

LENORE TAWNEY: WHOLLY UNLOOKED FOR

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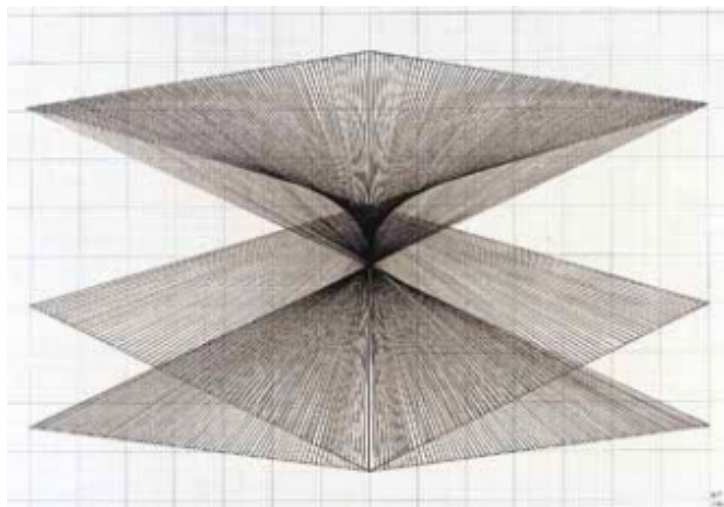


Fig 1 Lenore Tawney, *The Great Breath*, 1964, ink drawing on graph paper. Courtesy Lenore G. Tawney Foundation. Photo: George Erml.

Before entering the glass doors to the Decker Gallery at the Maryland Institute of Art (MICA), the visitor is instructed to remove his or her shoes—a minor act of supplication. Stepping across the threshold, a pristine space beckons. Well lit and filled with a majestic calm, it is as if the visitor has entered a sanctuary. The entire gallery space is white, including the floors. Ethereal objects, large and small, conceptually intersect, cross, and come in and out of focus, some heavy and some light. It is meditation manifest. This is the world of artist Lenore Tawney.

Tawney, a groundbreaking artist, was 100 years old when she passed away in 2007. Her life story reads like a mythic tale, following the classic contours of the hero's journey—from a descent into darkness to a spiritual rebirth. Born Leonora Gallagher in 1907 in Ohio, Tawney moved to Chicago at age 20 to work as a proofreader and attend evening classes at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In Chicago she met George Tawney, who, in a tragic turn of events, died shortly after their marriage in 1941. After a move to Urbana, Illinois to be near his family, Tawney discovered in the library of her father-in-law a collection of talks by Swami Vivekananda, a well-known Hindu monk who helped to spread Indian philosophies in the West. She was deeply affected by his teachings, and they

sparked an interest in Eastern philosophy that would come to shape her creative practice.

In 1946 Tawney began classes at Chicago's Institute of Design (her teachers included avant-garde artists László Moholy-Nagy, Alexander Archipenko, and Emerson Woelffer, and the weaver Marli Ehrman). After creating small clay figures under the tutelage of Archipenko, she abruptly quit the practice and destroyed her work.

Subsequently she attended weaving classes with Marta Taipale at Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina. During her studies she adopted a seeker's path, traveling extensively over a throughout Mexico, Western Europe, North Africa, Greece, and the Middle East.

And here the story turns dramatically. Tawney made a firm vow in this period to cast off the clutter of everyday life and devote herself entirely to a single pursuit: life as an artist characterized by an austere devotion to work. While her decision was clearly based on her increasing belief in and practice of Eastern philosophy (by now she had begun to meditate daily and soon she would become an ardent student of well-known Hindu guru Swami Muktananda, and later, his heir Swami Chidvilasanda), it remains a quintessentially American story, rather Protestant and Midwestern in its stoic determination and outcome. As this newly invented protagonist, Tawney would, for the next fifty years, comb the world, glean what she needed to create art that she viewed as enlightened and transformative.

