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Stanley Bulbach works on a flat weave carpet in his home studio. He weaves using a loom he built himself.

Stanley Bulbach, Quiet Crusader for Fiber Arts

by **Christine Lin**,
Epoch Times Staff

NEW YORK—There are two ways to deal with perceived injustice — fill public halls with hue and cry, or speak simply and rationally. Stanley Bulbach does the latter. He speaks out against corporate dominance in his neighborhood and the arts. Yet, he is refreshingly cheerful, grounded, and calm.

Bulbach has lived in his Chelsea apartment since 1969, a time he remembers as a friendly one for creative types. Slowly the money began to move into the neighborhood, and rents have increased fiftyfold. In the glass-tower landscape of today's Chelsea, Bulbach acts as a neighborhood advocate against hyper-development.

In 1981, Bulbach obtained a doctorate in Ancient Near Eastern Studies from New York University. A trip to Morocco inspired him to try

his hand at the ancient art of carpet weaving, a craft that has led him to another realm of activism.

Through three years of trial and error, Bulbach became a self-taught master of flat weaving — spinning, dyeing, and weaving entirely by hand out of his home studio. He has since traveled throughout the United States and Canada lecturing, teaching, and speaking about the state of fiber arts in America.

Bulbach has long spoken of the troubles he and other fiber artists face in a contemporary art world dominated by marketing. He finds evidences that in the crafts world, fiber arts have been ranked beneath glass, ceramic, and woodwork, which tend to enjoy better representation and marketing in museums and galleries.



Raw wool from a Lincoln sheep, seen at Stanley Bulbach's studio in Chelsea, Dec. 9, 2013. Bulbach hand-spins this wool to make yarn for his weaving. (Ben Hedges/Epoch Times)

“It’s rewarding for me and in a way it’s also isolating because it’s such an overlooked art form — which doesn’t make sense to me because when I do show my work, people respond so enthusiastically,” he said. “It strikes a chord.”

Though Bulbach concerns himself primarily with fiber arts, the problem he describes is huge in scope. In the verbal picture he paints, the struggles of fiber artists represent the loose yarn in an art world unraveling at the hands of the museum-industrial complex.

Taking Museums to Task

Fiber artists are generally considered to be those who create art using fiber — weavers, knitters,

lacemakers, needlepointers, quilters, felters, and fiber sculptors — even fashion designers.

Part of the reason why fiber arts have had such trouble making it into the hallowed halls of museums is undoubtedly that the category is hard to define. If fiber arts include knitting and fashion, could an Etsy merchant qualify as an exhibition-worthy fiber artist? How about grandma and her sweaters?

Curators decide what art from our culture’s huge creative output deserves to enter museums’ permanent records. As Bulbach sees it, these curators are asleep at the wheel.

Bulbach has accused contemporary art museums of casting aside their responsibility toward the public in favor of ticket sales and media attention, or to bolster the financial interests of trustees, popular artists, and auction houses. In a 2002 report, he argues that museums (both public and private) use opaque processes to select artworks for exhibition and are influenced by motives other than researching, preserving, and displaying the best of contemporary art for the public good.

He says the research is faulty, not ethical, and that sometimes there is no research at all. Bulbach points to the 1999 Sensation exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum, which was widely criticized for being little more than a corporate sponsorship magnet. The issue caused such a controversy that Mayor Rudy Giuliani took legal action (which he later dropped) against the museum for colluding with contemporary art collector Charles Saatchi.

Calling museums out on hypocrisy is not welcomed by all. Even his friends have cautioned him against questioning curators. In a response to his activities, the Handweavers Guild of America warned Bulbach, “These kinds of aggressions benefit no one.”

Bulbach’s arguments touch on a critical issue: What is the role of museums today? To provide a place for people to connect to their cultural past? To introduce artists to their contemporary public? To reflect the concerns of contemporary society? Or simply to entertain the public with visually arresting shows?

Exhibitions as Track Record

The list of recent exhibitions in New York City’s top two contemporary craft museums isn’t much of a defense against Bulbach’s accusations. If fiber

arts have been examined at all, they've been examined selectively.

