



# TEXTILE

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## *Lenore Tawney: Mirror of the Universe*

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# Exhibition Review

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## **Lenore Tawney: *Mirror of the Universe*, John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, WI**

Revealed throughout *Mirror of the Universe*, a suite of four exhibitions recently on view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center exploring the life, work, and influence of Lenore Tawney (1907–2007), is an artist whose creative and everyday lives were intimately intertwined.<sup>1</sup> Her expressive, principled art of “open-warp” weavings, whereby portions of the warp are left visible and unwoven, was as dedicated to disrupting the conventions of textile art, as it was to the pursuit for her own inner being.

An intensely private person whose early beginnings remain somewhat enigmatic, Tawney was born in Lorain, Ohio, in 1907. She moved to Chicago in 1927, and later studied briefly at the Institute of Design under the tutelage of Alexander Archipenko, László Moholy-Nagy, Emerson Woelffer, and Marli Ehrman. After extensive travels throughout Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, she then studied tapestry with Martta Taipale at the Penland School of Crafts. Tawney’s search for “a life of spirit” led her to New York in 1957, where at the age of fifty she sought “a barer life, closer to reality, without all the *things* that clutter & fill our lives.”<sup>2</sup> She found it at 27 Coenties Slip, a former dockyard and home to

an emergent artists’ community in Lower Manhattan that included Robert Indiana, Jack Youngerman, and Agnes Martin, the latter with whom Tawney would form a close and influential friendship.

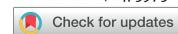
This pivotal move sets the stage for *In Poetry and Silence: The Work and Studio of Lenore Tawney*, the series’ central exhibition. Curated by Karen Patterson, it featured over 120 works ranging from Tawney’s earliest weavings and sculptures to her monumental “woven forms” to her later, intimate drawings and assemblages. Anchoring this expansive survey—the largest devoted to the artist—was a recreation of Tawney’s various home-studios, restaged here with stark wood furniture, tidy chests of drawers, ceramics, and the artist’s own works (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> Neatly displayed throughout the environment and upon adjacent shelves were Tawney’s personal collections of antique and found objects, among them shoe and hat forms, stones, bones, baskets of feathers, boxes of buttons and eggs.

While this interior realm reflects the artist’s penchant for austerity and contemplation (the poetry and silence intimated by the exhibition’s title), Tawney was as profoundly influenced by the external world outside her

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**Figure 1**

Installation view of *In Poetry and Silence: The Work and Studio of Lenore Tawney* at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2019. Photo courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center.

studio. The East River, in particular, fueled her lifelong interest in themes of water and nature, as well as her pioneering explorations of textile's capacities for movement and light. Although Tawney began experimenting with the open-weave technique as early as 1955, *Shadow River* from 1957 is emblematic in this regard. Nearly transparent with its strong vertical lines and curvilinear forms traversing delicate open expanses, the work portends the fluid structures and abstract geometry that would soon become the hallmark of Tawney's practice. Given the fragility of the piece—suspended and displayed

between two sheets of glass—it is one of the few early open-warp weavings that has survived. It is also the first time the work has been exhibited since it was originally shown in 1961, a testament to the exhibition's superb scholarship and scope. However, it was precisely the ephemeral nature of *Shadow River* that interested Tawney and gave her the freedom to exploit further the tensile properties of her medium, liberating textiles from the strictures of the rectangular format and eventually craft.

The exhibition then unfolded into a stunning chronological display of suspended weavings (Figure 2), with

works such as *The Judge*, *Inquisition*, and *Vespers* (all 1961), characterized by remarkable variations in density and thickness, braided or knotted fringes, and errant threads (Figures 3 and 4). The weavings' porous compositions seem to float in space, offering dramatic expressions of shadow and light, an effect that was developed further in subsequent works that become more sculptural. In 1962, the artist designed an "open reed" that allowed her to change the shape of the work at it was woven and "to vary not just the density of her compositions but also their directionality."<sup>4</sup> With the open reed, Tawney begins to



**Figure 2**

Installation view of *In Poetry and Silence: The Work and Studio of Lenore Tawney* at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2019. Photo courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center.

