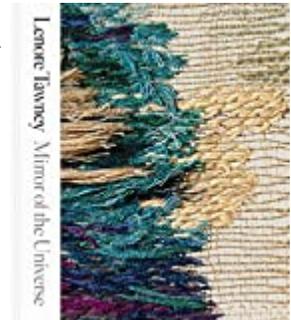




**Karen Patterson, ed.** *Lenore Tawney: Mirror of the Universe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. Illustrations. 304 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-66483-5.



**Reviewed by** Erica Warren (Art Institute of Chicago)

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The year 2019 marked the centenary of the Bauhaus, and accordingly curators and scholars across the globe found varied ways to celebrate the remarkable, yet short-lived, German art school and consider its wide-reaching impact on modern and contemporary art. Many of these projects examined stories and artists less prominent in canonical narratives of the Bauhaus and its diaspora; among these was *Lenore Tawney: Mirror of the Universe*, a catalogue that accompanied a suite of four exhibitions at the Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. The institution, devoted to the study and preservation of artist-built environments, has acquired Tawney's studio for their collection and worked with the Lenore G. Tawney Foundation on the project. The preface makes clear the catalogue's goal "to understand Tawney's work and environment in a new way" along with the intent to provide varied scholarly approaches and viewpoints (p. 6). The essays, organized in four sections, as a poem in four stanzas, trace the breadth of Tawney's life, posit that her life was her work, argue for her status as a pioneer in textile-

based art practice, and suggest her wide-reaching and ongoing impact on fellow artists.

In the opening essay, "Mirror of the Universe," Karen Patterson, editor of the book, curator at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, and formerly senior curator at the Kohler Arts Center, argues that studying Tawney's studio is key to understanding the artist. Patterson meditates on the mysterious nature of Tawney's life and work; considers her studio as a metaphor for her life; and introduces key recurring themes, including water, light, nature, and the cycle of life. Embracing the speculative potential the studio seems to offer, Patterson follows Tawney's remit to look inward after studying what is outward; she reflects on outstanding questions about Tawney's life and suggests possible answers. Patterson's essay also serves to introduce the other authors and their contributions to the catalogue, and pays particular tribute to Kathleen Nugent Mangan, director of the Lenore G. Tawney Foundation and curator of Tawney's 1990 retrospective at the American Craft Museum (now the Museum of Arts and Design).

Nugent Mangan's recollections of the artist in the volume's foreword and afterword explain the genesis of the project and provide a deeply felt narrative of the artist. These recollections frame the catalogue's expansive and encompassing look at Tawney's life with essays that examine her studio, her relationships, her multifaceted artistic practice, her spirituality, and her cultivation of a sense of mystery as a form of protection.

Within the format of the volume, Tawney's biography appears as four distinct essays, a line in each of the four "stanzas" or sections. Glenn Adamson, senior scholar at the Yale Center for British Art and former director of the Museum of Arts and Design, tells Tawney's story with evocative prose. The extensive interviews and exhaustive archival research he conducted result in a series of essays that effectively detail Tawney's artistic evolution and convey the richness of her life. These essays situate her artistic identity in phases as a student, a sculptor, a seeker, and a sage. (For those who appreciate ease when verifying dates or checking a specific reference, there is a comprehensive chronology at the end of the volume.)

Adamson offers pointed and carefully considered analyses throughout each essay. From the outset he proposes Tawney's deception about her age (for decades Tawney indicated her birth year as 1925 rather than the actual 1907 date) as the artist "resetting the clock" and perhaps "figuratively erasing some times in her life that she preferred to forget" (p. 49). He argues that Tawney's move from Chicago to New York served as a break from her established life as a middle-class woman. This major geographical shift provided Tawney with a new environment to mark her life as an artist. Although she had begun to pursue this path through her studies at the Institute of Design (formerly the New Bauhaus, founded in Chicago in 1937 by the artist and former Bauhaus teacher László Moholy-Nagy), this was after fifteen years in the city, where she had established herself as a well-respected and widely connected proofreader. Tawney's own re-

flections seem to confirm Adamson's assessments: in a journal entry from 1967 the artist wrote "I left [Chicago] to seek a barer life, closer to reality, without all the *things* that clutter & fill our lives. I left friends whose preconceptions of me held me to their image of me" (pp. 208, 211).

