



READING FELT

ALISA
GOLDEN

Alisa Golden, author of *'Making Handmade Books'*, was introduced to felting by her sister-in-law, who raises sheep in Virginia. Golden lives and works in the San Francisco Bay Area. As an artist, she explores the questions raised when making books from felt. She includes the relationship of subject

to form and materials and the use of text as she describes various examples of her felted work.

Alisa says;
Each time I sit down to work, I begin with a question. When I began felting my questions were, "How can I make a book?" and "Why make a book from felt?"

I noticed that books and felt both invite touch.

Having made books for decades, I began with what I knew and experimented with different methods

of attaching the pages to hard covers. *'Mending'* is sewn to bookbinding mesh; the mesh is sandwiched between distressed, painted covers. *'Angels Dance'* (Page 15) has painted-paper wrapped covers, bound with a Coptic stitch from which felted balls dangle. With a nod to "How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?", the pages feature white, ball-headed pins. Neither book contains text.

Making books has been the way I merge art and writing, but how to add words? As a letterpress printer, my first impulse was to print on cloth and sew it into the book.



'Sleeping Book' has single folded pages sewn onto a ribbon; it's a dream book in its own pillowcase, the title referencing the Japanese concept of an unbound book. 'Walking Sticks' is sewn by hand at the spine and has attached camphor sticks; it's about how we collect sticks as children and then use sticks as supports when old.

But I wasn't satisfied. The text was not integrated enough. I saw that needlefelting could be a method for making fine lines so, using wool yarn, I needlefelted onto the pages, surprised that the words looked like my handwriting. I continued exploring structures: I sewed one book into a cover of latch-hook rug mesh and needlefelted a Hebrew prayer as a scroll.

Still, the handsewn book structures, intended

for paper, didn't feel right. What kind of book could I make with felt that I couldn't make with paper? I started by trimming the edges for a clean look, which contrasted with the fiber. 'Beautiful Tattoos' (Image 1) has two folded pages, sewn down the center; I found I loved the feel of machine-sewing through the soft felt. The haiku inside: Sewn to a moment

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/ Some prefer to keep private / Nostalgia or scar. Using a needle for tattooing and felting was in keeping with the book art concept of tying the form and materials to the content, working toward a unified whole.

What were the special properties of felt? I wondered if I could sandwich yarn into the

pages and tie them at the edges. 'Wouldn't Silent' includes machine sewing on leaf-shaped felt, and 'Word Waves' and 'Wordless Tides' has flying bird images on grey pages, both employing those ties and accompanied by paper books. Ultimately, the felted pieces were not as central to the project as I wanted. Again, they were wordless.

I went back to the sewing machine, still hoping to unify the book as I had done with 'Beautiful Tattoos.' Using metal letters for the title and no inner text, I resolved the thick book structure problem

and made 'Smiled Politely and Left' (Image 2). Each page is folded and sewn, one at a time, to an outer felt wrapper. I machine-stitched faces of imaginary people and covered the end of a doll needle as the closure. (I feel a bit guilty saying how much pleasure I take in stabbing this book shut).

But the soft books felt too light. I housed 'Carry On' and 'The Value of Secrets' in boxes to give them more weight; I also played with cutouts in the felt to display an heavy object made from layered glass microscope slides. The books feature needlefelted musings about emotional baggage and friendship respectively, one sewn like 'Smiled Politely', the other with loose pages to be read in any order. For a friend's birthday, I made a box for 'Her Palm Leaf Book' (Image 3), this time using eyelets and artificial sinew to string the separate needlefelted pages together.

I was starting to answer the question of why the book had to be made of felt, and to highlight felt's qualities. Each felted book had supporting objects to accompany it; each book had text, and a box was part of the piece. I found that horizontal formats allow the felt pages to drape nicely, while vertically oriented books can be held with pins. 'Cactus Couple' (Image 4), in a fold down box, has its own pin cushion so the reader can transfer the pearl-

headed pins while reading without fear of losing them. The time it takes to handle each component creates a personal performance.

A few years later, after experimenting with wet-felted color gradations, I was inspired to make several two-dimensional pieces, employing both the hand and machine stitching processes I enjoyed so much. I finally refined the needlefelting of text in 'The Infinite' (Image 5). (Tip: Use one ply of wool yarn generously and go slowly!)

I have a range of options at my fingertips now: wet felting from New Zealand Romney wool, needlefelting, machine stitching, yarn ties, eyelets, embroidery, incorporating boxes, and including objects. When making felted books, I want them to be not just for reading, but intimate and tactile experiences. Each action of opening, pinning, stabbing, turning, or handling can enhance the message. Each material can contain a meaning. Each book can awaken another question.

CONTACT DETAILS
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- IMAGES**
Page 15) Angels Dance, 2007 photo: Sibila Savage
1) Beautiful Tattoos, 2008 photo: Sibila Savage
2) Smiled Politely and Left, 2009 photo: Sibila Savage
3) Her Palm Leaf Book, 2010 photo: Sibila Savage
4) Cactus Couple, 2012 photo: Sibila Savage
5) The Infinite, 2015 photo Ailsa Golden