create her “woven forms,” monumental structures typified by a strong linear verticality, lightweight and transcendent yet present and material. Examples include the dramatic *Dark River* (1962) and *Shrouded River*

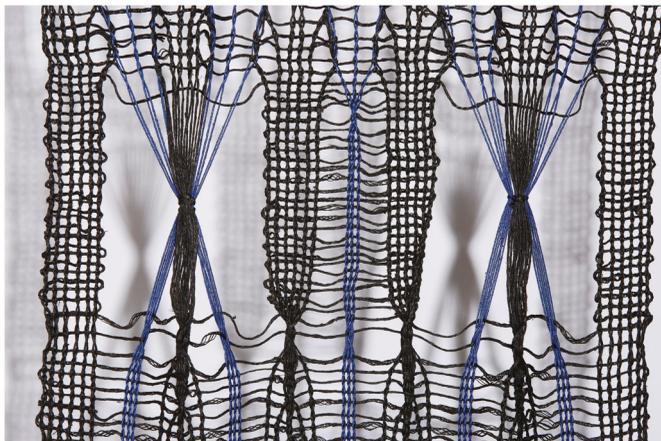
(1966) (Figure 5), both realized in black linen, *The Bride* (1962) and the ethereal *Lekythos* (1962), incorporating feathers amidst natural linen threads. The radical nature of these works lies in Tawney’s ability to

achieve delicate abstract forms at a grand scale in keeping with artists of the same time period working in Minimalism, while remaining uniquely her own. (*The Megalithic Doorway* from 1963, on view here, measures



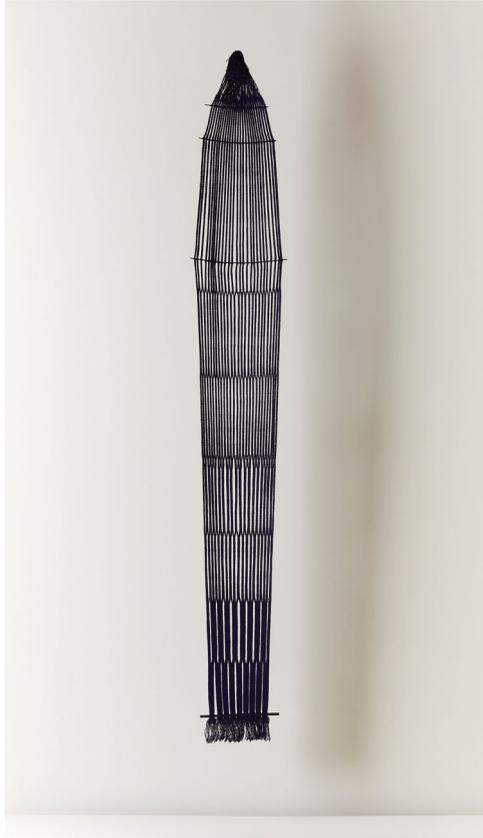
**Figure 3**

Lenore Tawney, *Vespers*, 1961; linen; 82 × 21 in. Courtesy of the Lenore G. Tawney Foundation, New York. Photo: Rich Maciejewski, 2018, courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center.



**Figure 4**

Lenore Tawney, *Vespers* [detail], 1961; linen; 82 × 21 in. Courtesy of the Lenore G. Tawney Foundation, New York. Photo: Rich Maciejewski, 2018, courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center.



**Figure 5**

Lenore Tawney, *Shrouded River*, 1966; linen and wood; 154 × 22 in. Collection of the Lenore G. Tawney Foundation, New York. Photo: Rich Maciejewski, courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center.

