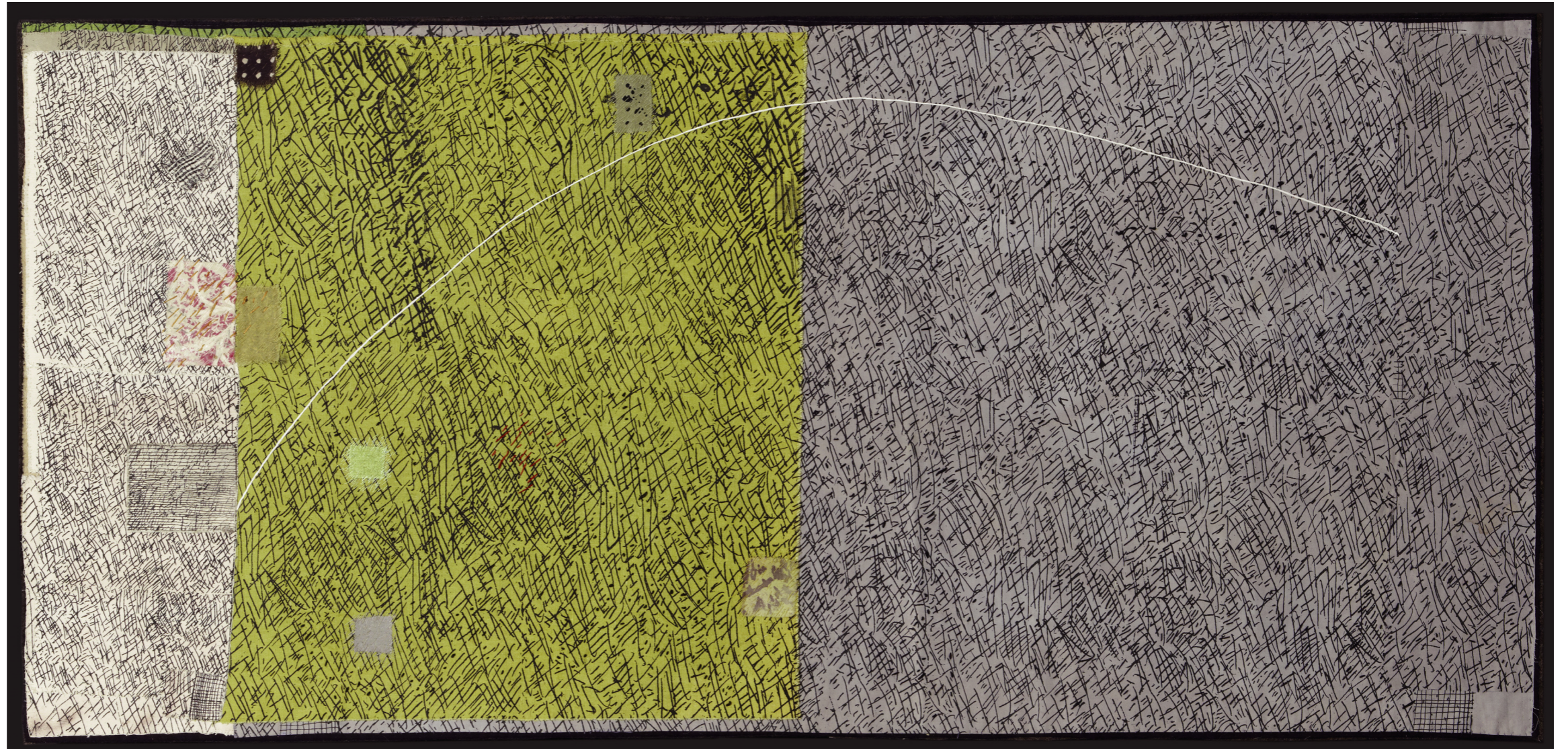


Dorothy Caldwell,  
*Walking on Tundra*,  
2013. 63.5 x 134.6cm.  
Cotton, dyed and  
silkscreened, stitched  
and patched



## MARKS in time and place

The artist Dorothy Caldwell states her work 'is a map of land and memory' recording and examining the landmarks that provide a sense of place and how humans mark and visualise the land...

CANADIAN ARTIST DOROTHY CALDWELL has always been intimately engaged with landscape, with physical place. She recalls her memories of the backyard at age five: '...around the perimeter... the cherry tree, then the pear and the plum... As you followed the fence around the border was the pussy willow, the blue morning glories.... My landmarks, all happening in a square shape.'

