

**A R T I S T O F T**



B Y L E E L A W R E N C E

Photography by Doug Metzler

# H E T E R N A L M O M E N T

**A**T 91, LENORE TAWNEY STANDS A MOD-est 5-foot-1, and when she greets visitors at the door of her loft on the lower West Side of Manhattan, she appears deceptively like a pixie. White leggings cover muscular calves. She wears a loose white tunic and, atop her head, a knitted cap in a shade between cream and faded orange. She wears no jewelry except a slim gold wedding band. She cocks her head to this side and that as though getting a radar reading while a strong, warm hand grips yours in welcome.

From the very first contact, it is clear that the woman whose art has often been called “meditative” and who spends many weekends at an ashram nevertheless lives very much in this world. Renowned for having freed weaving from the strictures of a loom in the 1950s and '60s, Lenore Tawney has in the intervening decades become known for her thought-provoking two-dimensional collages and three-dimensional assemblages.

In fact, visiting her loft is akin to stepping inside a giant Tawney assemblage perpetually in progress. Just as much of her work features revealing quotes from favorite texts and personal journals, rendered in a fine, spidery hand, the space in which Tawney has lived and worked since 1981 holds keys to the woman behind and inside her art.

Given the physicality of her work, from works like

*Having a longstanding interest in Eastern religions, contributing writer Lee Lawrence enjoyed spending time with Lenore Tawney, whose art and spiritual path demonstrate that meditation is nothing more—or less—than learning to pay attention.*

**LENORE TAWNEY'S  
ENTIRE OEUVRE IS  
A MEDITATION ON  
LIFE'S JOURNEYS**



*"Entablature," right,  
Tawney's linen weaving  
with collage.*



*Threads stand at the  
ready on a rack in  
the artist's loft.*



COURTESY MICHAEL ROSENFIELD GALLERY

her "Cloud" series, which entailed knotting hundreds of threads, to assemblages in which she juxtaposes textures of paper, bone and feather, it is not surprising that a visit to her home engages each of the senses. Irises and perfumed oil lace the air with fragrance. The glass of water Tawney proffers tastes of freshly squeezed lemon. To stockinged feet (shoes are left at the door, by the elevator), the floorboards feel at once silky and firm. The same can be said of Angel, her orange tomcat, as he accepts a scratch behind the ears and a caress down his back. His purr acts as a counterpoint to the undulating notes of chanted mantra and to the feast of texture, line and color that fill the eye.

Most startling among these is the 9-by-9-foot black weaving that anchors her living space, which, already large, is amplified by the sunlight ricocheting off white-washed walls, ceilings and floors. "What inspired me was the Greek letter Tau," says Tawney, pointing to the weaving. Her voice is low, her diction precise, her cadence unhurried. "It's also like the Great Eagle Dance" of Native Americans, she adds and spreads her arms, moving them in grace-





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ful arcs. This is the first indication of her love of dance; later, sitting on a couch with her legs tucked up to one side, she tells of having recently returned from visiting her brother in Virginia, where they listened to Benny Goodman and danced all night. Her eyes may not see as well as they used to, but they have not lost their sparkle.

With enjoyment, Tawney walks her visitor through the loft. Potted plants line the north window sill, while a collection of pottery, animal skulls, jawbones, stones, wooden combs and turtle shells fill wall-mounted shelves. At her bedside in the partitioned sleeping area, on the walls of her bathroom, under cabinets in the kitchen alcove and by the doorway to the laundry room are photographs of her late guru, the Indian Swami Shree Muktananda, and his successor, Gurumayi.

Elsewhere, chairs and loveseats cluster into seating areas, a shelf houses row upon row of milliner’s hat blocks, and shoemaker’s lasts of varying sizes mingle with pots by Tawney’s longtime friend, Toshiko Takaezu. Behind the television

set, the oblong drawers of an old-fashioned medicine cabinet hold all manner of bottles, papers, flasks and bones. In stacks, on shelves and scattered upon tabletops are books on art and religion and catalogs from Tawney’s shows.

Shelves, drawers, cigar boxes and baskets overflow with eggshells, stones, feathers, beads, rose petals, raw cotton, you name it. “I pick up these objects all over,” Tawney explains. “It might be 20 years before I use them.” They may turn up in a collage—of which there is an armoire full, each carefully wrapped and labeled by Tawney’s studio curator, Kathleen Nugent Mangan. Or they might appear in a boxed assemblage or in Tawney’s latest work, the “Shrine” series, which she constructs with the help of an assistant.

