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Weaving Beyond the Bauhaus

The Art Institute of Chicago honors the hundredth anniversary of the acclaimed German art school, Bauhaus. The exhibit, *Weaving Beyond the Bauhaus*, represents not only the relationships amongst the female artists themselves, but it uncovers the profound impact that the German school's weaving workshop and its artists had on contemporary American art. Some of the artists featured in this exhibit were born and raised in Germany and studied or taught at the influential German art school. Founded by Walter Gropius, Bauhaus's curriculum emphasized the merging of fine art and design, where aesthetic form was paired with utilitarian function.¹ After the school closed down in 1933, many of these Bauhaus artists, or Bauhäusler, immigrated to the United States to continue their passion for weaving, collaborating, and teaching the school's theories.² Visitors to the museum can view 50 works of textile art, both on and off the loom, including embroidery and knotting. The items on view include tapestries, rugs, and various textiles created with materials from natural fibres like cotton and jute to synthetic fibres like rayon. Works include objects from embroidery hoops to rubber bands; objects that cascade from the ceiling, hang on the wall, or freestanding macrame works; and pieces that highlight patterns and abstract designs. The exhibit, which spans the twentieth century (from the 1920s-1990s), showcases the works of talented artists such as Else Regensteiner, Sheila Hicks, Anni Albers, Otti Berger, Ethel Stein, Lenore Tawney, and Gunta Stölzl.

The show was organized by Erica Warren, the Art Institute of Chicago's assistant curator of textiles. In choosing the works and creating the exhibit, Warren wanted to show what the Bauhaus and its artists is all about. She says, "it's about this dispersal of artists, and their own development and progression, and their exchanges with students, and their collaborations with their colleagues and students, and the kind of reciprocal nature of all of these experiences."³ Instead of using descriptive wall plaques, Warren displayed quotes from the artists throughout the galleries, which reinforces the idea that these women networked, spoke to each other, and developed relationships. Warren chose the perfect time and location to create this eclectic textile exhibit, as it celebrates the centenary of Bauhaus, while unearthing the school's influence on textile art in Chicago and across America.

¹ "The Art Institute of Chicago Presents *Weaving Beyond the Bauhaus*," Art Institute of Chicago, <https://www.artic.edu/press/press-releases/274/the-art-institute-of-chicago-presents-weaving-beyond-the-bauhaus>

² "Weaving beyond the Bauhaus" Art Institute of Chicago, <https://www.artic.edu/exhibitions/9251/weaving-beyond-the-bauhaus>

³ "Art Institute of Chicago show traces the Bauhaus's legacy in 20th-century textile art," Victoria Stapley-Brown, The Art Newspaper, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/art-institute-of-chicago-show-traces-the-bauhaus-s-legacy-in-20th-century-textile-art>

Upon entering the *Weaving Beyond the Bauhaus* exhibit, visitors will notice the warm wooden floor laid out in a herringbone pattern, the white walls and ceiling, and the well lit room utilizing track lighting to highlight all the works of art. However, it is the breathtaking works of art that stand out the most. The exhibit consists of three connected rooms, or galleries that are easy to navigate. Each gallery has its own time period in the 20th century. The first gallery showcases objects that are from the mid 1920s to the late 1960s. The second gallery highlights objects that are made between the late 1950s to mid 1980s. In the final gallery, visitors will enjoy seeing objects from the mid 1970s to the early 1990s. In addition, as visitors move through each room, the pieces become more elaborate, starting with simple woven fabrics, then moving to fringed and beaded rugs and intricate wall hangings, and ending with larger suspended pieces, standing art sculptures, and impressive wall art. White raised platforms are placed against many of the walls to allow certain pieces to be displayed horizontally, or support standing sculptures, while also displaying the title of the work, name of the artist, and date. Other platforms are placed in the center of the gallery where large cascading textile art flows down from the ceiling onto the platform. The overall set up of the gallery allows for flexibility in showcasing such an eclectic group of textile art in all different sizes, shapes, and materials. I was able to really focus on each work individually and appreciate the composition and drama of each piece.

