

When it comes to wool I am drawn to the unusual. I seek to work with intention, choose carefully, mend what's torn and generally incur a smaller footprint. Some eight years ago I began working with and reading about wool, the sheep who produce it, and all that takes place between pasture and yarn store.

"The Fleece and Fiber Sourcebook" by Deborah Robson and Carol Ekarius was especially influential. I learned there are hundreds of breeds of sheep that hold the key to biodiversity and the health and future of wool production world-wide. I found myself drawn in. As I researched the various rare and endangered breeds around the world I began finding ways to purchase wool directly from small farmers and shepherds that raise these beautiful animals.

Since I started I have used the fleece of over 70 rare breeds. I have made friends with shepherds and farmers as well as others who make it their business to gather and sell the less-commercially-popular wools for farmers who are just too busy to do it themselves. I am utterly fascinated by these wools and the processes I have developed to work with them. Each piece I make is infused with the joy I find in working with these fibers.

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I prefer to buy raw wool and if possible an entire fleece from one animal. I wash and dry the wool and process it in several ways to get it ready to spin, knit, weave, or needle-felt.

If I am spinning, I use my Rio Grande spindle wheel. It's fast and efficient and I can spin a lot of wool in an evening. There are many factors and methods involved in how I spin different wools. After I make yarn I either weave or knit with it. My weaving is of the most basic type done on a small Saori loom and I use a knitting machine to quickly make a good amount of yardage. After I make the fabrics, I wash them so the fibers bind to each other and become felt. The other method I use to make felted fabric is a dry-felting technique called needle-felting. When I first started, I used a small 12-needle embellishing machine but I have since purchased a FeltLOOM, the Lexi model. This machine has hundreds of needles and makes this part of my process quick work. The path from raw wool to felts ready for composing is a slow process but I do certain things on certain days and somehow it all gets done.

I keep records and label all the wool so I know the content of each felt. I sometimes combine wools but I also make a lot of single breed felts depending on the project. The finished felts are then organized so they are readily accessible, ready to become part of a larger work.

The next step is composing. Using a combination of intuition and inspiration, I select pieces, cut my desired size and shape, and arrange the cut pieces on a base layer of commercially-made felt fabric. I use a single handheld felting needle to attach the two layers to each other. I then put the entire piece through my FeltLOOM to more thoroughly attach the cut pieces to the base. After that I attach a stiff buckram fabric to the back of the base using a steam-activated pH-neutral glue. A grid of hand-sewn stitches ensures that it will be stable and supported for the long term. Again, by hand-sewing, I attach this three-layer work to another piece of commercial felt that I stretch over a wooden frame creating a finished edge ready for hanging or framing.

It's a fluid and fascinating process requiring strength—both physical and mental—sensitivity, and an openness to dialogue between me and the wool. Each part of the process requires a slightly different kind of focus and there is always something to be done. At the end of the day when the studio goes quiet I settle down to some reading and writing. I rarely have a bad day, I have false starts, flops, great moments, and normal frustrations but I rarely have a bad day. I am fortunate to be able to do the work I was meant to do.