In her series of four essays (or verses), Mary Savig, curator of craft at the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery and formerly curator of manuscripts at the Archives of American Art, considers Tawney's papers with a focus on the collages, mail art, and journals. Savig posits these objects as documentary evidence as well as works of art that trace Tawney's artistic evolution and provide insight into her conceptual framework. Like Patterson in her meditation on the studio, Savig asserts that the archive remains inscrutable by intention. She argues further that Tawney built her studio into the proper artmaking environment, a space filled with precisely organized collections of found objects, such as bones, buttons, feathers, and stones. Indeed, according to Savig, this crafted studio was an artwork as well as a metaphor: "As Tawney collected, commingled, and crafted, she collapsed the boundary between her life and her art" (p. 90).

In the essay on Tawney's journals ("The Archive: That Point Is the Point"), Savig highlights the artist's use of writing as a practice that ran parallel to drawing and working with fiber. Although the passages highlighted therein engage with familiar themes, including creativity, the universe, symbolism, spirituality, interiority, and timelessness, Savig's reasons for choosing these particular passages, over countless others, remain unclear. More in-depth analyses of these writings as well as a precise explanation of the ways these specific texts "guided [Tawney's] artworks and her formation of self" would better situate this essay within the volume (p. 208). Similarly, in her essay on Tawney's production of her own archive ("The Archive: This Cage of Bones, & Blood, & Flesh"), Savig cites the work of performance scholar Diana Taylor, who

understands the archive as a site of ongoing knowledge production. Savig convincingly argues that Tawney indeed understood her own archive in this fashion, collecting objects (such as buttons) and imbuing them with meaning based on her use of them. Since Savig participates in this practice with her series of essays, a self-reflexive acknowledgment of the catalogue's broader engagement with this practice would be useful.

Like Adamson and Savig, Florica Zaharia, director of the Muzeul Textilelor in Romania and conservator emerita of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, also contributed four essays to the catalogue. In each, Zaharia provides a close study and analysis of a single textile-based object that represents the phases of Tawney's biography as set forth by Adamson. With her selection of emblematic works, including an open-warp weaving (*Lost and Proud* [1957]), a woven form (*The Bride* [1962]), a warp-face weave with double discontinuous wefts carried in opposite directions (*Dove* [1974]), and a deconstructed or reimagined weaving from the Cloud Series (*Written in Water* [1979]), Zaharia emphasizes Tawney's consistent and conceptual explorations of woven structures. Taken together, Zaharia's studies further explicate the artist's technical achievements, evolution, and innovations.

In an essay that acknowledges the prevailing impact of these aesthetic and technical feats, Shannon R. Stratton, executive director of the Ox-Bow School of Art and Artists' Residency and formerly interim senior curator-at-large for the Kohler Arts Center, writes about eight contemporary artists "whose work in some way intersects with, extends from, or dances with [Tawney's]" (p. 254). With her essay, Stratton matches a work by Tawney with each of these contemporary artists as a way to evoke the enduring resonance of Tawney's practice. These poignant juxtapositions persuasively propose and affirm the strength and reach of Tawney's legacy, across time and materiality. For Stratton, as well as the artists featured, it

is no surprise that Tawney's oeuvre has much to offer artists and scholars.

A well-executed collaboration, *Lenore Tawney: Mirror of the Universe* is a major contribution to the field and expands far beyond the extant scholarship, including Nugent Mangan's retrospective catalogue (*Lenore Tawney: A Retrospective* [1990]). Together the authors have composed a detailed and layered narrative that pays homage to Tawney's poetic practice through its organizational structure as well as the allusive language used throughout. The authors certainly owe an intellectual debt to the 1990 catalogue, which set forth themes explored in greater depth here, such as interiority, spirituality, and devotion. The volume effectively diverges from conventional modernist narratives, as the authors productively acknowledge and examine the myriad connections Tawney made with friends, artists, and her environment as well as her humble approach to her practice. The focus on Tawney as a known yet underexamined artist positions this volume (and the accompanying exhibitions) alongside the 2018-19 Anni Albers retrospective co-organized by the Tate Modern and Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, and sets a strong example for such scholarly approaches in the future.

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