The Great Cover-up: American Rugs on Beds, Tables, and Floors at the American Folk Art Museum, 2007, was “the first presentation devoted to a wide range of American rug traditions since 1974” according to the museum website.

Three to four years ago, Bulbach approached the museum about showing fiber arts and was told that the museum wasn't concerned with the field. To Bulbach, this refusal is puzzling given the museum's interest in self-taught artists, who make up a large proportion of fiberists. No doubt the museum leadership's choices are influenced by the institution's recent financial troubles.



A batten, indigo, cochineal, and beaters — tools Stanley Bulbach uses to create flat weave carpets. (Ben Hedges/Epoch Times)

To be fair, the American Folk Art Museum does feature one category of fiber art: quilting. It has put on nine quilt exhibitions in the past four years. When asked about the museum's representation of fiber arts, this journalist was told that the museum's director and chief curator were not available and that the museum would not comment about its propensity toward quilts.

The Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) (formerly the American Craft Museum) would be the next haven for contemporary crafts. Its mission is to “explore the intersection of art, craft, and design today.” Here too, the last fiber arts exhibit was in 2007, titled Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting. The MAD's most often-featured craft category of late has been jewelry. The museum did not respond in time for publication.

But if the 2001 show of Renaissance tapestries at the Metropolitan Museum is any indicator, the public is receptive to fiber arts even if museums aren't. That year, the Met held the first major tapestry exhibit the United States had seen in 25 years.

“Tapestry in the Renaissance: Art and Magnificence” ran only three months, but attracted 170,000 people within the first two months, far above its 151,000 estimate for the entire run. Met director Thomas P. Campbell, then-associate curator of European sculpture and decorative arts, was pleasantly surprised by the level of public interest. “We feared the show would fall on deaf ears and dead eyes,” he told the New York Times.

In a similar historical vein, *Interwoven Globe*, used textiles and costumes from 1500 to 1800 to illustrate the complexities of world trade. It closed this past weekend on Jan. 5.

As for contemporary fiber arts at the Met, the last fiber exhibit was a 2005 examination of painter Henri Matisse's use of fabric in his work — “contemporary” in terms of style but not contemporary with the exhibit. If the Met were averse to showing the works of living artists, its current exhibition of jewels by Joel A. Rosenthal, now 70 years of age, would not have been possible.

The museum's costume department has done excellent work with exhibits that either feature fashion icons, or use costume to illustrate some themes of history. *Savage Beauty*, the work of fashion designer Alexander McQueen, in 2011 drew 661,509 visitors and became the eighth most popular exhibit in the Met's history. The exhibit, made possible by the fashion house, American Express, and Condé Nast, gained the museum more than twice the usual number of new members.

Though one could technically count it as a major success for contemporary fiber arts, this type of exhibition is clearly of a commercial rather than cultural bent. Perhaps no fiber artist or group of fiber artists has risen to high enough prominence to be featured at the Met. The notion that no artistically superb fiber artists exist is implausible — they are probably just undiscovered. Contemporary fiber artists not represented by a popular fashion label are indeed conspicuously missing from the museum's galleries.

Hello, Weavers?

Museums make up only half the equation. If curators will not come to artists, the artists must go to museums.

“Weavers and spinners tend to be relatively quiet people,” Bulbach said. “They don’t promote themselves as strongly as they might, and most of them are not in New York.”

No matter where they are fiber artists, for the most part, are left to fend for themselves when it comes to marketing.

The American Tapestry Alliance is a volunteer organization that provides training and networking, holds biennial industry conferences, and sponsors exhibitions, but offers no help connecting members with galleries that would sell this fiber art.

Compare that with the Potters Council, which furnishes ceramic artists with health insurance, posts members’ portfolios on its website, and lists affiliated galleries nationwide that show ceramic art. The American Association of Woodturners likewise offers insurance and exhibition and marketing opportunities.

Should fiber art guilds take up the task of clearing the way, they have a big job ahead. The media that constitute fiber arts are nebulous to most — depending on whom you ask, the media can include plant fiber, even acrylic. Furthermore, the fiber arts are misunderstood by many to be women’s work.

