

Felting Down Under - A Canadian artist's experience

by Sheilah Wilson

I arrived at New Pacific Studios in Mount Bruce, Wairarapa in April of 2008, knowing little about this island in the ocean - just what I had gleaned from popular culture and movies such as 'Lord of the Rings', 'Whale Rider' or 'Once Were Warriors'. I had come to make art, unsure of what exactly that would look like in a place so different from anywhere I had been before. In my first day at New Pacific Studio Kay Flavell, Director, handed me a Creative Fibre magazine to look at. It was a moment of epiphany.

Let me contextualize. My own practice uses photography, video and performance as ways to access new ways of creating narrative. Often, this narrative takes as its starting point the province which I was born in; Nova Scotia. The previous year, I had worked on floating a model of a boat that had sunk off the coast of Nova Scotia with weather balloons. While researching that project I was captivated by the terrible beauty of the many historical photos of shipwrecks. When I saw the images of needle felting in Creative Fibre, I realised that I had finally found a medium that might work for trying to re-create these photographs.

I decided to contact Creative Fibre. What followed next was the most serendipitous sequence of events. I was put in touch with Jill Gunn, an amazing needle felting

at the historic Pahiatua courthouse and in the two months that I was in the Wairarapa I completed four felted works for an upcoming show. I was completely amazed by how quickly and openly people shared their skills and time with me, and I am so grateful for the knowledge and support that was passed on.

I have indeed been bitten by the felting bug! Although I spent the majority of my time needle felting, I was entranced by the miracle of wet felting as well. I have so many things I want to try now, and am waiting to find a place to set up a felting area in the next place I am living. My discovery of felting in the Wairarapa is important to me, both professionally and personally. Not only did it allow me to become familiar with a new artistic medium, but felting also put me in contact with a rich community of women felters.



Above: The Charles Ritchie came to grief on the rocks at Rose Head, Nova Scotia

Left: The Audrey P. Brown went aground right next to the Fort Point lighthouse in Liverpool, Nova Scotia.

artist from Lower Hutt, and within 48 hours I had a lesson organized for the following week. I then met Marjorie Gillespie, a board member of New Pacific Studio. She would be instrumental in getting me acquainted with the Pahiatua felting community. I also met and felted with past NPS artist in residence, Tracy White, another sensational felt artist in Woodville. Less than a month after my first needle felting lesson I was felting with the Pahiatua felters

Sheilah Wilson is a multi-disciplinary artist who came to New Zealand for her first time from April-June of 2008 as an artist in residence at New Pacific Studio, which is located outside of Masterton in the Wairarapa. Sheilah is from Nova Scotia, Canada, and has shown her video and photographic work both nationally and internationally. Upon her return to North America she has had a solo show, *Forever Magic*, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and will be exhibiting work in Canada, New Zealand and the USA in the coming months.