercially printed fabrics are sorted and manipulated by value so that the surface moves from light to dark in a gentle progression.

"For more than 10 years, I never used solid fabric at all," Turner says. "Colorwash quilts are very busy looking. My wool quilts are the total opposite, perhaps as a reaction to that." In her wool pieces, by couching wool yarns to a wool fabric base, she makes an image from subtly blended colors.

"The first one I made using my mother's leftover knitting wool," she says. "I just liked working with the yarn to start with, and that got me going." Her first piece, *Carnival*, is a geometric illusion, lines of color twisting and turning across the surface.

Her second wool quilt used the same basic construction with a completely different concept: an abstract landscape. The quilt, *Desert Sky*, was accepted into "Quilt National" in 1997, which encouraged Turner to explore the technique further. Since then, she has made 14 wool quilts; many were featured in 2001 in an invited exhibition at the country's National Wool Museum in Victoria.

"Usually I have an image in my mind or photos I've taken," she said. To begin the composition, "I generally gather colors that relate to a particular area of the surface. I work on one part at a time, starting with the sky. Once I've solved any problems there, I can usually tell which colors will work." In fact, her "sky"



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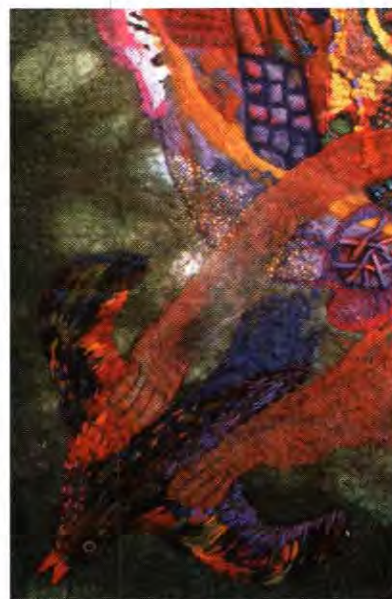
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**On the cover:** Carol Ann Carter, *Open Bundle: Apron with Hatchmarks*, 2001; acrylic paint, paper, thread, graphite, metal, linen, and plastic on canvas; 39 by 37 by 1 inch. See article on page 40.

**Right:** Odin (in Norse mythology, the supreme deity of the cosmos), 1907 (designed by Gerhard Munthe, 1899); tapestry. See article on page 14.

**Far right:** Sarah Swett, *Jane's Picnic III: Toast Marshmallows*, 2000; handspun wool, natural dyes; tapestry; 48 by 40 inches. Photo: Mark LaMoreaux. See review on page 56.



**Above:** Pamela Farmer, *Flying Woman* (detail), 2000; hand-dyed felt, wools, silk, beads, rayon threads, flax, merino cross wool; felting, machine and hand embroidery; 19.75 by 22.75 inches. Photo: Hannah Lewis. See article on page 50.

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**Right:** Judy Turner, *Carnival*, 1995; couched wool yarns, wool fabric; 38.5 by 38.5 inches. Photo: Grant Elmers.

**Opposite:** Judy Turner, *It Never Rains But It Pours* (and detail), 1999; wool yarns and fabric; 30.25 by 22.5 inches. Photo: Andrew Sikorski.

colors are what first captivate viewers. A quilt about Australia's harsh conditions juxtaposes a severely gray-blue sky against a water-starved landscape. In another work, a buoyant aqua sky is happily poised against a fertile yellow canola crop. *It Never Rains But It Pours* has the purple overtones of a summer monsoon.

Turner's use of color is fresh and memorable; the simplicity of the image leaves a lasting impression. "I'm trying to keep the images simple, and let the color speak for itself," she says. "I love the saturated colors available in wool. [They're] more intense."

A different type of wool quilt, called a *wagga*, captivates emerging textile artist Paull McKee, a recent graduate from Australian National University's Canberra School of Art.

In Australia, the *wagga* is a utilitarian cover made for warmth. *Waggas* were originally made by men in the 1890s using bags from a flour mill in the town of Wagga Wagga; the bags were sewn loosely to burlap to create a layer of warmth. Like flour bags in depression-

era America, these were stamped with the mill's name and widely recycled. Later versions of the *wagga* were sewn by women and were made from a myriad of found and recycled materials.

