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Artist Melissa Joseph Wants the World to Understand Midwestern “Casserole Culture”



The multidisciplinary artist, showing with Charles Moffett in New York, channels her childhood home in giant fabric artworks

BY MAXWELL RABB PUBLISHED: SEP 9, 2026

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JÓN PRÓSPERO

“I am a maker of things,” artist Melissa Joseph says in her Manhattan studio. The space is alive with materials: drawers overflowing with kaleidoscopic bunches of fabric, corners crammed with antiques (or parts of them) sourced from around the world, and walls covered in mementos and photographs. “Some people don’t see value in discarded things,” she says. “That’s been a throughline from my practice even before, when I was a kid making dolls from jars and screws, before I discovered felt. Even when I was in grad school, I was stealing steel bars from construction sites and wrapping them in silk.”

I joined Joseph at her studio in July, as she was putting the finishing touches on her latest solo show, “Casserole Culture,” now on view at New York gallery Charles Moffett through October 17. The show draws on Joseph’s rural Pennsylvania upbringing, her Indian and Irish heritage, and the peculiarities of Midwestern culture through a new series of plush textiles depicting domestic scenes and landscapes. To make these works, she meticulously felts colored wool, binding fibers together with a razor-sharp needle, creating compositions that from afar could appear to be paintings but up close reveal themselves as soft and fluffy. One of these hangs in the studio as we talk and felt together: *Julie’s Room by Jeanne Caldwell* (2026), a massive, detailed depiction of her sister’s pink childhood bedroom. The wool gives the work tactility, evoking a sense of intimacy with both material and memory and the laborious care with which it was rendered.



CHROMATICS STUDIO NYC

Melissa Joseph, *Julie's Room* by Jeanne Caldwell, 2026

Joseph, 45, picked up wool as a medium after a residency at New York's Textile Arts Center in 2019, after years of working in ceramics and found-object sculpture. Since then, she's mounted solo shows of felted work in New York and Berlin and received commissions from Rockefeller Center and the Brooklyn Museum. These works often draw on her memories and real-life excursions, capturing scenes from her childhood

or landscapes like sheep scattered across the Scottish countryside. Sometimes she mounts these works in found frames like antique dressers, metal plates, and other objects she receives from her beloved “rust guy,” a close friend who deals in old wares. Four works in the current show use this kind of unconventional framing, including *Hearth* (2026), a rendering of a roaring fire that’s housed within an actual stone fireplace.

“This material is so special to me,” she says. “I can’t explain it. I can’t even imagine my life if I hadn’t found this material, because it opened up a new way of working. I can work 12-hour days without even blinking, batting an eye. It is my home. There’s something about using this material to make my home that’s related to that, but what I really want to do is transport people. I want people to feel transported to this place.”



DANIEL GREER

Melissa Joseph, *Hearth*, 2026

Home, for Joseph, is a small town in a rural stretch of North Pennsylvania called Saint Mary's. Her father immigrated to the town as part of the Hart-Celler Act in 1965 and soon met her Irish Catholic mother, who grew up nearby in Pittsburgh. In 2020, when conversations around identity politics entered the mainstream, Joseph realized that she doesn't necessarily classify herself as Indian or Irish but rather "identifies most authentically as Pennsylvanian," she recalls. Eventually, she distilled this localized sense of identity into the term "casserole culture," rooted in the community and gumption she experienced throughout her rural childhood. (She even claimed the website and Instagram.) "It's a way of life that is about resourcefulness, ingenuity, making stuff from whatever's available," she says.

For Joseph, a casserole functions as a type of hearth. "You don't make a casserole for one person," she jokes later, when we walk through the exhibition. These dishes pull together all the available ingredients to provide a shared meal, sometimes the center of a dinner party or a gift for a mourning friend. It's fitting that a casserole portrait anchors the show. On the far back wall of the gallery, *Bridal Shower* (2026) depicts a table packed with colorful dessert casseroles, fruit bowls, and plenty of silverware. Even without people, the food itself signals community—a shared space.



CHROMATICS STUDIO NYC

Melissa Joseph, *Bridal Shower*, 2026

Unlike Joseph's previous shows, this new work is noticeably devoid of people. After her mother passed in 2024 (and her father in 2015), she shares, she "wasn't in the emotional place" to create figurative work, though she still wanted to convey the spaces that her loved ones once inhabited. Where *Bridal Shower* evokes a massive gathering, other works imbue spaces with subtle signs of life. *Dad's Hat* (2026), for instance, shows her father's hat gently dropped onto the top of a dresser in her childhood home. *Curry Is a Casserole* (2026) also invokes her father, depicting his favorite curry while weaving in a sense of all-embracing Midwestern hospitality.

"Bringing different things together and making them feel like they were always together or they belong together, it's how I'm trying to reconcile the two different cultures," she says. "The fact that people call them 'flyover states' means that they're not recognizing that there are valuable things about it—the community-oriented part of it.... The goal of the show is to humanize the 'flyover states' so that people can see themselves there too."



MARK WALDHAUSER

Melissa Joseph, *Dad's Hat*, 2026



MARK WALDHAUSER

Melissa Joseph, *After the Party*, 2026

Still, two works very intentionally feature people: *647 Evergreen Rd.* (2026) and *After the Party* (2026), depicting Joseph's father and mother, respectively. The first shows her father donning a brown trench coat and standing outside her childhood house, which tragically burned down. The second focuses on her mother washing dishes in the background, cleaning up from a party, while a lone green balloon floats in the corner of the room. Here, wool offers an added sense of dreaminess and

personalization, as if we as viewers are peering directly into Joseph's slightly fuzzy private recollection.

The felted wool landscapes and interiors in “Casserole Culture” carry a vague melancholy, evocative of nostalgia; however, Joseph assures me that she feels more present than ever. What people can learn from the casserole—from shared food and space—might help them understand one another better. In the wake of her personal grief, Joseph found a home in her textiles and now strives to show us how much an unwavering community matters.



MARK WALDHAUSER

Melissa Joseph, *647 Evergreen Rd.*, 2026

“I want to move away from the word *memory*,” Joseph says. This new work may use images of the past, but Joseph wants to champion Midwestern cordiality and community in the present. Everything in the show feels full of life, even when people are absent, from the felted casseroles on the wall to the textile fire in the stone hearth. Referring to

herself, her community, and her work, Joseph tells me, “It’s not nostalgic; it’s now.”

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