The piece of art I chose to analyze from this exhibit is Lenore Tawney's, *The Bride Has Entered*, 1982. Hung from the gallery ceiling, the dimensions are 69 ½ x 69 ⅞ x 84 inches. This impressive piece has an almost ethereal look to it, despite the fact that it is quite large. Strand after strand of linen thread hangs uniformly in a gridded pattern from fabric above. The large square shaped fabric could be described as an umbrella, but is gently pleated, giving it a wavy look, as the long delicate threads hang down toward the floor. The color is very subtle and calm, giving it a light and welcoming feel. The main material is cotton, which was plain woven in this case. It was also painted with pigment as well as gold leaf, which gives a little shimmer to this creation. The majority of the color is a creamy white with a touch of what appears to be a pale pink pigment in the center of the fabric. As the eye moves down the linen threads, another touch of pale pink is highlighted in the center, on a small smattering of linen threads. The texture of Tawney's piece is soft, airy, flowy and delicate in nature. A small breeze would create gentle movement of the long linen threads. The overhead lighting provided plenty of light to shine on this object to give it its own spotlight next to the other woven textiles in the same gallery.

This exhibit is all about the relationships between the Bauhaus artists and their students, and the German schools impact on American contemporary art. Lenore Tawney was an avid traveler and student of art and design. She studied weaving with Marli Ehrman, a Bauhäusler, at Chicago's Art Institute of Design from 1946-47.⁴ She

⁴ "Chronology," Lenore G. Tawney Foundation, <http://lenoretawney.org/lenore-tawney/chronology/>

also travelled and collaborated with Sheila Hicks and Claire Zeisler, two other contemporary artists who studied with Bauhaus artists who immigrated to America. Tawney's *The Bride Has Entered*, 1982 was created from history; from a connection of developed relationships between strong female Bauhaus artists and students in America. This shared knowledge and networking among German Bauhaus artists and American students resulted in a transformation of textile art in America. Tawney's piece really stands out amongst the other works of art in this textile exhibit. Although there are a few other suspended pieces in the gallery, the majority of the objects in this exhibit are hung on the wall and not as big in height and width as the object I chose. Another difference to note is the type of weaving that was done by Tawney. The flowy linen threads which hang from the wavy square of fabric near the ceiling gives it a very airy and light feel. The other larger works are much heavier looking, as they are made of wool or hemp that are knotted into thick ropes or braided and wrapped.

The Bride Has Entered is displayed hanging from the ceiling, away from the wall. Using clear string, the piece hovers about a foot below a white, gridded hanging display that is on the ceiling. Although the piece doesn't reach the ground, it has its own white platform beneath it which has a label describing the work: Lenore Tawney, American, 1907-2007; *The Bride has entered*, 1982; cotton, plain weave; painted with pigment and gold leaf; attached linen threads in grid pattern; gift of Lenore Tawney; restricted gift of the Textile Society.⁵ This particular work has its own corner in the room, but is surrounded by several other large objects that hang from the ceiling along with other wall hangings. Other artists' work featured near *The Bride Has Entered* are Claire Zeisler's, *Private Affair I*, 1986, Lenore Tawney's, *Water Above the Firmament*, 1976, and Sheila Hicks, *Éventail (Fan)*, 1990. Displaying these pieces of art together in one room makes sense, as they are all larger works and share some commonalities in use of material, and how they are displayed.