This preface is important to any discussion of the artist's work, because while the basic details may sound simplistic, even clichéd, the result is astonishing. Tawney was fifty when she seriously began her new, revitalized art practice. In 1961 she moved to New York alone. She acquired and renovated a large, dirty loft in the Coenties Slip district and painted the space a pristine white from floor to ceiling. Tawney lived nearby on a houseboat, and her neighbors in her loft building included Robert Indiana, Agnes Martin, Jack Youngerman, and Ellsworth Kelly. She meditated and followed a path of beatitude that extended to her creative practice.

The exhibition at MICA is one half of a larger project—the other half organized by the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. MICA's show was co-curated by faculty member and chair of the Fiber Program Piper Shepard and her colleague Susie Brandt.¹ Their show is a retrospective of Tawney's fiber works, with an emphasis on her use of line, and how that work connects with her assemblages, collages, and drawings, which are also part of the exhibition. Shepard and Brandt worked closely with Kathleen Mangan, executive director of the Lenore G. Tawney Foundation, to bring together this diverse cross-section of works. The University of the Arts in Philadelphia will treat Tawney's paper-based work.

Each work in the MICA exhibition resonates with or cross-references another work. The exhibition's organization is based on connections, though one could follow the work chronologically and discover Tawney as an artist always ahead of

her time in terms of her use of the medium of fiber and her adoption of an Asian minimalist aesthetic. Although influences are apparent, the exhibition reveals that Tawney never imitated, rather, she produced her own unique lexicon. In the case of her chosen medium of fiber, this was a lexicon so unorthodox that at first it was controversial, but then quickly spread through the burgeoning field of fiber arts so as to become so ubiquitous its origins were forgotten.



Fig 2 Lenore Tawney, *Scripture in Stone*, 1990, canvas, linen, paint, gold leaf.

When visitors enter the Decker Gallery, they are met with a majestic piece from the latter part of her career titled *Written in Water* (1979), one of her so-called “cloud” works. It consists of loose strands of linen augmented with acrylic paint cascading from a canvas grid. It is larger than human scale, and it shimmers and shifts in the light. Strictly speaking, the work is linear and spare. But all the interstitial space between the hanging strands is magically activated. It is

air as sculpture and weaving as disembodied strands. To its right is a set of drawings on graph paper from the 1960s. In these works, very fine lines in India ink converge and overlap across the gridded paper in a visually complex manner. These drawings were influenced by Tawney's study of the complicated industrial Jacquard loom. To their left is another set of paper works consisting of simple circles centered within squares embellished with handwritten text and collaged paper elements. The text is poetic and often consists of quotations or personal writing, and there are hints of John Cage's Asian-inspired chance operations here. Also in the space are Plexiglas vitrines containing taut, linear arrays constructed in black string that twists and overlaps. Other larger Plexiglas vitrines contain similar arrays of linen twine; they are all appropriately titled *Drawing in Air*. Produced thirty years later, the *Drawings in Air* are her Jacquard loom drawings from the 1960s reimagined. This section of the exhibition successfully illustrates that Tawney was continually using linear marks—drawing in various forms—to carve out space. The resulting work is as much air, or negative space, as it is positive, sculptural space.

Opposite these works hangs *In Fields of Light* (1975), a broad slit tapestry. It is vibrant orange—a holy color in India and Nepal. The circle within the square motif appears again in this work, and is recognizable as the single most pervasive motif employed by Tawney. Radiant, it references Jung, meditative practice, and the religious culture of her teachers and their homeland. As such, this work also very clearly relates to Tawney's dedication to daily spiritual practice.

