



A Fabricated Journey

by Eve Tobolka

A student of beliefs and cloth, Canadian artist Heather Goodchild pulls what she loves from the past to create a fiber practice that is both mysterious and optimistic.

Heather Goodchild is a prophet, of sorts. She carefully chooses elements from a smorgasbord of fables, folk music, and religions, combining them with textiles to create her own unique and ghostly enchanting narratives. These otherworldly felt fabrications come to life through intricately handmade shadowboxes, hooked rugs, and inlaid patchwork.

Growing up without religion, communal inspiration came to her from alternative versions of church and fellowship. “The passing from Brownies to Girl Guides [Scouts in America]—



ABOVE: Journey Landscape (with detail), 2009; felt, burlap; rug-hooked; 35" x 65". All works are made with commercially produced wool felt. All portraits are handsewn with cotton thread, overdyed with tea, and stained with watercolor paint.

how you walk through this archway of hands—I really felt like that was a big moment and it really made me more responsible. I could take care of the Brownies!” For Goodchild, rituals are benchmarks for personal growth. Her exhibitions feel like meeting places where the walls return stares and let you know you’ve entered a space where stories are told and lessons learned. “I’ve been brought up in a culture where I have no training in any spirituality and I feel like there’s a hole in my life.” For Goodchild, spirituality is not organized religion. Rather, it is the connectedness of everything, the belief in the balance of nature, and the desire to be good. In her fictional world that is both familiar and mysterious, she creates opportunities to view spirituality from different points of view. “By observing something that’s false,” she explains, “you can talk about it in a freer way.”

The cornerstone of the artist’s ongoing body of felt and wool work is intricately handpainted and handstitched inlaid patchwork. Historically, tailors and soldiers worked inlaid patchwork with durable and accessible fabrics like the wool from uniforms or men’s great coats. Soldiers used the technique as a hobby during downtime in the barracks to make decorative patches and banners. The process is simple: shapes are cut out and butted together, similar to wood marquetry, then handsewn from behind to hide the stitching. The radiating wheel in Goodchild’s installation *The Fire and the Knife* was inspired by a wall hanging by Josef Grossi. The Swiss soldier and artist, who lost both legs to frostbite in the Napoleonic war (1803–1817), used remnants from vibrant Napoleonic uniforms in his work.

What sets Goodchild’s practice apart from traditional inlaid patchwork are the handpainted sepia-tone faces she adds to bring antique portraiture style to pieced felt—a technique she has been developing over the past decade. “It’s all about cutting,” she says, which allows her to pair portraits that reference one time with colorful geometric shapes and motifs that recall others. As an example, Goodchild’s wall hanging *The Balanced Life Will Flourish* is influenced by American Mennonite quilting and European inlaid-patchwork altar cloths. The juxtaposition of modern patterns, bright colors, and austere faces in this piece are evidence of a sharpening skill set and complex symbolism found at the heart of all her work.

After graduating from the Fashion Design program at Ryerson University in Toronto, Ontario, Goodchild worked in the motion-picture industry making puppets for stop-motion and live-action productions. These projects helped animate her own artwork, with tactile illustrations of common folk tales and songs inspired by the artistic styles, symbols, and heirlooms of Appalachian, Mennonite, Quaker, Pennsylvania-Dutch, Shaker, and Freemason societies. Goodchild’s research

RIGHT: *Journey Portrait*, 2010; felt, burlap; rug-hooked; 70" x 27".





into the stories and beliefs of these communities allowed her to develop a complex amalgam of values, in turn forming the very personal yet fictive narrative that runs throughout her work. In the spring of 2007, her exhibit *From Some Wilderness Place* featured shadow boxes depicting the first of these new fables and folklore alongside dozens of ominously posed wool mammals coming out from beneath a heavy quilt. This installation marked the start of something more pious and socially aware in her practice: "It was a kind of emerging Eden where man grows further from his animal nature and becomes more corrupt, which falls along my theme of self-improvement."

This concept of moral evolution became the scaffold for Goodchild's surreal tale about the complex fictional life of Anna Ward Brouse, who lived in nineteenth-century Pennsylvania. At twenty-three, Brouse is struck by visions of a religious group of young girls living in sixteenth-century Germany who were slaughtered by witch hunters. Brouse channels this long-dead assembly by starting her own chapter, complete with rituals, regalia, and beliefs. Goodchild uses this new order as a platform to animate the fragments of histories, faiths, and textiles she's fallen for along the way.

To reference characters in this devoutly time-warped storyline, Goodchild uses Victorian- and Edwardian-era photographs as source material for her paper patterns, carefully mapping the graphic contours of each woman's face. She then

TOP, LEFT: Using a paper pattern drawn from an antique found photograph, the contours of the portrait are cut into 1/8" commercially made wool felt. The process is similar to wood marquetry. TOP, RIGHT: The first watercolor painting of the wool face. CENTER: A detail of the painted felt portrait. BOTTOM, LEFT: After each layer of paint, Goodchild puts the woman back together to assess gradation and tone, repainting areas if needed. BOTTOM, RIGHT: The back of the piece is handstitched with cotton thread. ABOVE, RIGHT: The finished portrait Margaret Brock (2011, 14" x 20").

cuts both paper and commercially produced wool felt together. Each piece is stained with watercolor paint and left to dry—a process that is repeated until the desired tone is achieved—and finally sewn back together. "The reason it's so successful is that by cutting it [the felt], I stop the bleed of the watercolor," she says, all while playing with gradation for hair, makeup, and a lot of intensity.