This kind of collaboration has forced her to change her way of working. When she created her open-weave works and sculptural weavings in the ’50s and ’60s, she explains, “I never had a sketch. I had an idea. I’d put on three or four yards, then use the whole thing to make a whole piece that came out of me.” The process remained the same even after she stopped weaving

in 1976 and devoted herself exclusively to the collages and assemblages she had been doing for more than a decade. Things simply “came together,” she says. “The collage came into being. That’s how a lot of things happen in my work.”

Today, failing eyesight forces her to map out the piece ahead of time in her mind and communicate the vision to her assistant. She, in turn, drills holes in the sides of Plexiglas cubes and creates with colored threads what can only be described as intricate cat’s cradles into which, before the box is closed and sealed, Tawney herself places one of her found objects. On completion, she perches them atop pedestals which cluster near the only column in the loft that is not white. Richly gilded, it sports a checkered pattern that recalls both Renaissance pageantry and Byzantine mosaics. “My temple,” Tawney calls it, patting its rounded flank.

In other ways, however, the shrines embody several persistent themes in Tawney’s life as an artist, a life which began with the death of her husband, George Tawney, in 1943, less than two years after

*“Blond Bell,” left, by Tawney’s friend Toshiko Takaezu, stands at the center of the loft. By the front door is Tawney’s “Boy with Bird” mixed-media assemblage.*

their marriage. "When he died," she says, "it was really bad. And it went on like that for years. But I think that's what made me an artist because I went deep down into myself."

At the time, she was 36 years old. For 16 years, she had lived in Chicago, having left her hometown of Lorain, Ohio. She had worked as a proofreader for a legal publisher and spent her evenings studying at the Art Institute of Chicago. Although the seeds of art had been sown, it was widowhood that brought the often painful introspection, silence and loneliness that forged Lenore Tawney the artist. From 1946 to 1948, she trained in sculpture with Bauhaus exponent Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Modernist Alexander Archipenko, after which she turned away from clay and bought a loom.

The next several years proved seminal. She studied tapestry with Finnish weaver Martta Taipale and traveled frequently through Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. Syria particularly stands out in her mind, partly for the ancient art she discovered there, partly for the sheer adventure. During a trip to Lebanon, "I

went to Syria by taxi," she recounts. "That was the only way to get there then."

Then was 1956. Tawney was 39 and traveling alone, discovering as much about the world as she was about herself. It is difficult to pinpoint the subtle changes that travel induces in the psyche, but one thing is certain: Tawney never dressed the same again. From then on, she has made all her clothes, "square and easy to fold." But not without the occasional dramatic flair. For an outing on a chilly fall afternoon, she slips on over her white tunic a black coat edged with feathers and adds a black velvet hat for a rakish, extravagant look. It clearly delights her. "Give the street a thrill," her eyes say.

The same independent spirit that propelled her travels fueled her work. Time and again, she stretched the limits of the loom, worked with open weaves, created sculptural forms with threads and, essentially, wove the foundations of what later became the fiber art movement. Although she never worked on a Jacquard loom, she studied its workings in Philadelphia in the late 1950s. In today's parlance, she was blown away by the trilling threads, which

she compares to music. These gave rise to intricate geometric drawings in which fine lines in red and blue and black criss-cross in intricate and varying patterns. "I had to keep my mind right on the line," she says, holding one up. "If you don't, you go off." At the time, she was reading Jacob Boehme, a cobbler at the turn of the 17th century who had had an enlightenment experience.

Not surprisingly, Tawney's art reflected her spiritual interests. She moved to New York in 1957, and for the next 15 years or so, her woven work thrust ever higher, the way Gothic spires soar toward the heavens. Some of her weavings reached as much as 28 feet in height. "I was searching for the source of myself, that's why they got so tall," she explains. The names she gave them attest to this: "The Path," "Spirit River," "Secret Path," "Dark River." All were vertical and most were monochromatic, except for some, like "King I," which were black and white. Of these, Tawney says, "I was trying to integrate myself. I never really managed it," she adds with a smile.

