



The Voice of Our Advocates?

by Stanley Bulbach, Ph.D.

In the Spring 2009 issue of Fibre Focus, we published Stanley Bulbach's essay "Where is the Voice of Fibre Art Today?" This is the second installment in Stanley's series of articles.

Trillion is a luxury clothing store in Palm Beach, Florida. Earlier this year, one of the local residents stopped in and ordered a pair of cashmere pants for about \$2,000 US. The cashmere was "worsted spun." Only the best fibre. Processed only with the finest craftsmanship. Unfortunately, when the order arrived from Italy, the customer wasn't able to stop by to pick it up. That wasn't due to the steep price, but due a schedule conflict the customer, Bernie Madoff, had with the Court.

In the previous issue of *Fibre Focus*, I mentioned how an Indian fabric maker recently paid a record price nearly \$250,000 — for a 200 pound bale of exceptionally high-grade wool; and how after the collapse of Lehman Brothers, the former CEO's wife had gone shopping and picked up three cashmere throws at \$2,225 a pop.

I also wrote about the internet posting last autumn of a weaver who detailed the inability to recoup the investment of \$40-50 worth of materials in each scarf produced for sale; and how our field is increasingly challenged by dwindling resources and economic opportunity.

What a Stark Contrast!

On the one hand, fine fibre* work is selling in the luxury marketplace for impressive profits; while on the other hand, our field is losing suppliers, information services, membership, etc.

Our field has long held that we fibreists should not have much of a voice in discussing the factors underlying our field's vital connections to the marketplace of goods and ideas. In our field we are rarely permitted, no less encouraged, to have a voice exploring this in our conferences or at our teaching institutions. Our larger circulation publications, now mostly owned by venture capitalists, deem such discourse as "too serious." They prefer to publish "stress-reducing" writing.

Where is the Advocacy?

Why not discuss these issues openly in a problem-solving manner? One reason frequently heard is that it is more appropriate and effective to leave that up to our official spokespeople. That's an interesting thought, since the word "advocate" does share the same root as "voice". Who would those advocates be and what might they be doing on our behalf to help our field meet its increasing challenges?

The most powerful professional advocates in the field of contemporary fibre craft and art would include museums and commercial galleries. Museums would be showing fibre in their exhibitions and catalogues to educate the public about the field, and dealers would be promoting fibre art and craft for sale in their commercial galleries. These would be the two primary forms of advocacy assigning and permanently recording the significance of fibre work for the public and

*This and a number of other spellings reflect the preferred Canadian spellings.

posterity.

So how has that been working out?

Unexpected Research Distortions

In the less than transparent world of art museums, open acknowledgment of serious problems is rare indeed. One striking admission did appear in 1986 at the American Craft Museum in the introduction of the catalogue to a landmark exhibition.

“[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 — in the recent history of American craft ceramics is more fully recorded than work in any other medium.”

(Edward Lucie-Smith, “Historical Roots and Contemporary Perspectives,” in *Craft Today: Poetry of the Physical*, (New York: Weiden & Nicholson, 1986) p. 16.)

More than two decades later, those “unexpected distortions” continue in the research record on our field today. But how can that be? Museum research isn’t supposed to permit “distortions.”

Museums claim that their curatorial staff are reliable professional experts skilled in the basic research techniques that safeguard against such distortions. One crucial research safeguard is that after a distortion is acknowledged as it was in 1986 the distortion is supposed to be corrected without delay. This is not an optional consideration. This is a matter of professional ethics of primary importance. But twenty three years later, the official curatorial record of contemporary craft and art is still distorting fibre in its record as a field of secondary size and significance.

In 2001 I was asked by a French academic publication to research this distortion for an article. I approached the principal museums that

publicly claim to do curatorial research on craft and art and asked them how they performed that research on fibre. Every museum wrote back asserting that they themselves were not researching fibre craft and art. They wrote that they depended upon the research done by other museums of craft and art. The bottom line was that each museum I questioned pointed to one of the others as the source of their research, while apparently none of the museums actually did the research.

So as many fibreists have complained, key questions in our field include: 1) What museum research was being written on our field’s work? 2) What were the research standards guiding how that research is done? 3) On what grounds was fibre work still being assigned a misleadingly poor share of the spotlight in the curatorial record?

As to our other major professional advocates, commercial galleries, I asked Friends of Fiber Arts International what galleries are promoting fibre craft and art. I received a very short list in response. I queried each of them. Half denied that they look at fibre craft and art and sell it. The other half did not respond. So much for the professional commercial galleries advocating on behalf of our field.

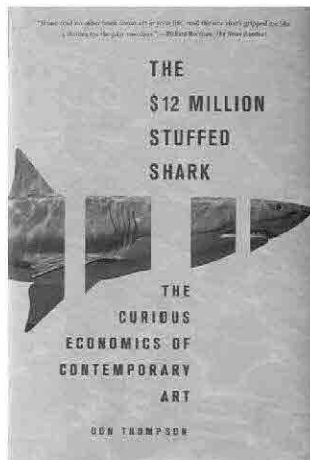
Why have these professional advocates been doing this to our field when it causes such grave problems for them, as well as for fibreists? And why is our field so quiet about this while this distorted record is being perpetuated by these advocates?