Today she lives in rural Ontario where the hill behind her studio with its gentle curve and the intersecting, cultivated fields anchor a world, both visual and felt, that is embodied in her stitched textile pieces. Her work draws on the landscape, but forgoes Renaissance traditions of a window on the world or North American

landscapes of majesty and conquest. Instead, her work suggests a way of entering the landscape, of being in and part of a physical place.

The tactile quality of textiles is an apt medium for her approach. The intensive, obsessive stitches – in the cloth, rather than on the cloth – create movement and integrate disparate aspects of the landscape depicted.

Trained as a painter at Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, Caldwell came to textiles incrementally. She notes the 1971 Whitney Museum of American Art quilt exhibition as a significant moment. That exhibition presented quilts as art, emphasizing their abstract design qualities rather than their purpose or history as folk objects.

Seeing both abstract expressionist painter Mark Rothko's thin washes of colour exposing the canvas substrate and Lenore Davis's painterly dye surfaces further opened the door to the potential of cloth as an expressive medium. Caldwell also references Canadian artist Anne Meredith Barry, a painter, whose dashes and dots are like stitches. For Caldwell, Barry's work reinforced an idea of place as 'what you feel on your skin, the scent in the air... the sounds you hear'.

Caldwell likens the physicality of stitching to the ideas and techniques of painters. Needle and thread, like paint on canvas, mark cloth, leaving a record of gesture, time, and process. But, with its record of small gestures, her stitching claims an intimacy not



Above: *Quiet Place*: Willow and Arctic Moss, 2011. 61 x 61cm. Wax resist & silkscreen discharged cotton, stitched and patched

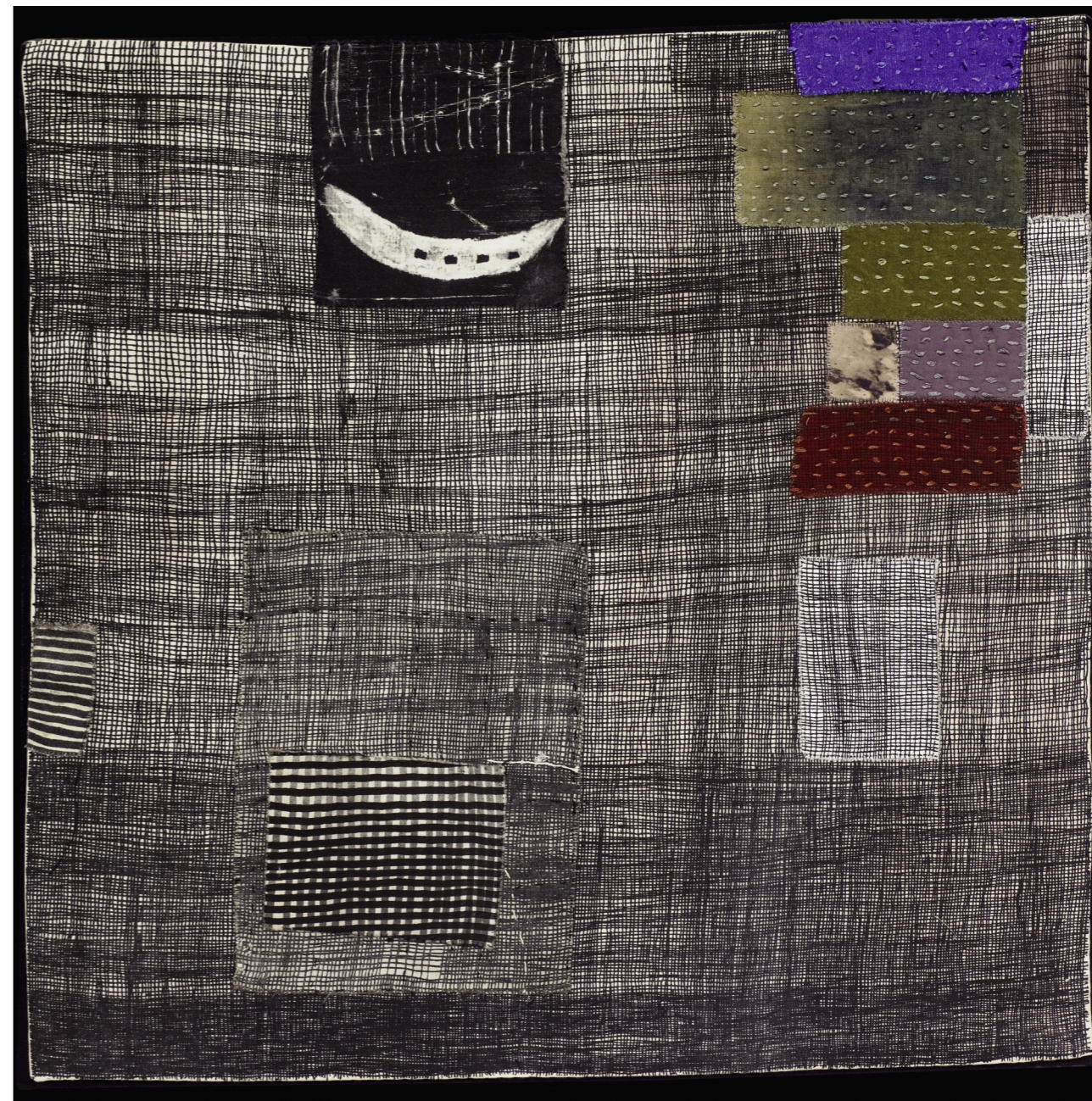
commonly found in painting. Caldwell's large-scale pieces marry restraint and richness, appearing to meld the grandness of a place with intimately observed and felt detail.

