Prairie Blossom Felt

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My milkweed journey began on a cold, blustery day in January 2006 at Old Sturbridge Village, Massachusetts. I was teaching a J-term off campus course on the development of the fashion industry along the eastern seaboard states, and we had just attended a historic costume seminar. The docent displayed a beautiful cream-colored capelet for the group to admire and then asked us to decide what it was made from. Lamb's wool was the popular but incorrect answer. It was made from milkweed floss! Intrigued with that information and unable to examine the garment due to its fragility and preservative wrappings, I decided to try to replicate the garment from memory the following fall. Thus began my experimentation with creatively using a common, local plant to provide warm yet fashionable attire.

Historically, milkweed has been used as a fiber of choice when other, more superior, options were not available. In colonial America, milkweed floss was used as a vegetable fur in capelets and tippets; and as a stuffing for mattresses and pillows. During World War II, due to unavailability of kapok, milkweed was used as stuffing for life jackets because of its buoyancy and in flight suits for its warmth. The prevalence of this fiber producing plant in prairie meadows and roadside ditches makes milkweed floss an inviting, sustainable fiber to re-investigate. After a successful re-creation of an historic capelet, I ventured into using milkweed as a fiber source in developing a useable textile.

Yarn spinning attempts using milkweed have been difficult unless the floss is blended with very cohesive fibers such as wool. The cohesiveness analogy was used to explore combining milkweed floss with wool fleece into a nonwoven fabrication. Five alternating layers of wool fiber and milkweed floss were assembled. Felting methodology using heat, moisture, agitation and compression caused the wool fibers to shrink, capturing the milkweed floss and holding the fibers together in cohesive fibrous mats. No adhesive was used. The wool fleece was dyed prior to layering to enhance the distinct luster and open spiral character of the milkweed floss. The fibers were crosslaid in the same manner during construction of the mats in order to achieve similarity in fabric design. I needed the spiral shape to open before felting the fibrous mats, so complete air stillness was required in my working space. Very slow, deliberate manipulation of the fibers was absolutely essential. When the hot, soapy water was applied and agitation of the fibers commenced, control of the movement of the milkweed floss was lost. At this point, the contrasting colors of the two fibers caused the milkweed floss to become very apparent. To

manage the felting process and create enough fabric for a garment, seven fibrous mats, approximately 36 x 54 inches were produced. A simple princess-line jacket with an asymmetrical closing was constructed to accentuate the unique, unpredictable fabric design that emerged. The milkweed floss aesthetics of warmth, softness and luster became strikingly obvious.

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