Age demographics are not on fiber artists’ side.

“The people who entered the field at the renaissance of contemporary fiber arts in the 1970s are graying,” Bulbach said. “One of the greatest challenges we have is bringing in young people and creating a field for them to do the work. The youngest generation is saddled with school loans and college education that’s become more a function of the banks. There’s interest, but they can only afford to come into it as hobbyists.”

The costs of doing this work are considerable. Bulbach estimates that the raw wool for one carpet costs him between \$200 and \$300 if he used just one fleece.

A Timeless Task

Inside Bulbach’s home studio, one can find jars of cochineal, indigo, goldenrod (his last batch was a recent find from a nearby wood) and bags full of wool. When he started out, he used commercially

available yarn, but was unhappy with how “dead” those pieces appeared. When he switched to Lincoln longwool, a rare breed from English breeds, he found that those hairs shimmer and lend his weavings dimension.

Most brown wool-producing sheep were bred out in the 1800s because it was easier to dye white wool in the shades they wanted to control. In order to obtain fibers whose colors naturally contain surprising variations from American sources, Bulbach must work with rare breed conservancies.



“Gotham,” ©2002, by Stanley Bulbach. Flying between Manhattan’s buildings in a world spinning upside down. 6 feet by 3 feet; wool. (Photo by D. James Dee/Collection of Mike Greenly)

That raw wool gets spun on a bicycle wheel that Bulbach improvised in the early days of his flat-weave experimentation. It still serves him well. The resulting yarn is turned into the most astonishing abstract designs, as contemporary as they are the continuation of an age-old tradition.

“This technology is a most primitive form of weaving,” Bulbach said. On the simple frame, warps are strung taut vertically. A batten forces open a space among them through which Bulbach pulls the weft through by hand — there’s no mechanization, not even a shuttle.

Flat weave (originally called kilim among Persians) is the primordial mother of all floor and bed coverings, including today’s ubiquitous pile carpet. Non-machine woven carpets were (and in some regions still are) created using naturally dyed yarns.

Bulbach essentially does his art the way it used to be done in the ancient Near East, short of raising the sheep. In nomadic communities, all the spinning, dyeing, and weaving are done at a household level. The carpets stay with families for generations. They are beds, prayer rugs, and decoration for transportable homes. Legends and clan histories are passed down through their patterns.

Bulbach keeps his design in his head as he works. After each line of yarn, he tamps down with a beater, producing a lush crunching sound as the newly woven length of yarn makes its acquaintance with the lines of yarn that went before it.

When the whole carpet is finished, it is exposed to hot water in a “fulling” process that slightly felts it. Then it is hung to dry. Bulbach used to be able to complete four carpets a year, but now that

there’s diminished interest in fiber art, he’s content with two.

Though Bulbach creates rugs that can be used on the ground, he intends his work to be mounted on the wall.

However, the carpets aren’t to be viewed as paintings. “What painting can do is make gradations. The forte of weaving is that it can do patterns the way paintings can’t,” Bulbach said. “It’s mathematical in the way paintings can’t be.”

Flat-weave technique produces highly abstract designs. Unlike tapestry, flat weave embraces the natural distortions of shapes rather than fighting them using a precise grid.

“Compared to tapestry, my work is considered coarse — a bit wild. But that’s what I want,” he said. “I want people to see the wool and know that there’s a sheep behind it.”

As for the future of fiber artists as a whole, Bulbach remains optimistic. For 2014, the American Craft Council announced three fiber art competitions and exhibits across the country. The American Tapestry Alliance has its biennial, and the Textile Society of America will hold its first juried exhibition at Los Angeles’s Craft and Folk Art Museum. Maybe little by little, the art world will come to embrace the loom once more.

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Stanley Bulbach’s website is bulbach.com



“Fire Water,” ©1986, by Stanley Bulbach. To sleep atop the surface of a woodland spring reflecting autumnal leaves elsewhere out of view. 6 feet by 3 feet; wool, natural dyes. (Photo by Leonard Guercio/ Collection of Greg Grant)