Caldwell is a dogged researcher, most recently in the Canadian Arctic and the Flinders Ranges in Australia. She begins by studying the people and culture, the history of the area and how the land has been used. She also immerses herself in local textile traditions. Gathering of visual, literary, and documentary information continues as she undertakes new work in the studio.

Even with this grounding, Caldwell admits that: 'Approaching a new piece or body of work is always scary. Just because one piece is successful doesn't mean the next one will be.' And, being scared can lead to procrastination. Caldwell explains that over time she's

developed a technique she calls 'creative procrastination'. 'I go into the studio, I putter, perhaps sort and fold fabric, read a relevant article, take notes, handle and arrange my collections, vacuum, do some random stitching and gradually something begins to take shape.'

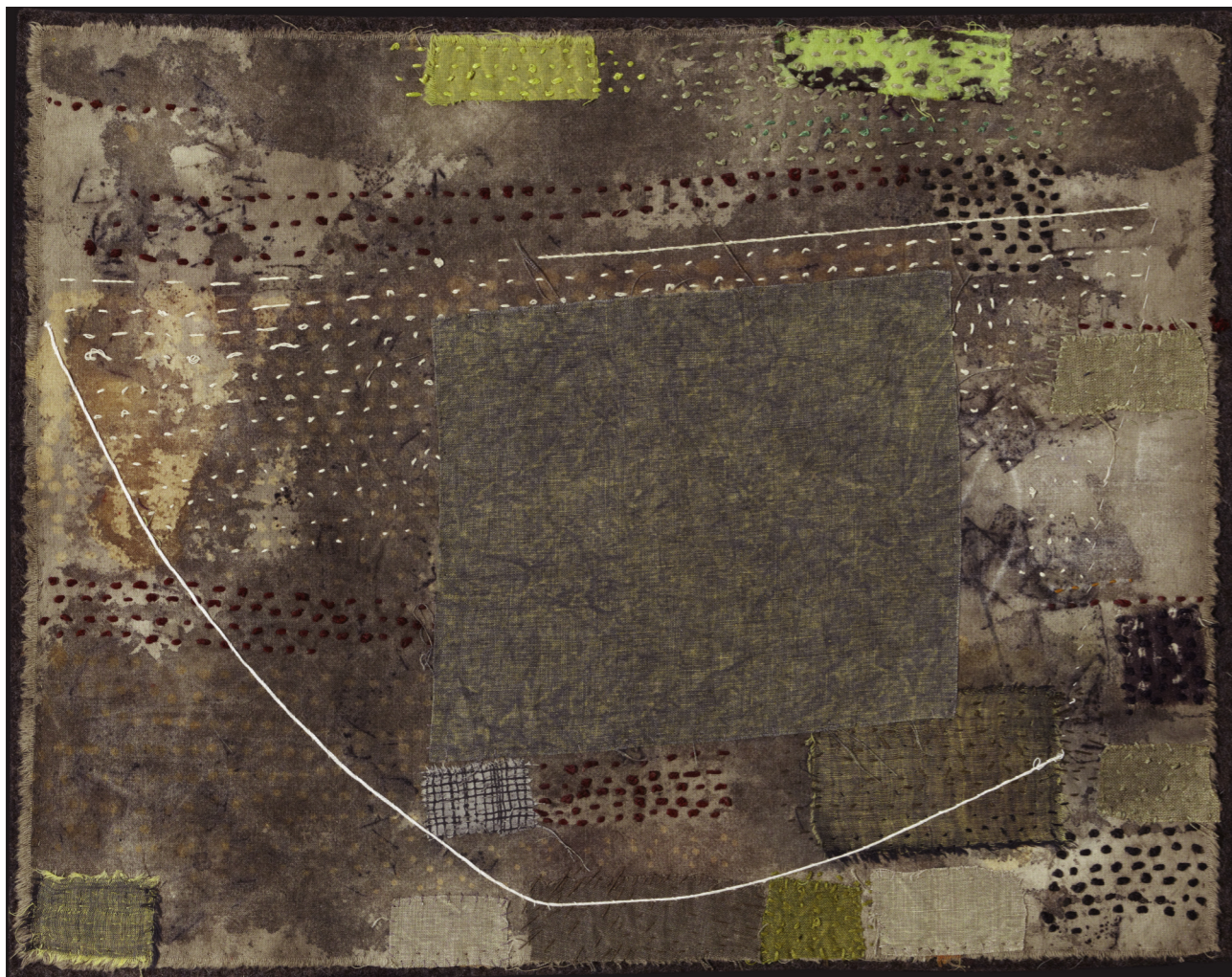
Typically, she begins a piece by creating a printed and, or batik base fabric, using a process that courts accidents, inviting surprises and irregularities. The piece is then hung on the wall for further study, to become familiar with its surface and flaws. Finally, the slow process she refers to as 'repair' begins. Fragments of cloth are added, areas are 'mended,' cloth is removed or patched over. 'It doesn't matter how much work has gone into it, if it doesn't work, I just keep going.' This process of accident, accretion, erosion, repair



