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Art Reviews

Sheila Hicks's Faith in the Latent Power of Materials

An invigorating survey of mostly recent works by the American artist at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf is a feast of rhythmic form and pulsating color.



Ela Bittencourt 17 hours ago



Sheila Hicks standing next to her work "Saffron Sentinel" (2017), pigmented fibers (all photos © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024; photo by Katja Illner, courtesy the artist)

DÜSSELDORF, Germany — Sheila Hicks is a master colorist, capable of suggesting depth and movement in abstraction and seducing with figure and landscape all without straying

from formalist rigor. Indeed, an invigorating survey of mostly recent works by the American artist at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf is a feast of rhythmic form and pulsating color. Set against the museum's austere architecture, Hicks's rich array of regal blues and canary yellows is sensually offset by deep burgundies and creamy and ashy whites.

In "Amsterdam" (2014), a free-standing work, the volumetric body and verticality of a cerulean blue fabric uncannily suggest a standing figure, adorned with braided gray yarn that cascades down as if luxuriant hair. Yet the work may also be Hicks's take on Amsterdam's wintry color palette, suggesting the flow of the city's numerous canals constricted by frost. In this sense, while Hicks builds out the textile sculpturally, she also evokes landscape painting in three dimensions. Organic forms more broadly permeate the show, from the exuberant flow of the mop-like fringes in "Wishful Volcano" (2024); to the lumpy fibers in "Saffron Sentinel" (2017), imitating flowers; to the more pared-down works in which nature is reduced to rhythmic lines, such as "Delphi" (2023) or "Sunrise in Machu Picchu" (2020).



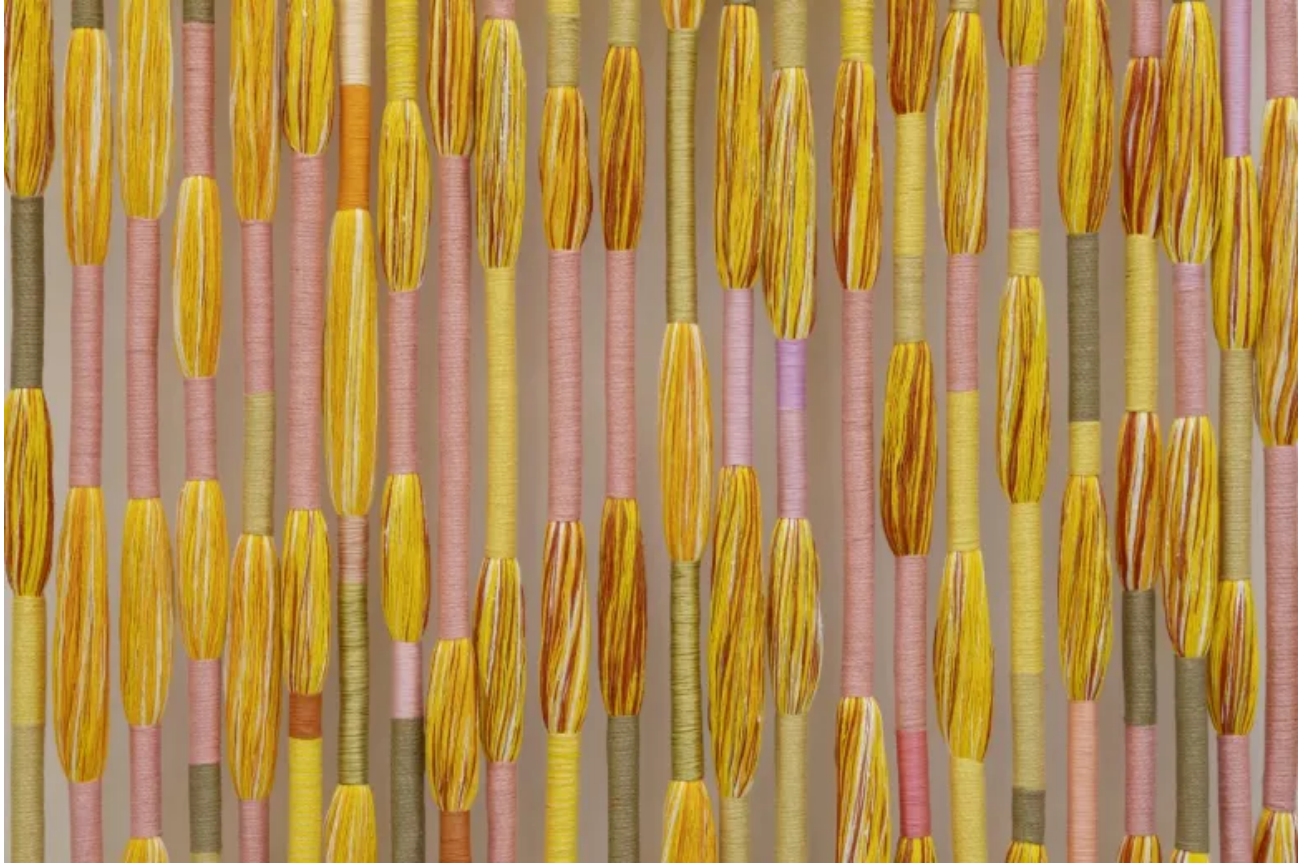
Sheila Hicks standing next to her work "Aprentizaje de la Victoria" (2008–16), wool (photo by Katja Illner, courtesy the artist)

The survey's scope — the newest works are from 2024, and the earliest the mid-'80s — engenders reflections on the trajectory of weaving as an art form. I thought, for instance, of Anni Albers, whose pioneering geometric weaves seem particularly relevant to Hicks's

work. In the late 1920s, when Albers studied at the Bauhaus, women artists were steered away from architecture and painting toward crafts. By the 1950s, when Anni and Josef Albers were teaching at Yale University, where Hicks was a student, weaving had been integrated into modern art yet still held an intermediary status as both art and craft. Hicks's work seems to represent the next step in that evolution: freedom from any qualms about this intermediacy.

Her own works range from strictly geometric pieces, such as “KH, 2024” and “HK, 2024” (both 2024), with their hard-edge crisscross patterns, to textile-objects, such as “Target” (2023), a work in both linen and cork. The uneven patterns of “Hommage aux Shakers” (2018) evoke older traditions, such as Andean weaving, which Hicks learned about while traveling in Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Ecuador on a Fulbright scholarship in the late '50s, as well as the vagaries of the human (mostly female) hand. Overall, she is as likely to depict strict geometry associated with abstract art as she is to reference artisanal methods and traditions.

In the process, Hicks dismantles the residual hierarchy between high and low arts. What seems to interest her, instead, is material flexibility. Her art revolves around an oscillation between the manner in which textile and yarn can be laid out or hung to convey softness and flow, or bunched up for density and object-like sturdiness, or stretched to create a nearly tectonic depth. She believes in the latent power of materials to challenge and surprise, emphasizing tactility in ways that link her to Post-Minimalist artists, such as Eva Hesse. Liberated from many of the constraints earlier artists faced, however, Hicks seems to feel free to align her work with a craft lineage, rather than seek a radical break with the past.



Sheila Hicks, "Labyrinthe du paradis" (2024)(photo by Claire Dorn, courtesy Kunsthalle Düsseldorf)



Sheila Hicks, "Embedded Enrobed Knowledge of the Age" (2024), natural and synthetic fibers(photo by Katja Illner, courtesy the artist)

Sheila Hicks *continues at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf (Grabbepiaz 4, Düsseldorf, Germany) through February 23, 2025. The exhibition was organized by the institution.*

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