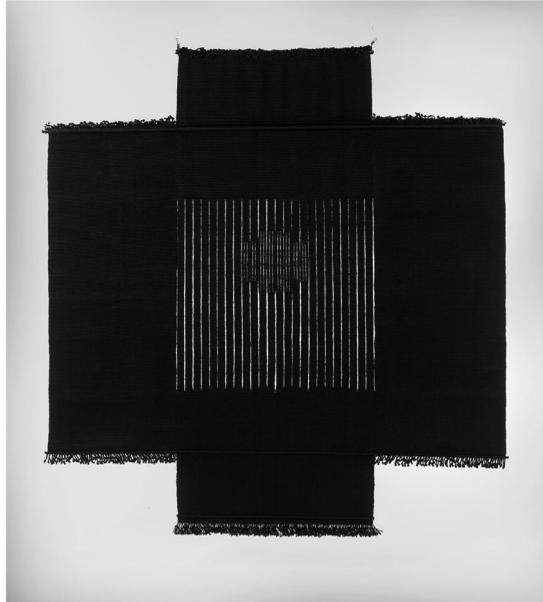
204 inches in length.) Likewise, her soft, elemental compositions anticipate post-Minimalism's more subjective explorations of process and materiality.

Tawney infuses her later weavings (1973–1976) with spiritual evocations derived from her ongoing interest in the phenomenology of the natural world and her dedicated practice of Zen Buddhism and Siddha Yoga. These mainly monochromatic compositions are realized in tightly woven crosslike forms (Figure 6) or rectangular fields bearing vertical slits that filter light (Figure 7). Nature and

mysticism are writ large in the *Cloud* series, among the last of Tawney's works. The Kohler Arts Center dedicated an entire gallery to *Cloud Labyrinth* (1983), a room-sized installation comprised of thousands of individual threads falling like rain from a horizontal support suspended from the ceiling (Figure 8). At once volumetric and atmospheric, this immersive environment is the ultimate fulfillment of Tawney's open-weave technique; abandoning wefts altogether, each strand was meticulously knotted by hand. Accompanying the work was a video projection and audio

soundtrack documenting a movement piece by choreographer Andy de Groat performed for a solo exhibition of Tawney's work in 1979.

A grand achievement that spans architecture, performance, and craft, *Cloud Labyrinth* presaged the formal and conceptual lineages of Tawney's work as explored by eight contemporary artists in the exhibition *Even thread [has] a speech*, curated by Shannon R. Stratton. This diverse showing was followed by a small yet illuminating exhibition of Tawney's archives and ephemera organized by Mary Savig. Rare photographs, letters,



**Figure 6**

Lenore Tawney, *The Four-Petaled Flower*, 1973; linen; 84 × 84 in. Courtesy of JPMorgan Chase Art Collection, Chicago, IL. Photo courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center.



**Figure 7**

Lenore Tawney, *In Fields of Light*, 1975; linen; 108 × 100 1/2 in. Collection of the Lenore G. Tawney Foundation, New York. Photo: Rich Maciejewski, courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center.



**Figure 8**

Lenore Tawney, *Cloud Labyrinth*, 1983; canvas and linen. Courtesy of the Lenore G. Tawney Foundation, New York. Photo courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center.

postcards, drawings, and excerpts from the artist's notebooks furthered Tawney's legacy as an artist of profound innovation and influence, for whom (un)woven thread was both creative freedom and a state of mind.

## Notes

1. *Lenore Tawney: Mirror of the Universe* included the following exhibitions: *In Poetry and Silence: The Work of Lenore Tawney*, curated by Karen Patterson (6 October 2019–7 March 2020); *Cloud Labyrinth*, organized by Laura Bickford (18 August 2019–19 January 2020); *Ephemeral and Eternal: The Archive of Lenore Tawney*, curated by Mary Savig (1 September 2019–2 February 2020); and *Even thread [has] a speech*, curated by Shannon R. Stratton (2 September 2019–2 February 2020).
2. Lenore Tawney as quoted in Glenn Adamson, "Student: 1945–1960," exhibition catalog *Lenore Tawney: Mirror of the Universe* (Sheboygan and Chicago: John Michael Kohler Arts Center in association with The University of Chicago Press, 2019), p. 69.
3. Tawney's home-studio was acquired by the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, where it will be preserved and on view at its forthcoming Art Preserve, a facility that will allow the public year-round access to its collection of artist-built environments, opening August 2020.
4. Glenn Adamson, "Sculptor: 1961–1970," *Lenore Tawney: Mirror of the Universe*, p. 118.