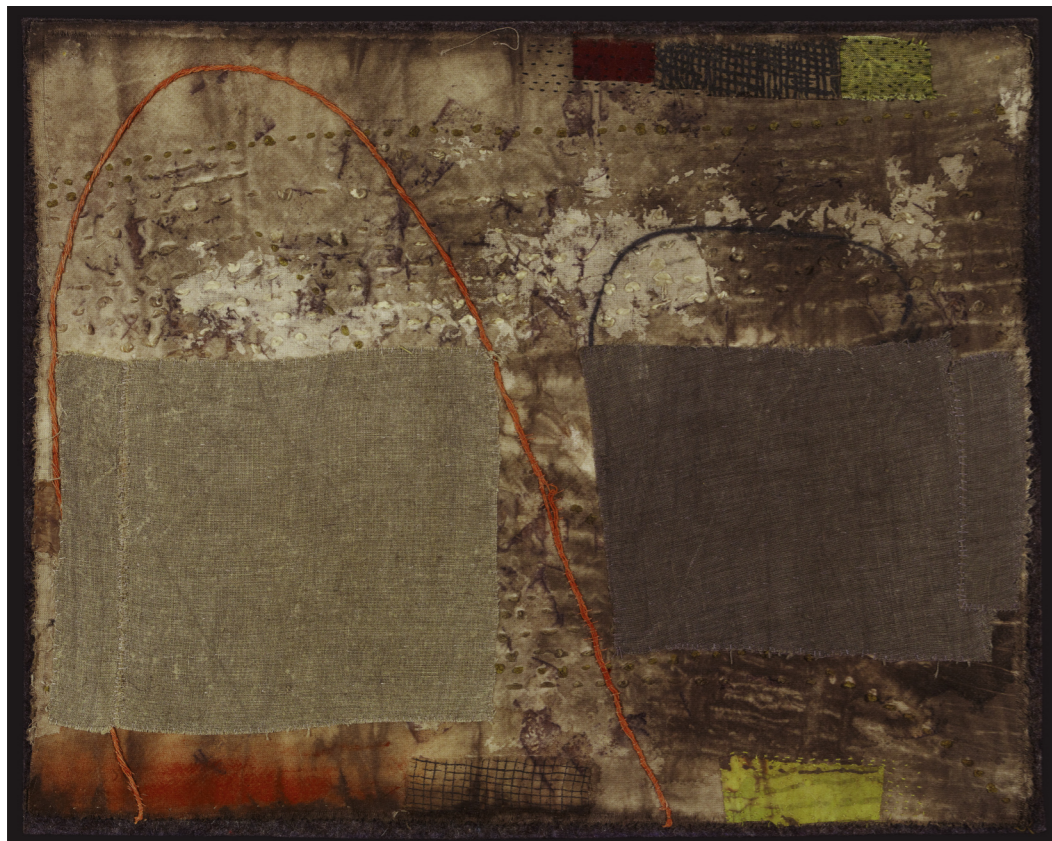
Above: *Artifact*, 2011. 60 x 60cm. Wax resist & silkscreen discharge on cotton, stitched and patched