McKee's wall quilts resemble their *wagga* origins. Large squares and rectangles cut from old military blankets are joined together and sewn to a backing, each piece edged in large blanket stitches, because, he says, "that's the language of blankets." The traditionally neutral colors are often overdyed with eucalyptus bark and leaves. This overdyeing not only enriches McKee's palette but also gives the pieces a suede look.

McKee gathers these secondhand materials as eagerly as he gathers stories, especially stories of men who sew. "I'm very interested in history from the bottom up," says McKee, whose grandmother taught him to sew when he was six. While some textile artists criticize the legacy that thrift has imprinted on their art practice, McKee thinks it's liberating.

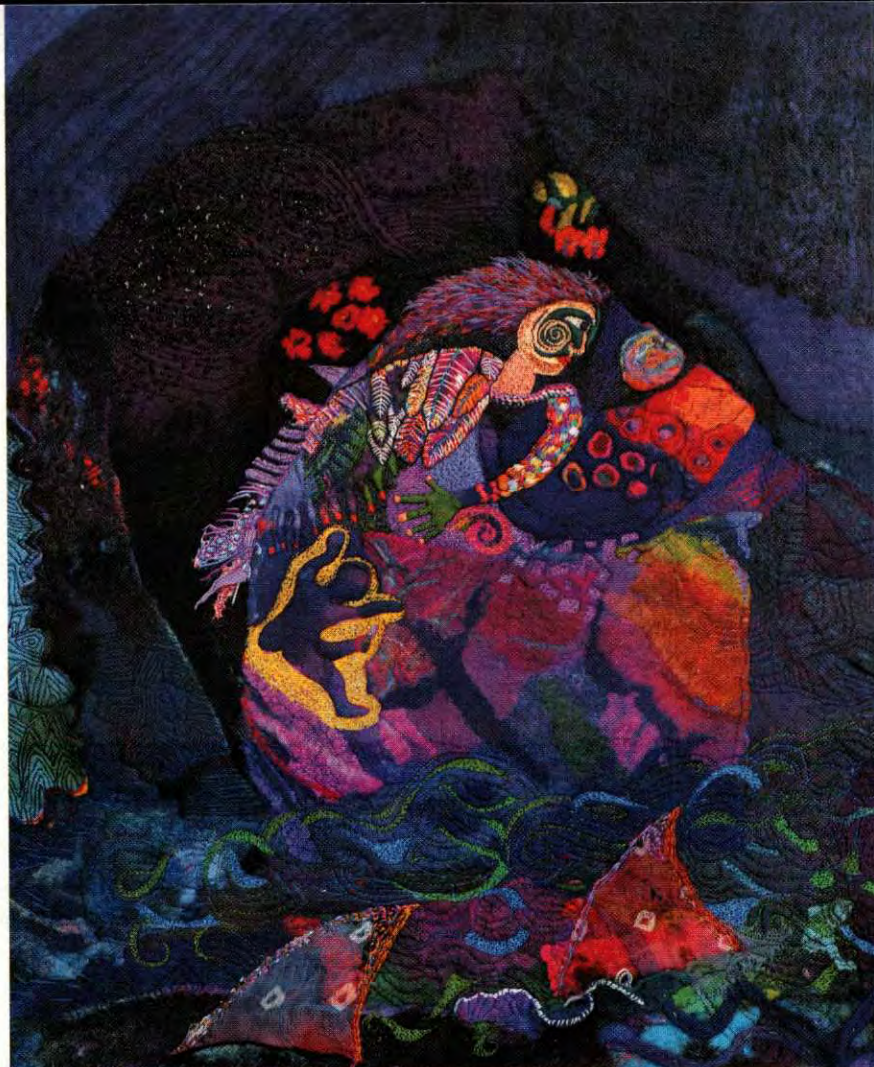


**Opposite, top:**  
 Paull McKee, V554,  
 1943 I, 2001; recycled  
 woolen blankets,  
 burlap, thread; 59.5  
 inches by 35.5 inches.  
 Photo: Maryann  
 Mussared.

