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### ***String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, by Elissa Author, PhD**

University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, \$29 paperback, \$95 hardcover

**Reviewed by Stanley Bulbach, PhD**

**IF SOME** of the world's key art markets and museums are selling and exhibiting fiber work successfully, why then do there continue to be significant economic and academic obstacles to secure our field's appropriate positioning in the art world?

Scholarly writing, let alone thoughtful and factual dialog, has not been encouraged during the transition to the 21st century as the contemporary fiber movement has taken shape. Fiberists and fiber enthusiasts have kept quiet on the topic while "how-to" books are produced by the dozens by large publishing houses.

Finally here is a book that begins to shed some revealing sunlight on all this. Dr. Author is a young Associate Professor of Art at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. In her new book, *String, Felt, Thread*, she discusses the first two decades of the contemporary fiber renaissance — the 1960s and 70s — and she openly probes some of the issues perennially alarming fiberists, but not encouraged for open discussion by our fiber field's advocate organizations and press.

The crux of Prof. Author's book is her focus on women and their "legitimate desires to practice professionally in an art world hostile to their presence," which emphasizes that "works of art and cultural producers do not exist independently of a network of institutions that consecrate, authorize, and legitimate them" — a network permitting the "marginalization of women's art in museums, galleries, the art critical

press, art historical scholarship, art history courses, and art criticism."

### **Imposed Hierarchies in the Arts**

Prof. Author's book begins by highlighting some of the structure of the contemporary art world to provide readers a more accurate foundation of how contemporary art is generally validated by art authorities. Then she focuses on the academic and expert opinion imposed upon our field. And then she converses more generally with three fiber artists about some of this to give it clearer context.

For an introduction on how art is considered in the contemporary art world, she cites a number of scholars. She details how one scholar, Pierre Bourdieu, finds the art world to have "invisible relations of power — hierarchies", as a "contest" that controls what is

recorded, shared, explicated, enjoyed, and marketed. She refers to his "vision of the art world as structured by competition", a "competitive terrain in which participants struggle against one another to maintain or challenge dominant definitions of art".

If this be the case, this is an important wake-up call for fiberists questioning their poor position in the art world. Our field was designed early to maximize consensus, cooperation, and social benefits to promote the field's survival. Conversely it was designed to discourage competitiveness and

debate. The fiber field wants acceptance into the "competitive terrain" of the contemporary art world while prohibiting the "challenge [of] dominant definitions of art."

For example, over the past half century our field has been characterized by organization members working busy as bees to put on exhibitions that display their work. Then everybody quietly stands by waiting for art experts to discover the exhibited work. Invariably the art world turns its back on them. Invariably without a further peep, the organizations simply mount another exhibition.

Unfortunately, when discussing Bourdieu's idea about the competitiveness of the art field, Prof. Author does not say anything about the effects of finances in



Elissa Author, PhD

this competition. Financial influences need to be addressed, especially since recent exhibitions in major art museums have been discovered to use undisclosed “pay-to-play” criteria in their research.

### **Gender Discrimination in the Hierarchical Structure**

After describing how expert art research and expert art opinion has assigned fiber to a low rung in the contemporary art world’s hierarchy, Prof. Auther focuses on gender discrimination.

She documents art experts’ negative judgments on the work of fiber artists. Then she documents art experts’ positive judgments on similar work created by artists who avoid identifying themselves as fiberists. Time and time again, the only real difference in the art is that of the gender of the artist: When men make art with fiber, art experts deem it to be significant and meriting their research. When women make art with fiber, art experts deem it to be insignificant and not worthy of attention.

Prof. Auther doesn’t stop here, however. She also documents how during those two decades some women artists working in fiber disassociated themselves as much as possible from the liability of being identified with the medium. She documents how those women artists joined in the public derogation of fiber work and fiber artists, preferring to brand their own work as a form of sculpture just happening to use fiber instead of other media.

Here I think Prof. Auther successfully maps out how complex the gender prejudice in art research is. What is clear and simple in Prof. Auther’s book is the damage caused to the fiber field by gender prejudice still acceptable in the contemporary art world’s system of pre-judging work by assigning hierarchies.

### **The Stigma of a Relationship to Craft**

Prof. Auther then proceeds to illustrate how fiber’s traditional roots in the craft arts also lead to another type of prejudice that is also acceptable in the contemporary art world. The jejune art versus craft debate is mostly an academic creation of the modern era. It too is a form of pre-judging, assigning a hierarchical value prior to careful knowledgeable examination of the thing itself.