Right: *Wandering Time*, 2011. 66 x 152cm. Wax resist & silkscreen discharge on cotton, stitched and patched





Above: *History of Stone*, 2013. 35.5 x 45.7cm. Cotton plant-dyed in Australia and coloured with earth ochres, stitched and patched



Left: *Red Hill/Black Hill*, 2013. 35.5 x 45.7cm. Cotton coloured with earth ochres and plant dyed in Australia, stitched and patched

Opposite: *How do We Know When It's Night?*, 2011. 304.8 x 289.6cm. Wax resist & silkscreen discharged cotton, stitched and patched

creates a history, paralleling the history of geologic and human marks visible in the landscapes that shape Caldwell's vocabulary. It also requires that one is a good editor, ready to identify and abandon what isn't working, regardless of time invested. Caldwell says that she doesn't 'think of stitching as requiring patience so much as I think of it as giving myself time.'

Caldwell has traveled to Australia regularly over the last 20 years to teach, research, and work. She has always been a collector of natural material and says that her way of knowing a place is 'by gathering and touching its contents.' In Australia, rather than keeping a sketchbook or journal, she collected earth, daily rubbing earth from specific locations onto the pages of a book. Each page, a different colour, records travels from location to location. On daily walks while visiting the Arctic and Australia, she also collects plant material, stains 'collecting cards' with plants and earth, makes tracings of stones or rubbings of objects, both those discarded by humans and natural.

Caldwell was aware of Australian aboriginal baskets and other fibre work coloured entirely with earth ochre. When she learned about concentrated deposits of ochre in the Flinders Ranges, she determined to go there. Since, in collaboration with Australian artist India Flint, she has worked at a historic sheep station in the Flinders Ranges, gathering ochre and other local material, dying on site, as 'a way to deepen my connection to place.'

For Caldwell, travel, study of textile traditions, and residencies 'form a rich basis to work from.' Wherever she goes, she finds support and inspiration via collaboration and conversation with others who love textiles: rural Ontario quilt groups, an Inuit tapestry weaving studio, workshop students, women's Kantha cooperatives in India, aboriginal basket makers in Australia. In addition, her studio is both a place for making work and a material environment designed to inspire. She likens her studio to a natural history museum with 'lichen covered rocks, chunks of red, gold, pink, and lavender ochre, stones with intriguing shapes, leaves, pressed flowers, shells, bones... [plus] intriguing textile objects... gloves, bags, socks, potholders, vintage aprons, women's handbooks... and many textile fragments.' All contribute to the 'courage to start.' And, one must assume that Caldwell reaps such benefits in large part due to her persistence, humility, quiet generosity, and eagerness to share and to learn. ●

SUSAN MOSS

[dorothycaldwell.com](http://dorothycaldwell.com)

A solo exhibition of new work by Dorothy Caldwell is on show at the Knitting and Stitching Show in Harrogate from 21-24 November 2013



## DOROTHY CALDWELL

US born, emigrated to Canada in 1972

### Education

1980 The Banff Centre for Fine Arts, Banff, AB  
1970 BFA Temple University, Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia, PA  
1969 Tyler School of Fine Arts, Rome, Italy

### Exhibitions

2014 Solo Tour: Charting Unfamiliar Territory, sponsored by the Art Gallery of Peterborough & the Cambridge Galleries  
2013 Solo show: Knitting & Stitching Show,  
2011 Solo show: In Place: New Landscapes, David Kaye Gallery, Toronto

### Awards

1990 Saidye Bronfman Award (Exceptional Canadian Craftsperson)

### Collections

Museum of Art & Design, New York City  
Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull, Quebec  
Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia  
Quilt Study Center and Museum, University of Nebraska, USA  
The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston