

Re: *Gender Bend: Women in Wood, Men at the Loom*

By Stanley Bulbach, Ph.D.

The Fuller Craft Museum in Brockton, Massachusetts is one of the few surviving craft media art museums in the United States. It is dedicated to the objects, ideas, and insights that inspire patrons and artists to explore life through the art of contemporary craft. The Fuller recently produced a gem of an exhibition, *Gender Bend: Women in Wood, Men at the Loom*, which ran from October 21, 2017 through March 11, 2018. The exhibition featured the art of female wood turners alongside that of male weavers.

There are many, many wonderful things to say about this exhibition. Unfortunately, while this important project was widely promoted, almost no reviews were published, not even by the fiberists' primary organizations. The sole publicly accessible review I found thus far was in *Providence Journal* (December 20, 2017), referring to a participating weaver as "she," illustrating ongoing problems our field's artists confront when depending upon reviews for visibility of their work. Few curators and gallery directors accept unsolicited materials from us when performing their research. Too often exposure must be via fee-based juried exhibitions with controversial pre-screening admission fees.

Gender Bend included the impressive fiber art of Klaus Anselm, James Bassler, Archie Brennan, Murray Gibson, Jean Pierre Larochette, David Johnson, Urban Jupena, Marcel Marois, Wence Martinez, David Mooney, Michael Rohde, Jon Eric Riis, and Irvin Trujillo. I participated too.

The exhibition's co-curators were Tib Shaw, Curator at the American Association of Woodturners and Writer at *American Craft Magazine*, and our field's illustrious Jon Eric Riis. The Fuller announced the exhibition as "two populations that have been traditionally under-represented in their fields." In the beautiful catalogue, Fuller's Associate Curator Michael McMillan stated the museum's goal "to be a platform for the spectrum of conversations in craft."

Institutions and organizations for fiber art are being severely buffeted. Massachusetts' American Textile History Museum closed its doors.

New York's Folk Art Museum lost its new building. *American Craft Magazine* explained that it could not afford to review *Gender Bend*. Oregon's Museum of Contemporary Craft and Washington DC's Textile Museum both had to reorganize themselves radically.



The Hudson, a prayer carpet, handwoven from hand spun Lincoln with vegetable dyes. Photo credit: Stanley Bulbach

Over recent decades, the Handweavers Guild of America has lost more than half of its membership. An American Tapestry Alliance survey recently reported the average member age approaches 70. Our fiber groups and institutions now run continuous fundraisers competing against each other for the same limited pool of dollars available from fiberists.

If our field is sincerely dedicated to education and nurturing incoming generations, then that requires a constructive conversation about improving the accuracy of research practice of our field's accomplishments, to enable fiberists' ability to support our organizations and institutions.

Regarding *Gender Bend*, how can we discuss the traditional under-representation of fiber regarding male weavers without confusion when the entire field of fiber regardless of participants' gender is traditionally under-represented in the published research record of the craft media arts?

In 1986 the American Craft Museum produced its classic exhibition and catalogue, *Craft Today: Poetry of the Physical*, curated and edited by Paul Smith. On page 16 in "Historical Roots and Contemporary Perspectives," Edward Lucie-Smith contributed:

the recent history of craft as it is reflected in print is subject to some unexpected distortions. For example, although ceramics is not the largest field of activity — that honor almost certainly belongs to fiber — the recent history of American craft ceramics is more fully recorded than work in any other medium.

But how can we discuss distorted research when we are rarely helped to challenge why our field continues for decades to be under-documented in this inaccurate way? In all other fields, graduate students are required to challenge research conclusions to test accuracy and reliability as an overarching priority of professional ethics. If contemporary fiber is ever going to ascend from the lower visibility and status imposed upon it in the art world, fiber organizations need to support advocacy and education particularly regarding what accurate, reliable research practice requires.

Other fields of research practice correct traditional distortions. A third of a century since Lucie-Smith illuminated the inaccurate, unreliable research practice about fiber, it's now time for change. We all need strongly to support the conversation that *Gender Bend* and Fuller Craft Museum advocate.

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