



A carder brush and a doffer stick, two traditional tools, on a bed of indigo-dyed wool. **FACING PAGE** Grace Wood at the family farm with a batt of carded wool.

state of grace

WHILE RECOVERING AT THE FAMILY SHEEP PROPERTY, GRACE WOODS FOUND A WHOLE NEW CAREER.

WORDS AMBER CRESWELL BELL. PHOTOGRAPHY FELIX FOREST





“I’M INSPIRED BY MY LIFE IN THE COUNTRY, AND THE FAMILY THAT HAS SHARED THE JOURNEY.”



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Grace works the wash line and dyed wool through a drum carder; a sheep and a paca wool polka dot scarf on the kitchen door; three felt cushion covers beneath a ‘Blue Ring’ wall hanging; some of the 300-strong flock; the 1860s homestead started life as a goldrush-era post office. **FACING PAGE:** A ‘Blue Waves’ bedcover hung out to dry.



What do you get from a life-threatening illness, followed by convalescence on a sheep property? In Grace Wood’s case, the answer is a new career as a felt textile designer. Grace had always wanted to be a farmer, just like her parents. Growing up on an orchard in Barry, south-west of NSW’s Bathurst, she loved the country lifestyle and was old enough to appreciate her parents’ pioneering ways when, in the 1980s, they moved their apples and pears from chemical dependence to a wholly organic operation. When her parents, Russell and Catherine, eventually sold the property, Grace felt the loss keenly. Unsure of her direction after finishing school, she eventually moved to London in 2006 for a change of outlook. But the following year she heard that her parents had purchased a new property at Clear Creek, just 20 minutes north of Bathurst — and the news encouraged her to head home in early 2008. The then 24-year-old began a bachelor of design course at Sydney’s College of Fine Arts — still not sure what she wanted to do, but aware that it might be sensible to give her creativity some practical qualification. But then she began suffering terrible pain in her neck and down one side of her body. Worse still, after six months of chiropractic and osteopathic treatment it was discovered that Grace had a large tumour in her neck. “Facing cancer and mortality was an exhausting experience that carried me to a very dark and fearful place,” she recalls. “Many surgeries to remove the tumour eventually gave me the all clear — but the strain on my >



health had been great and I spent a lot of time at the Clear Creek farm recuperating.”

Dating back to the 1860s, the heritage-listed house was on a large pastoral property that had gradually been reduced. By the time the homestead and remaining land were bought by Grace’s parents, just 60 hectares remained.

And that remainder was in a dire state. Paddocks were filled with discarded white goods, empty car bodies and even old train carriages, and sheds overflowed with junk. After this debris had all been consigned to big skips, Russell and Catherine began building dams, controlling erosion, slashing weeds, and planting trees, vegetables, flowers and clover pasture for a flock of 300 merino and crossbred sheep. The house, too, had suffered neglect and required a considerable labour of love to be revived.

It was here that Grace convalesced, as the seasons came and went. And it was at the farm that Seralie Wood — Grace’s aunt and an accomplished textile artist — began teaching Grace to make felt.

“It took me out of my head and into my hands,” Grace says. “And, of course, the fact that the raw material was right here on the farm seemed very right as well.”

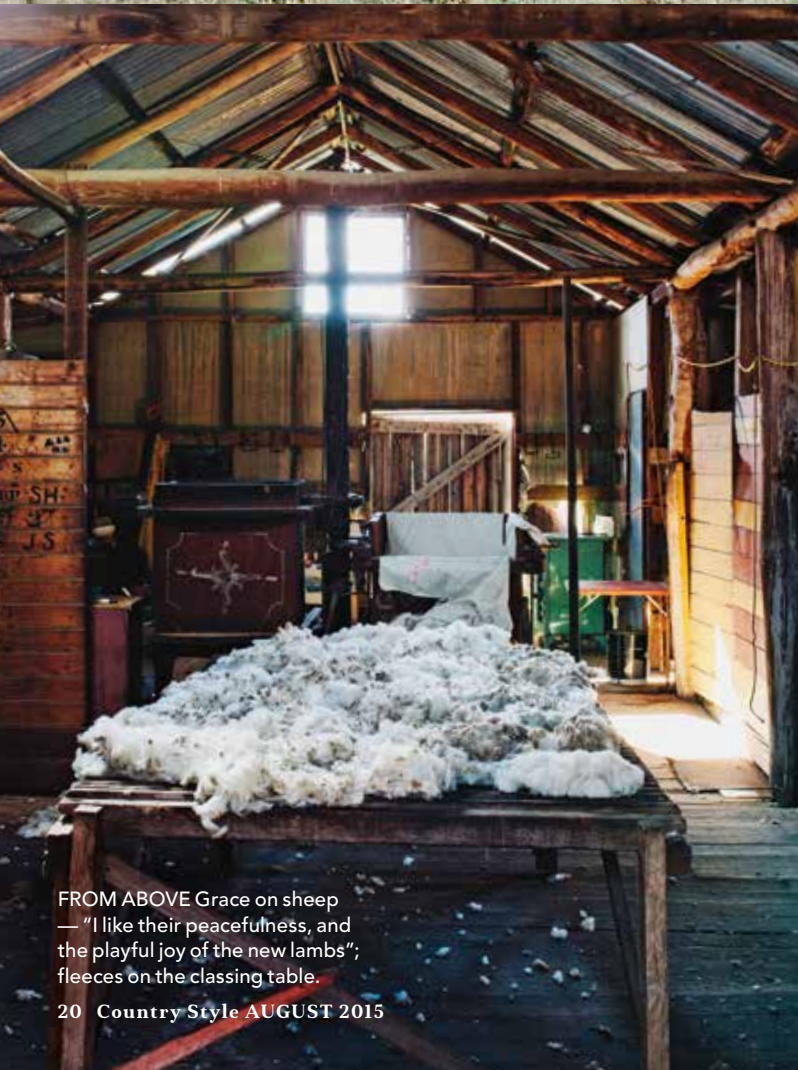
When Grace’s health improved, she returned to study in 2010. Towards the end of the course, she was required to complete an internship as part of her degree — and now she had a clear direction. Having fallen in love with the work of Dutch fibre artist Claudy Jongstra, Grace applied to join her studio in the Netherlands — and was accepted. “This was a major turning point,” Grace says. “When I returned home in 2013, I started my own studio practice hoping to emulate the business model I had observed.”

Now 31, Grace sells her hand-felted textiles through her website, as well as on Etsy. Although she is now based in the Blue Mountains, the influence of Clear Creek is clear in her work, starting with the raw wool that’s treated with traditional craft techniques, including dyes made from plants from around the farm.

“I’m inspired by my life in the country, and the family that has shared the journey,” Grace says. “I get back to the farm as often as I can, and I love to be here for significant events like shearing and crutching. And at Christmas and on birthdays we all congregate, often bringing large groups of friends with us.”

This recent visit is in winter, which at Clear Creek means frosts and even the occasional snowfall — so beanies and gloves are fashion essentials. Everyone gathers around the kitchen’s open fireplace, drinking endless cups of tea and cooking stews on the slow-combustion stove. And over the warm and welcome smell of the fire lingers a faint scent of lanolin that speaks of sheep, wool and craft. *

To see more of Grace’s work, visit gracewooddesigns.com



FROM ABOVE Grace on sheep — “I like their peacefulness, and the playful joy of the new lambs”; fleeces on the classing table.