**Opposite, bottom:**  
 Paull McKee, Untitled  
 Wagga, 2001; collect-  
 ed woolen blankets,  
 natural dyes (eucalyp-  
 tus leaves); 28.75 by  
 48.5 inches.

**Right:** Pamela Farmer,  
 Kate's Dream, 2001  
 (work in progress); felt,  
 knitting, embroidery,  
 beading; 27 inches by  
 22.5 inches. Photo by  
 the artist.

**Below:** Pamela Farmer,  
 Untitled, 1998; wool,  
 various threads; embroi-  
 dery on felt; 6 by 9 inch-  
 es. Photo by the artist.





"Making do has a tone of sadness, but it's so full of hope," he says. "I use patchwork as a metaphoric journey to create stories of strength and versatility."

"Textiles are something you have in your heart," says Pamela Farmer, a feltmaker and embroiderer from Victoria. Farmer was recently awarded the Wool Quilt Prize, a biannual acquisitive award by the National Wool Museum. Her piece, *Earth Blanket*, incorporated three-dimensional felt shapes on a base covered in machine and hand embroidery. New and recycled materials were incorporated into a work that evokes the undergrowth of leaves, twigs, nuts, and insects that we tread on in the forest.

The subdued colors of the piece were unusual for Farmer. "My color palette is very strong and bright," she says. "I'll push myself and try things that are different, but always my work comes out looking like mine." She makes most of her own felt using commercially dyed sliver (untwisted carded fiber) but draws increasingly on found and rescued textiles that she cuts up, overdyes, and reassembles. Her work reflects her emotional and spiritual responses to the world; *Kate's Dream*, for example, depicts a woman and child in a cocoon suspended over waves, with a starry galaxy in the background.

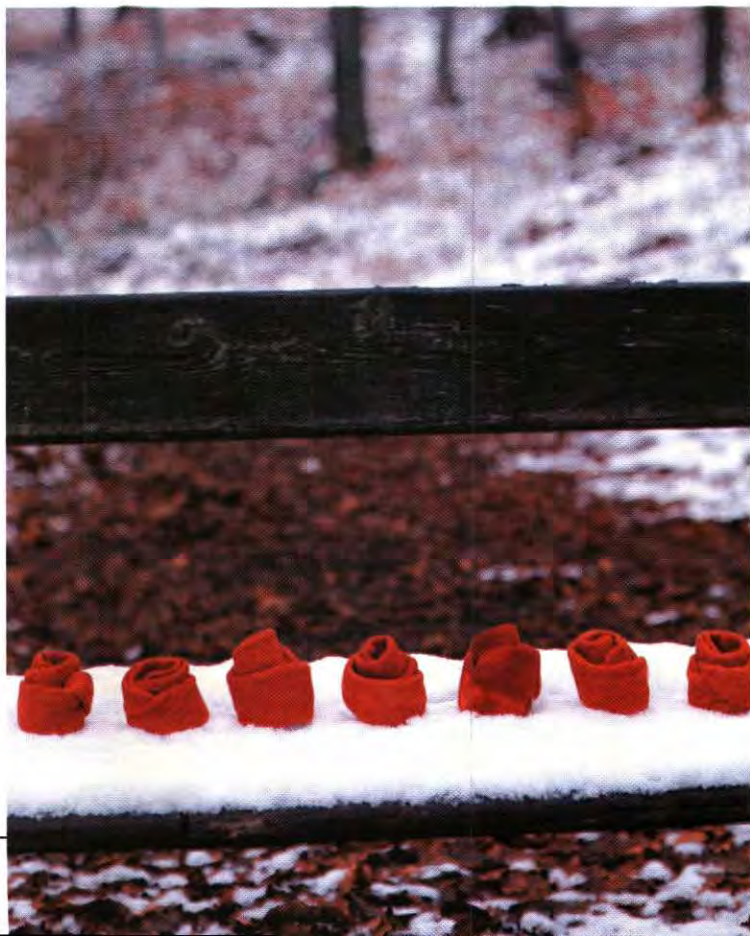
Farmer has several pieces in progress at any given time. She comments: "I tend to work in an intuitive and seemingly haphazard manner, moving from one piece of work to another after many hours of machine or hand embroidery. In this way, I overcome major challenges that emerge in each piece of work." It also keeps her inspired. Farmer describes how she can walk into a room, see a bowl of buttons, and immediately incorporate them into a piece of work. Likewise, she can be focused on a piece of work, head downstairs to hang something by the fire, and along the way dis-