Beyond this section of the exhibition hang large, multiple monochromatic weavings created in very thick yarn dating from the mid-1960s. These works, which integrate figures, knots, and fringing relate to the small clay figures she made when younger. They were radical—derided even—in their time for their open warps and knotting, but the style

During the mid-1960s and 1970s, contemporary art decidedly moved away from Tawney's style of formalist modernism and its belief in positivist redemptive and transformative power toward more conceptually oriented practices. With it came a move away from the artist as a heroic figure toward an attitude of cool detachment. Yet, in an art world suffused with irony and cynicism, Tawney stuck with her practice. Although she didn't remove herself from the art world like her friend and colleague Agnes Martin, she maintained her convictions, including a belief in the power of the artist as a kind of shaman, the idea of art as a romantic vocation, and the notion of creative practice as a search for meaning. It doesn't seem she was the least bit concerned with postmodern credos, though her work is not without its own sense of humor, most evident in her assemblages and mail art. Works such as her Band-Aid boxes carefully wrapped in pages of small print look surprisingly Fluxus, a movement that also employed humor and intersected with her sense of the personal over the institutional and the transformative over the ironic. But to walk into Tawney's studio was always to enter a sacred place, and her work hinges on the belief that the artist's goal is to enlighten the viewer, revealing worlds and ideas not yet known. More recent generations of artists weary of the concerns of their postmodern predecessors and the ever-increasing

demands of the contemporary art market now see Tawney as an inspiration. In other words, her time has come around once more.

The second room of the exhibition includes a table full of objects, carefully culled from Tawney's personal and studio possessions. This area includes various ephemera, postcards, feathers, beads, a small broken Mexican mask, pieces of fabric with beads glued to the surface, reconstructed eggs, and a book turned into a sculpture, among other intriguing objects. Each piece seems like a talisman, a secret unfolding, and all together they suggest narratives full of allegory and wonder. Behind this several of her beautiful handmade garments are exhibited. These were created with the same careful attention to dimension and shape evident in her other work, and they elegantly conjoin her preferred Asian and other spare aesthetic languages. Tawney's garments, like her studio, personal collections, and spiritual practices, were all part of her broader creative endeavor.

There are many additional drawings that illustrate Tawney's interest in Asian aesthetics in the exhibition. One of the most compelling is a seminal work from 1980, titled *Manuscript Writing*. On a simple, small piece of paper Tawney lays down a few fast, black brushstrokes to which she later added text in the form of a beautiful cursive script. The words are so small they are hard to read, but their meaning doesn't matter. It is the exquisite draftsmanship that creates an overall intimate yet exalted sensation. There is something about this small gestural painting that is key to the artist's universe and it seems to be located in her ability to bring together the human or mundane with the majestic through an extreme economy of means.

The exhibition ends (or begins, depending on how you enter) in the Brown Center's Leidy Atrium, a space situated close by to the Decker Gallery. Overhead in the wide-open space looms one of Tawney's masterworks, *Scripture in Stone* (1990). *Scripture in Stone* is a giant cloud sculpture, consisting of a suspended square piece of black canvas, from which "rain" down dark strands of linen flecked with paint and other material. Like an apparition, it shimmers in the light, hovering over the visitor. In concert with the natural light that floods the open space of the atrium, this rigorously spare work brings a floating, organic charge to the postmodern, jutting glass building. Standing in the center of the atrium looking up, one realizes Tawney has left an open circle in the center of the square canvas that glows in gold leaf and creates a column of light. The viewer can climb as high up as four levels within the vast atrium to capture various views of the work, with each perspective offering a different experience. The monumental scale of *Scripture in Stone* approaches that of a natural wonder, and it is the maximal counterpoint to the small ink drawing *Manuscript Writing*.

In the end, the visitor comes away with the understanding that Lenore Tawney pushed her work to a grand level of creative expression. Her ability to fabricate whole works in parts from images in her head is the hallmark of an artist whose total immersion in her practice—to the near exclusion of all else—gave her unprecedented insight and ability. It is part mystery and part mastery, with the

sincere belief in art's transformative potential. Call it what you may, in the end Lenore Tawney remains a deeply humanist artist with a mystic's gaze. She has left us a generous legacy of work and an inspiring path for future generations to follow.

Note¹ The Lenore G. Tawney foundation was established by the artist in 1989 with the goal of furthering the understanding of her work and that of fiber art generally.