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The Wonderful World of Needle-Felted Animals

Whether tigers or tortoises, field mice or feathered peacocks, artisanal creatures are a celebration of life itself.

By Ligaya Mishan

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WITH EACH STAB of the needle, the fibers catch, twist and snarl. From this violence might emerge the dainty pink nose of a mouse the size of a knuckle or a Japanese waxwing's watchful ruby eye. In these stunningly realistic animal figures, meticulously sculpted from felt, it's the details that astound, the transformation of a material so soft and inchoate — wisps of wool shape-shifting under a maker's fingers — into something solid, structured and anatomically precise. Far from the pillowy curves of a child's stuffed toy, these creatures are collectible works of art that have inspired cultish (adult) adoration: An iguana meditates, its skin like fissured, parched earth; an owl tilts its head, its wings both ponderous and light; a tiger half yawns, half roars, its teeth uncannily sharp.

Felt-making is a prehistoric technology. For millennia, such work didn't require a needle, or any tool beyond human hands: One simply took wool, added moisture and sometimes whey and applied repeated downward pressure until the material was densely interlocked. Felt was (and is) a sartorial staple of the Central Asian steppes, essential for warmth. The technique of needle-punching, which eliminated the need for moisture, was introduced in the mid-19th century, as part of the Industrial Revolution in Germany and England, where barbed needles lined enormous factory looms.

Only in the past few decades has needle-felting gained recognition as a craft. In the 1980s, Eleanor Stanwood, an American fiber artist, began experimenting with the kind of small-scale needle-punching machine that factories use to produce fabric samples. Her husband, David Stanwood, an inventor, decided to see what he could do with a single hand-held needle, jabbing wool and shaping and sculpting it as it gained mass. Other artisans took the same approach to make felted creatures and figures, which in those early days were often left intentionally approximate, with minimal definition, giving them a comfortingly unreal, fairy-tale aspect.

By contrast, a number of today's felters in Japan, the United States and Europe are realists. The work of the Tokyo-based Terumi Ohta, who designs under the name TrueStyleLab and calls herself a "wool animal sculptor," ranges from tiny hamsters to life-size elephants. Simon Brown, known as the Gentleman Felter, from the Northumberland coast of England, creates miniature owls, pigs and hares perched on the bristles of antique wooden scrub brushes (and has a following that includes Dame Judi Dench). These faithfully rendered animals come at a precarious moment in time, when it can be difficult to decipher the real from the fake, from the boasts of politicians to the ever-blurring borders of the virtual world. The very nature of this work — done by hand with a dangerous tool, demanding hours of keen attention before anything recognizable manifests — suggests a stubborn rejection of the speed of modern life. Yvonne Herbst, who was born in Germany and now lives in the Pacific Northwest, turned to felting after 10 years as a digital painter at Pixar. "I stabbed myself a lot," she says. "My daughters sat next to me with Band-Aids." After years working in animation, she found that the material itself was part of the appeal, "so warm to the touch," she says, evoking its distinctly animal origins.

EVERY FELTED FIGURE begins with a close study of its living analogue. A wire armature typically acts as a skeleton; Heather Burke, of Piping Plover Love in Cape Cod, Mass., fashions hers as one unit, sometimes inserting toothpicks as little splints for stability. Often a coat of something sticky, such as beeswax or craft glue, is applied to make the felt cling to the wire. (Burke prefers to use pipe cleaners.) First come layers of coarse wool, bulking up the body, with the finer stuff reserved for the outer layers. Some artists use glass eyes and polymer clay like Fimo or Super Sculpey to mold beaks, tusks and talons. Others, like Burke, insist on using wool alone, to make the animal not just a specimen but an individual, or to simply "keep it pure," as Burke says.

For Ohta, one animal might take 150 hours. For Kiyoshi Mino, who used to run an organic farm with a dozen sheep in central Illinois, it could be three months, spent painstakingly refining each of a peacock's tail feathers, say, with a purple inkblot eye in an ombré of greens and blues. His vivid beings — a life-size Andean mountain cat or blue-faced golden snub-nosed monkey — have drawn admirers from Japanese royalty to the Mobilia Gallery in Cambridge, Mass., which exhibits his work. Mino sees his animals as a kind of natural historical record, especially urgent for dwindling species. It's an alternate form of taxidermy, without the price of an animal's life.

Yet so realistic are the animals that often viewers on Instagram, a vibrant platform for the medium, grow confused. Herbst once posted a picture of a mouse in progress, needle in its head, and was accused of torture. “Why would I be so inhumane and send baby rabbits out by mail?” she recalls being asked. “How dare I put a little bat under a glass dome — let it fly free!”

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