“The \$12 Million Dollar Stuffed Shark”

Insight to these crucial questions concerning contemporary art museums and commercial galleries can be found in a book published last year by Donald Thompson, a Canadian professor teaching marketing and economics in the MBA program at the Schulich School of Business at York University in Toronto. He has taught at Harvard Business School and the London School of Economics. Prof. Thompson is also a collector

of contemporary art.

His book is *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art* published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2008. The book explores the contemporary art world and analyses the forces that have been driving it particularly since the beginning of the “New Market Economy” in the early 1980s. This book details how the driving force is not related to accurate reliable curatorial research. The driving forces have included art gallery and auction house money, powerful marketing tools, and a consensual lack of transparency all around.



Prof. Thompson asks how the work of certain contemporary artists has been able to command astronomic prices and how they have been able to monopolize publicity and overshadow the rest of the field. This question is quite similar to the question how certain media in the field of contemporary craft and art have been able to dominate and have fibre inaccurately relegated to secondary status in the official research record.

He details clearly in layman's terms how this magic is achieved. He details a feeding frenzy of unimaginable wealth combining pyrotechnically with an unquenchable demand for status symbols at any price. He describes an environment of manipulative gallery dealing and completely opaque auction house machinations. He explores checkbook journalism in art magazines where feature articles on specific work are frequently mirrored by expensive ads paid for by the dealers representing that art. He details how art museum exhibitions can be inextricably intertwined with donations to the museums. He presents the math and illustrates the competition between the growing number of contemporary art museums and the tightly controlled number of hot

contemporary artists.

He traces each step in the process of how the prices of hot contemporary art are “ratcheted” higher and higher as those prices escalate. Galleries, museums, newspapers, magazines, etc., all tell the public how the work is growing more and more artistically important as prices rise. And he describes the contrasting veil of silence drawn by the same entities when prices backslide.

Prof. Thompson details “branding” and how it is closely bound up with museum exhibitions and research. As it becomes more and more difficult to look at the most expensive contemporary craft and art and agree whether it is really worth its soaring prices, the need for brand name assurance increases greatly. The more journals and newspapers cover work, the more the work is branded, justifying the price. The most pursued branding is from museums. And Prof. Thompson illustrates the conflicts of interest that have been compromising museum research in the process.

Money Rewriting Art History

After tracking how a work of contemporary art can command the same price as a new 747 jet, Prof. Thompson warns us that the value of contemporary art “reflects the reality that art history can be rewritten by a buyer wielding a heavy wallet.” And this rewriting of history has been distorting the fibre field's accomplishments and impoverishing our field's resources.

This rewriting is the exact opposite of what researchers at our art museums claim occurs. They claim to record and exhibit work knowledgeably, fairly, and accurately, based upon the work's intrinsic and aesthetic values, free of distortions. This role reversal described by Prof. Thompson would certainly account for why museums claiming expertise in the field of craft and art can produce a distorted research record.

This is not a radical new conclusion. After all, there have been many recent publications reporting that art research is unethically distorted. Those include:

- *New Ethical Guidelines* of the American Association of Museums;
- *Whose Muse? Art Museums and the Public Trust*, ed. by James Cuno;
- *Art of the Steal*, by Christopher Mason;
- *Eyewitness: Reports from an art world in crisis*, by Jed Pert;
- *Tales from the Art Crypt: the painters, the museums, the curators, the collectors, the auctions, the art*, by Richard Feigen;
- *Culture Incorporated: museums, artists, and corporate sponsorships*, by Mark W. Rectanus; and
- *Exhibitionism: Art in an era of intolerance*, by Lynne Munson.

But Prof. Thompson's book offers readers much more. His book is a detailed explanation of the economic forces, factors, and practices that have been concentrating the resources. and the focus of the contemporary art world onto a very narrow, financially manipulated, secretive, unaccountable process, shutting out most of the rest of the contemporary art community. That process includes leaving contemporary fibre craft and art out in the cold.

Prof. Thompson's book is required reading for anyone trying to understand how the recent contemporary art market really functions.

What Does Our Future Hold?

On the one hand, throughout history, fibre quality

and fashion have always been treasured. On the other hand, today's community of fibre art and craft is increasingly strapped for value and economic resources needed to ensure its future vitality.

We discourage ourselves from having a voice. Our field suffers from a distorted record created by our principal professional advocates. What might the future hold for our field? Ultimately the youngest generation will answer that question, one way or another.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if there were a dialogue about these issues among all of the generations populating our field of work? I believe it would be an interesting and stimulating discussion of vastly different views and wishes and hopes and experiences. I hope there will be an opportunity, finally, for those of us in the generation which worked to prevent fibre traditions from disappearing in the mid-20th Century to participate in passing the field on in good condition to the generations that have to carry it forth in the 21st Century.

Couldn't we encourage a Voice long enough to call for a wish-list, a bridge connecting our generations in fibre? Think about it! And if I might be so bold, why not start talking openly about it too?

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Bio: Stanley Bulbach is a fibre artist who lives and works in New York City. He holds a Ph.D. in Ancient Near Eastern Languages and Literature from New York University. More information about his work can be found on his website: www.bulbach.com and more of his writing can be found in the Library section there.