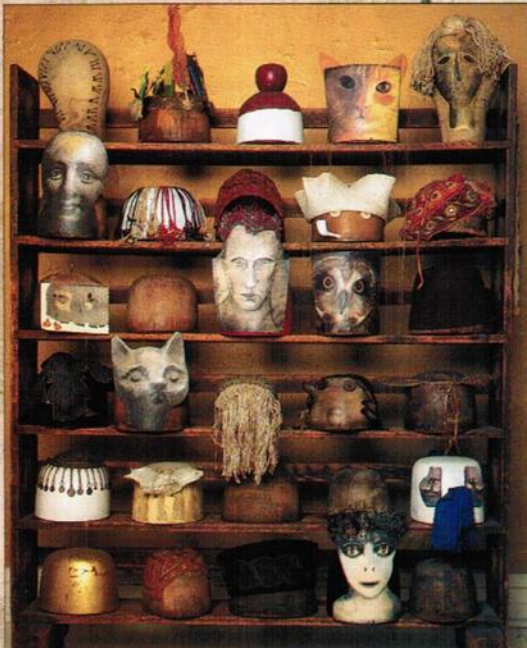
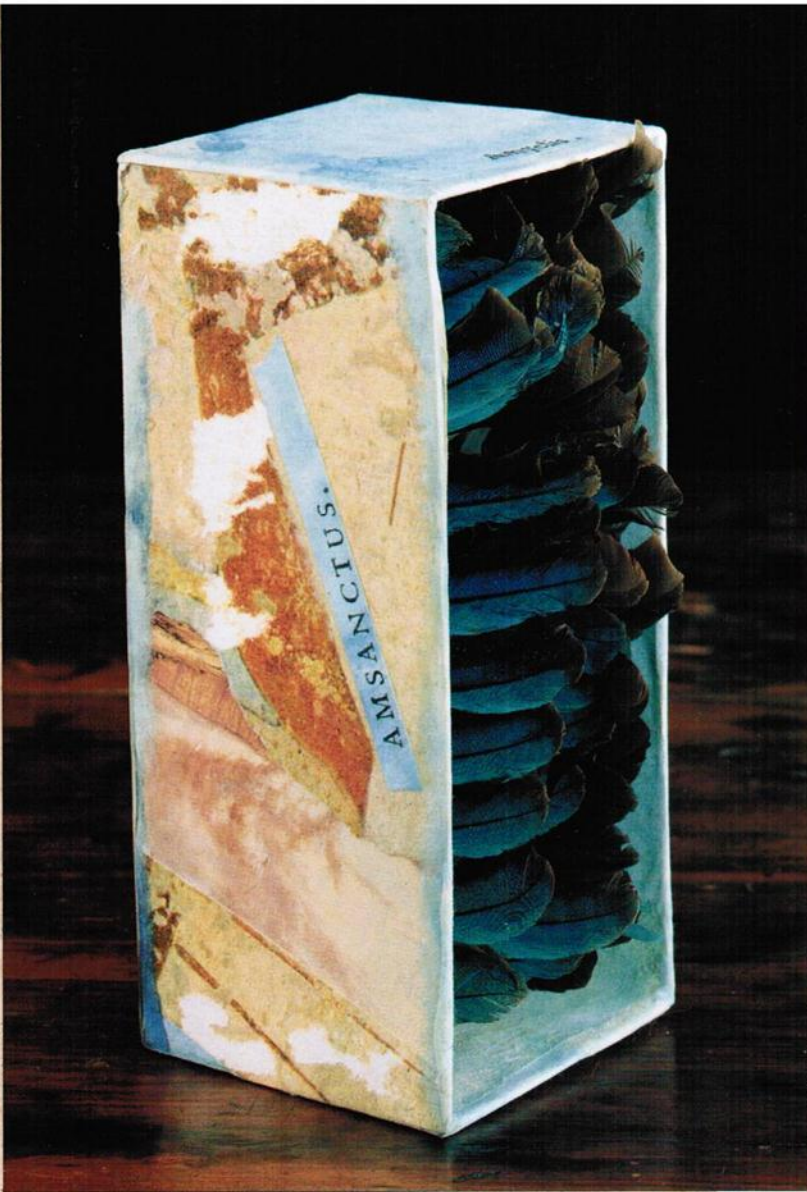
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Feathers began appearing in Tawney's work after a 1963 trip to Peru, where she was entranced by ancient feather art. This mixed-media assemblage, "Feather Music," was created in 1987.

As often happens in life, the answer she sought came in a different manner altogether. In 1969, she traveled to India "sort of looking for" a spiritual teacher. Before that, she had been involved in Zen Buddhism. But in 1974, she went nowhere, except around the block to meet an Indian teacher whose lectures she had attended some years earlier. "When I met him the second time," she recalls, "I got *Shaktipat* and I was his." At first she didn't believe "all these things. But then I saw it," she says. "We are all one."