As the art versus craft debate gets older and staler, it demonstrates itself to be little more than a quicksand filled morass. It seems to exist solely to distract people from focusing on more significant questions. The debate is comprised of competing theories each set forth as universal orthodoxies. These theories are supposed to be imposed upon work before examining the work itself, as a pre-judgment, a prejudice. And in light of the stunning art of many of the world’s other cultures, the art versus craft debate in the contemporary West becomes parochial.

This debate imposing short-lived theories upon the object is certainly a prime example of what was described in Prof. Auther’s book as “competitive terrain in which participants struggle against one another to maintain or challenge dominant definitions of art”. In *The Painted Word* Tom Wolfe summed up the contemporary Western obsession with theory succinctly: “In short: frankly, these days, without a theory to go with it, I can’t see a painting. . . .”

The prejudice of art over craft is actually much worse than Prof. Auther depicts. Despite the contemporary fiber field’s greater size and achievement in the contemporary craft art world, contemporary craft art experts invariably brand fiber as one of the least significant media. So fiber doesn’t just suffer a detrimental undisclosed pre-judging from its historic ties to craft. It suffers the grave blatant prejudice of being assigned to one of craft art’s lowest castes. And who permits that to occur without challenge?

The American Craft Council (ACC) published a brief book review of *String, Felt, Thread* in their publication, *American Craft* (June-July 2010). Unfortunately, the review said little about the issue of prejudice against craft cited by Prof. Auther. Therefore I reached out to the ACC to propose a “Commentary” piece focusing on *String, Felt, Thread*’s analysis of prejudice by association with craft art.

Unfortunately, the ACC said the op-ed piece would not find an “appreciative” audience in the ACC and suggested it would find a “more suitable venue” elsewhere. So, this reveals not one, but two very serious problems. The organization claiming to be



craft art's primary advocate in the U.S. deems this issue unsuitable for dialogue with its membership.

Worse, it executes this judgment while creating misleading public impression that it does advocate proper research practice on behalf of its membership.

The ACC's paid circulation is now only about 70% of what it was 15 years ago. Last year financial difficulties forced the ACC to move its headquarters out of NYC and to replace its longtime professional staff.

### **Prejudice is Improper Pre-Judging**

The last part of Prof. Author's book is an interesting interview of three fiber artists helpful to understanding the history of our contemporary field. But for me, it is the earlier parts of *String, Felt, Thread* discussed above that are the most valuable aspects of the book. Those parts not only cast light on the problems in our field, they also begin to point in the direction how to improve our field, which is of course a goal of the American Tapestry Alliance.

For decades, opinion based writing on fiber art and craft by art institutions has been improperly conflated with academically reliable research practice. But opinion based writing in the art world has few ethical and technical requirements, whereas professional academic research in all fields of the liberal arts and sciences has stringent ethical and technical requirements enhancing accuracy and protecting against errors. These ethical and technical requirements protect against prejudices and pre-judging that might otherwise not be properly disclosed. These requirements help make research be accountable and more verifiable.

The technical and ethical guidelines in professional academic research include transparency, opportunities to challenge evidence and conclusions, open disclosures of conflicts of interest, unambiguous distinctions between opinions and facts, specific clarification of the evidence examined in the research, details of how evidence was selected, details of how evidence was examined, etc.

Prof. Author does not mention these crucial methodological requirements. But then, I know of no one writing about the fiber field who has ever referred to these required elements of reliable academic research practice. But clearly, every fiberist striving for consideration in our field should be fully conversant in those requirements.

In academic research practice, prejudgments not disclosed at the beginning of the research are "fatally defective" to the validity of the research. They are technically, ethically, and professionally intolerable. They are flaws that "stack the deck" with no one permitted to see that happening. At best such research practice with undisclosed pre-judging and prejudice is sloppy, unreliable, and misleading. At worst it is professionally deemed to be an outright fraud.

Prof. Author has turned a very bright spotlight on prejudice in our field due to gender and genre. Here, now, is the opportunity for the fiber field to initiate an open, constructive dialogue probing how the contemporary art world excludes work based upon undisclosed pre-judgments — prejudices — when characterizing our field and recording it for posterity.

The University of Minnesota Press has advised me that Prof. Author's book is selling so well that it is already in its second printing. I believe that reflects a real hunger in our field to begin to address and resolve our challenges, if not by my generation, which is older, then by the incoming generations of younger people.

Thanks to Prof. Author's book, the fiber field finally has a unique opportunity to begin asking questions openly about the hostility shown by art research that pre-judges fiber and about the network of institutions permitting that defective research. We finally have the opportunity to work together in the broad light of day to call for the beginning of more accountable, reliable, transparent, accurate research practice on our field.

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