cover something else to stitch on. This haphazard method "is my best way of learning, and I try far more interesting things because of it." The downside, though, is that she is never quite sure when something is done.

She likes the shimmery, reflective qualities of wool and approaches feltmaking in a contemplative manner, adding layers and refelting things as she feels the need to. "I just think that felt is the most amazing technique. There's no end to what you can create."

The endless possibilities of felt also occupy the imagination of South Australian artist and sheep rancher India Flint.

**Above:** Pamela Farmer, *Earth Blanket* (detail), 2000; wool blanket, felt from merino wool and alpaca; felting, appliqué, quilting, hand and machine embroidery, dyeing with eucalyptus leaves; 41 by 35.75 inches. Collection of the National Wool Museum, Geelong, Victoria, Australia. Photo: Hannah Lewis.





**Above:** India Flint, installation view from her "Arcadian Academy" exhibition, 2001; felted dress and cold-pressed cotton cloth strips, both "Ecoprinted" using leaves.

**Left:** India Flint, Seven Hills felt installation, Kapuziner Berg, Salzburg, Austria, 2000; English Leicester and merino felt, dyed in eucalyptus cinerea.

**Right:** "Ecoprint" sample pages from Flint's research for her master's degree, 2001. Photos by the artist.

Flint had been a feltmaker and dyer for 15 years when she began to question ecological sustainability in her work. "After an exhibition in 1998, I began looking at other ways of coloring the wool [besides synthetic dyes]—plants, found metals, or soaking in the sea," she said. "For someone whose favorite colors were purple, blue, and green, this was a fundamental shift in practice."

Her concern about toxicity of commercial dyestuffs comes from deep ties to the land. Flint shares the duties of the sheep ranch with her parents, grandparents, and children. She has a deep love for the environment. This, combined with a lifelong interest in plants, led her to begin testing for natural dyes. After two years of work, 250 samples dyed using various eucalyptus species (there are 900 known species) and mordants (color fixatives)

formed part of her recent exhibition, "Arcadian Alchemy: Colors for Cloth from the Eucalypt Forest," at the Adelaide Botanic Gardens. The exhibition will be at the Australian National Botanic Gardens in Canberra from February through July.

She prefers to collect "windfall," as she calls it, rather than harvesting growing leaves and bark, to add to the dyepot. During her exploration, Flint discovered a quicker way to predict her results in a trademarked method she calls "Ecoprint." She wraps one eucalyptus leaf in felt and steams it for 30 minutes. The leaf imprints onto the cloth, much like a fossil. This way, Flint has an indication of the color she would achieve if she left the piece to soak in a dyepot. This printing method has become her signature.

The second part of her "Arcadian Alchemy" exhibition, which was the final stage in obtaining her Master of Visual Arts degree at the University of South Australia, was seven colored and printed dresses informed by her dye experiments. The long, flowing dresses of wool felt have earthy surfaces that are hard to distinguish from the soil itself. The garment structure comes from what she calls an "archetypal" garment, based on a utility dress favored by her grandmother. By exaggerating the sleeves and hem length, Flint has transformed their original, practical nature into something frivolous, fairy-like.

"Felt is magic," says Flint of the wool she uses. "It starts as soft fibers and it turns into this amazing strong fabric."

Although these four artists make very different work and use wool in completely different forms, all have one thing in common: the ability to elevate the most practical fiber in the world into visual magic.

*Fiber artist and writer Fran Kenneley Stephenson recently moved back to the United States from Canberra, Australia.*