In the Hindu tradition of Siddha Yoga, *Shaktipat* refers to a master's special ability to raise the primal energy (*kundalini*) of another. When this occurs, in Tawney's words, "it is much easier for the person to get through to realization." Far from denoting an escape from the world, "realization" involves seeing through the fictions our minds elaborate to experience the world as it truly is. "It's also called liberation," Tawney explains. "It's when you see that you are

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Left, a shelf of embellished milliner's hat blocks is a longtime work in progress.



The linen weaving "Shield" is one of many that Tawney wove in the late 1960s and re-worked with cutting and knotting in 1991.

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*Tawney strikes a dramatic pose in front of her most recent "Tau" weaving, from 1997.*

*Untitled assemblage, right. The former proof-reader now harvests words from antique books purely for their visual, calligraphic sense.*



COURTESY MICHAEL ROSENFIELD GALLERY

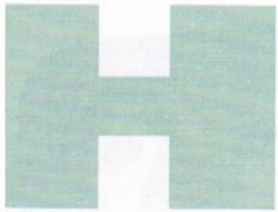


not the body, and the world is communal beliefs. It's when you see that everything is just energy vibrating. Baba," she adds, referring to Swami Muktananda, "called it the Self." From then on, she adopted his path of meditation, taking off for India two years later to live in his ashram for six months.

Her art also changed radically in 1974. She was prolific. She made large squares and crosses, like the Tau that hangs in her loft. "I felt in my mind that I had turned the corner and found the square," she says. "That's also when my weavings and collages came together," she says, her voice tinged with surprise. She glances at Mangan as though to make sure she hasn't mixed up her chronology. But, no, she's right. The year she found the spiritual path that best suited her was also one of artistic explosion—her works became large and bold—and integration.

Tawney's art stands as proof that spirituality and meditation are not abstract pursuits, but rooted in the here and now. The means are deceptively simple: observation and attention, the kind of attention of body and mind with which she has





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always worked. "I am aware of what I'm doing," she says, "moment by moment. That's how we live, too, if we're aware." When she works, she demands absolute silence and often plays the recording of a sacred chant or mantra.

"I've been aware of the moment," she confides. "Which is the eternal moment." Over and over again, her works refer to this truth. At the point where lines intersect, she explains, "that is the eternal moment." In one of her writings, she refers to it as "the moment of awareness." Perhaps the best way to get one's mind around this is to think of life as a graph, with space as one axis and time as the other. The point at which these two meet is the "now" we are living. More to the point, that is all that exists and, in this sense, it is eternal.

In many ways, Tawney's work is all about intersections. In assemblages from the 1960s onwards, threads routinely criss-cross. Strips of old manuscripts interlace with entries from her journal. Forty-year-old drawings inspire contemporary assemblages. Arabic calligraphy molds itself to the shape of a last. Portions of photographs overlap with scraps from ancient manu-

scripts. Soft feathers meet hard wood. Cloth bags hang limply from a sturdy post. Taut threads cage an oval stone.

For years, Tawney garnered only limited attention. In the fiber world, she was hailed as a ground-breaker, but few outside that world would have recognized her name. "I was a weaver," she says. "The lowest of the low." And although her collages sold through New York City galleries, they did so, as she puts it, without "hullabaloo."

The same cannot be said today. In 1996 alone, six exhibitions celebrated her work, including a retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Galleries around the U.S. take turns showcasing Tawney's work and the government of Quebec gave her a lifetime achievement award in November 1997. All this has triggered a spate of media attention. "I feel like I died," she says, rifling through some of the clippings, "and I'm watching what happens."

Her meditative path has certainly brought her much peace. Also joy. In describing a retreat she went on last fall at

the Shree Muktananda Ashram in South Fallsburg, N.Y., Tawney's face brightens. "It opened my heart," she says. "We laughed and acted goofy and it was quite wonderful." But meditation has not meant escape from all suffering. Although she believes now that it was a good thing, being out of the limelight as she pursued her art did not always make things easy. The slim gold band speaks of enduring loss. She refers to "the agony" of seeking a teacher. Indeed, just because the moment is the eternal now does not make it a dreamy, pleasant experience. Most recently Tawney has had to face the gradual loss of her eyesight. "I was angry at first," she says, but then rapidly shakes off the subject.

The subject of death, however, triggers no such response. Sitting cross-legged on a loveseat by the gilded column, she recounts a recent dream. Walking on a river bank, she came upon a canoe meticulously fashioned of wood. "I realized that this was my canoe, for me to cross to the other side," she says. "But it has no paddles yet. I still have to fashion the paddles. It was a beautiful dream. It is nice to know I have a beautiful canoe." ☐

*Tawney collects true  
miscellany, left,  
for future use.*