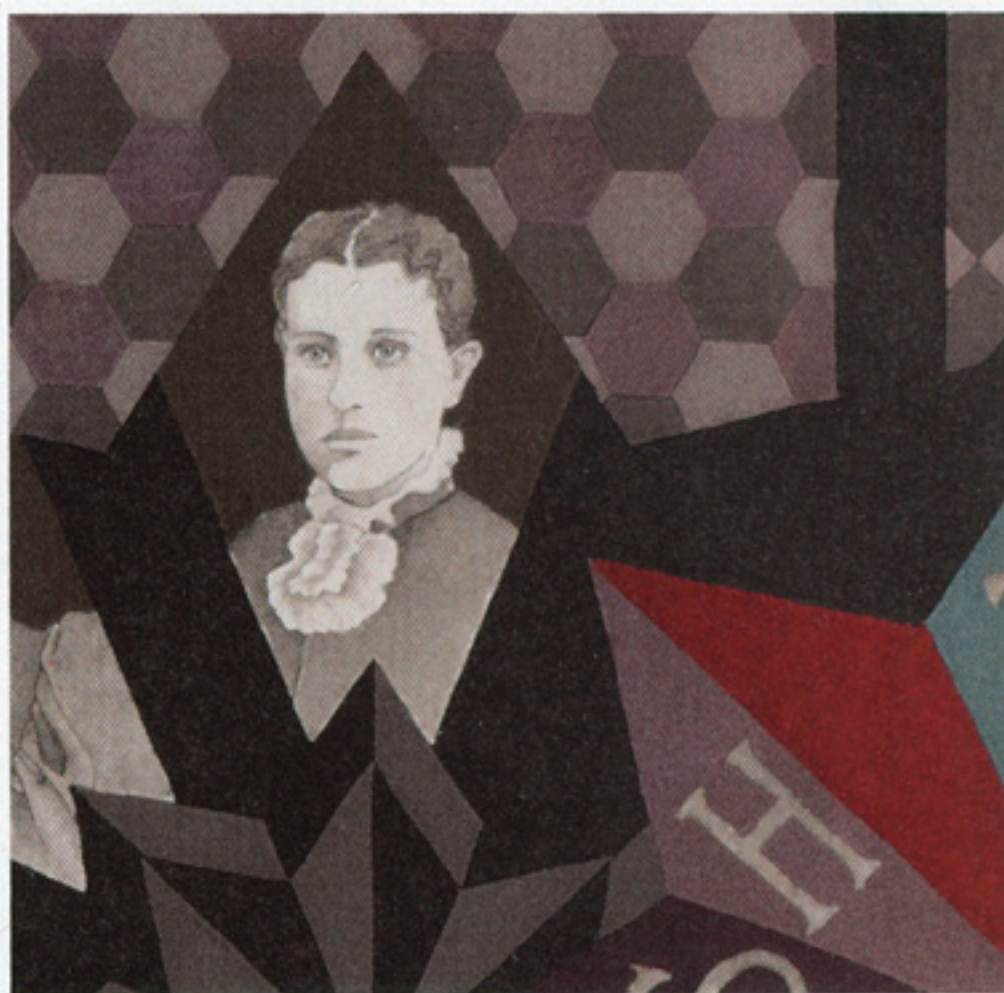
The *Revelations of Anna Ward Brouse* is the first of three shows to date that depict Goodchild's society. This initial exhibition pulls you into the space by way of three textile arches; each one is based on the pillars of Freemasonry: wisdom, strength, and beauty. Within the arches, a diorama reveals Brouse's visions of her lost sisters gaining the properties of each pillar. "It's all about using a metaphor of architecture on your soul," says Goodchild, "and as you pass through life, you're building your soul to become a better person." The following exhibition, *The Path of Anna Ward Brouse*, further elaborates

on the society's virtuous philosophy, while in her third segment, *The Fire and the Knife*, Goodchild delves into the ideas of journey and transformation.

Traditionally a woman's craft, she chose rug hooking as the ideal medium to convey societal messages, as well as the centerpiece for that show. In the Victorian age, people could look at a painting and read it like a book, thanks to the universality of certain symbols. At the bottom of the *Journey Portrait* rug, Goodchild repeats the wisdom, strength, and beauty motif with the oak leaf, the lily, and the pomegranate. The rug's composition is reminiscent of stained glass windows that church parishioners still look to for stories and guidance. Hooked into the rug is the biblically inspired slogan "Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads unto life" to be remembered throughout one's journey. The checkerboard floor signifies times of lightness and darkness. The three triangles represent self-chosen paths such as politics, career, lifestyle, etc., that become dead ends, for the traveler passing through the forest. Each triangle corresponds to a suit of modern playing cards derived from the Tarot deck. Those able to move through the forest will be destroyed then reborn by fire, much like the phoenix. The fire represents one of life's benchmarks. Once achieved, the traveler progresses on to life's next challenge.

Goodchild's fourth installment of this intriguing world, *Walking the Pattern*, will be presented this fall at Mulherin + Pollard gallery in New York. The new patterns and designs will evoke board games with hidden secrets that teach lessons on moral reform. As an installation, a moment of initiation in dance will be made with figures dressed in regalia decorated with motifs stemming from folk symbolism, traditional patchwork, and the expanding repetitions of nature. A look into Girl Guides, the early years. ●

The artist's website is www.heathergoodchild.com. Goodchild's solo show *Walking the Pattern* will be on display at Mulherin + Pollard gallery, New York, September 8–October 2; www.katharinemulherin.com.



BELOW: *The Balanced Life will Flourish (with detail)*, 2010; inlaid-felt patchwork; 60" x 60".