When analyzing *The Bride Has Entered* on a contextual level, it's important to understand Tawney's historical roots and how her techniques evolved throughout her career. The Bauhaus textile workshop encouraged its artists to experiment with material and pursue independent ideas. This theory influenced contemporary American artists, including Tawney. Her earlier textile art consisted of densely woven works. Later, she began "drawing" with threads on her loom and her woven works became lighter gossamer constructions.⁶ Her art became less figurative and more abstract. Tawney's techniques continued to evolve in the 1960s, when she designed an open reed for her loom which allowed the shape of her works to change as they are woven-called "woven forms."⁷ This established her as a pioneer in exploring new approaches to fiber art. This is truly reflected in her 1982 *The Bride Has Entered*, where she reaches an entirely new

⁵ "The Bride Has Entered," The Art Institute <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/149413/the-bride-has-entered>

⁶ "Lenore Tawney: Photos from Wholly Unlooked for at Mica," Cara Ober, BmoreArt <http://www.bmoreart.com/2012/12/lenore-tawney-photos-from-wholly-unlooked-for-at-mica.html>

⁷ "Chronology," Lenore G. Tawney Foundation, <http://lenoretawney.org/lenore-tawney/chronology/>

level of experimentation when she creates a large work that embraces negative space and can hang independently, not requiring a wall to hang on. Marcel Duchamp is another artist, like Tawney, who was willing to experiment with different techniques and styles of art. Duchamp started off his career in cubism with other well known artists such as Pablo Picasso and Georges Baraque. He created some artwork in the analytic cubism phase, which is the breaking down of form. Next, he explored synthetic cubism, the breaking up of form, aka collage. He also explored another style of art later in his life known as the Readymade. The Readymade objects that he is known for is the *Fountain*, 1917 and *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, 1915-1923. Artists throughout history have taken risks and embraced new techniques and styles despite what others may think. Tawney sums this up nicely in 1992, at MICA's Commencement ceremony, when she said, "To be an artist, you must be brave. You can't let yourself be scared."⁸

Art Institute of Chicago one sentence exhibit summaries:

⁸ "Lenore Tawney: Photos from Wholly Unlooked for at Mica," Cara Ober, BmoreArt
<http://www.bmoreart.com/2012/12/lenore-tawney-photos-from-wholly-unlooked-for-at-mica.html>

1. *Photography + Folk Art: Looking for America in the 1930s*
 - a. The photography and Folk Art displayed in this exhibit represents the collection of everyday life in America, by documenting everyday people, places and things.
2. *Weaving Beyond the Bauhaus*
 - a. This exhibit shows how the German Bauhaus weaving workshop and its artists who immigrated to the US influenced American art through shared knowledge and experience.
3. *Cinema Reinvented. 4 Films by Andy Warhol*
 - a. Through hundreds of films, that ranged from black-and-white silent works to scripted color productions, Andy Warhol produced films in a variety of different genres.
4. *Andy Warhol--From A to B and Back Again*
 - a. The Andy Warhol exhibit displays many periods of his productive career including paintings, sculpture, drawings, films, media works, and videos.
5. *In a Cloud, in a Wall, in a Chair: Six Modernists in Mexico at Midcentury*
 - a. This exhibit highlights six different artists who lived or worked in Mexico between the 1940s and 1970s, and encompasses a range of media such as sculpture, photography, textiles, prints, and furniture.

Museum of Contemporary Art one sentence exhibit summaries:

1. *Direct Message: Art, Language, and Power*
 - a. This exhibit explores the ways artists have used words to challenge our ideas about messages we hear, speak, read, and write every day, while remixing conventional modes of communication.
2. *The Shape of the Future*
 - a. Global modernism as a framework for utopia and speculative world making is explored in this exhibit, while highlighting the histories and ideologies rooted in the built environment.
3. *Fragments of a Crucifixion*
 - a. This exhibit explores the crucifixion of Christ which was used by artists as a symbol of suffering and redemption in US history, while showing art that offers fragments and incomplete images and narratives in place of images of the crucifixion itself.
4. *Mika Rottenberg: Easy Pieces*
 - a. In this exhibit, Mika Rottenberg interweaves both fiction and documentation in her videos which often feature protagonists in factory-like settings, where central themes like technology and labor are highlighted.