ArtReview

# The Interview: Sheila Hicks

**Dan Coopey** Features 20 October 2026 ArtReview



Sheila Hicks, *I wish I were a wave*, 2018–26, linen on plinth, 21 × 48 × 25 cm. Courtesy the artist and Nara Roesler, São Paulo

**The artist's recommendations include: going straight to the factory for the best materials, reading one's post while seated, climbing stairs mindfully and listening to what old clothes are saying**

Before I get to ask Sheila Hicks a question on our video call, she has one for me. "Are you wearing a knitted sweater?" I tell her yes, and that it gets cold here in the mountains of Minas Gerais. "Are you sure it's wool? What kind of wool?" I tell her it's sheep's wool and she seems

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OK

Yale, and it's one that the ninety-two-year-old US artist has obviously adopted, having investigated the possibilities of textiles and colour for over 70 years now.

An early encounter during a lecture on pre-Columbian art and architecture with an image of Peruvian mummy bundles being unwrapped captured Hicks's imagination in a profound way. That the dead had been buried with their tools – in particular, weaving baskets full of spindles and fibres – only made the sight more captivating. Hicks notes that from the moment we are born, we are wrapped in textile, and it is this deep human connection to threads that provides endless inspiration. Though often called a pioneer of 'textile art', Hicks refuses to be pigeonholed, and indeed her sculptures, ranging from small wall works – a recent selection of which is on show concurrently at Nara Roesler in São Paulo – to architectural installations, can be difficult to categorise. Loom-based or untethered, wrapped or bundled, piled or knotted, both natural and synthetic, fibre in Hicks's hands is treated as matter and takes on unexpected and wildly varying form. The artist considers making and doing as ways of thinking about the world around her: seeing how others make and use textiles, how somebody ties their shoelaces, the particular scarf and jacket combination of a passerby or how a sock might begin to break and unravel through wear are all deeply embedded within her sculpture. For Hicks, textile presents a universal language fundamental to all societies, and she has received invitations to embed herself in cultures globally, facilitating her deep knowledge of and sensitivity towards traditional and nontraditional forms of textile construction.



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## No Need to Spin Things

**ArtReview** *You started out painting during the late 1950s and there are three new works in* O que que é isso? *where you've returned to the canvas. In these, however, you've made dozens of punctures and inserted little tufts of fibre into the gaps.*

**Sheila Hicks** Fibre, raw fibre, unspun fibre. When it's spun, it becomes linear, like threads, lines of threads. But I use masses of fibre that are unspun. It's not dyed. A lot of the fibres I use are not dyed. So how do we get the colour? I have a very good relationship with a group who extract pure colour from minerals in Turkey. It's the pure pigment, minerals, mined from the earth, and from leaves like indigo. You find a way to adhere the pure pigment to a base – like an acrylic base – you don't have to spin it, you don't have to twist it, you don't have to make it into a line. You can pile up big masses of fibre, as I did at the Venice Biennale in 2017.

**AR** Escalade Beyond Chromatic Lands *[2016–17], the Venice Biennale work, was this huge tumbling wall of coloured fibre bundles. Was it inspired by how you received those fibres in the first place, like a readymade? I assume they arrive loose in big sacks?*

**SH** I realised that's how they were at the workshops, the places where the wool is spun into thread. I managed to get access to their storerooms and I could see the mass of fibre before it was processed. It was like walking into a kingdom of soft existence, an environment you just want to lose yourself in. I thought, instead of standing there and looking at colour and tapestries and paintings, why not just swim inside, allow visitors to hide and sit there and wait for whoever you have your appointment with? For the current São Paulo shows we went shopping in Brazil instead of shipping so much stuff in. It's a waste to pay these cargo companies to ship tons of fibre from Europe. Brazil has wonderful fibres: wonderful sisal, wonderful plant fibres. How do most artists find their materials? They order sample cards. No, just go into the factories, into the warehouses, go into where they're actually producing it.

**AR** *Does your approach change depending on the scale you're working at? You have created many site-specific largescale installations in response to architecture.*

**SH** The project we're working on now is for the entrance of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. We're making a 38-metre-tall tower that goes up about six storeys. It's currently growing up a column towards the top of an opalescent ceiling that floods light down onto the tumbling fibres. As you get off the elevator on different floors, you're following the central column from the entrance. So if you lose your children on one floor, they're probably running up and down the stairs looking at the different colours. It's about 17 colours that are not dyed. So that's a trick: that means it'll weather the light, and it'll weather any other humidity or other environmental features; since it's not dyed, it's not going to fade.

**AR** *In 2013 you had to remake a 1967 commission, two floor-to-ceiling tapestries of repeated honeycomb circles integrated neatly into the interior architecture of the Ford Foundation in New York. How did you go about sourcing the same colour fibre, the same quality, almost 50 years on?*

**SH** It wasn't dyed! It was all honey-coloured silk fibre. The fire department destroyed it when they came in and sprayed everything inside the Ford Foundation with fireproofing chemicals and the silk thread reacted badly. It started to split and they took it down. They asked if I could remake it. I said it's going to take two years: we put a lot of silkworms to work until we could get enough fibre again, identical in colour. Asian silkworms. When you're sitting in the auditorium, and your brain is absorbing whatever's going on around you, you feel like you're inside of a beehive, the way the beehive has these modular structures, with the honey inside. Now the foundation doesn't allow people to come in and smoke or sleep in its auditorium like they used to.

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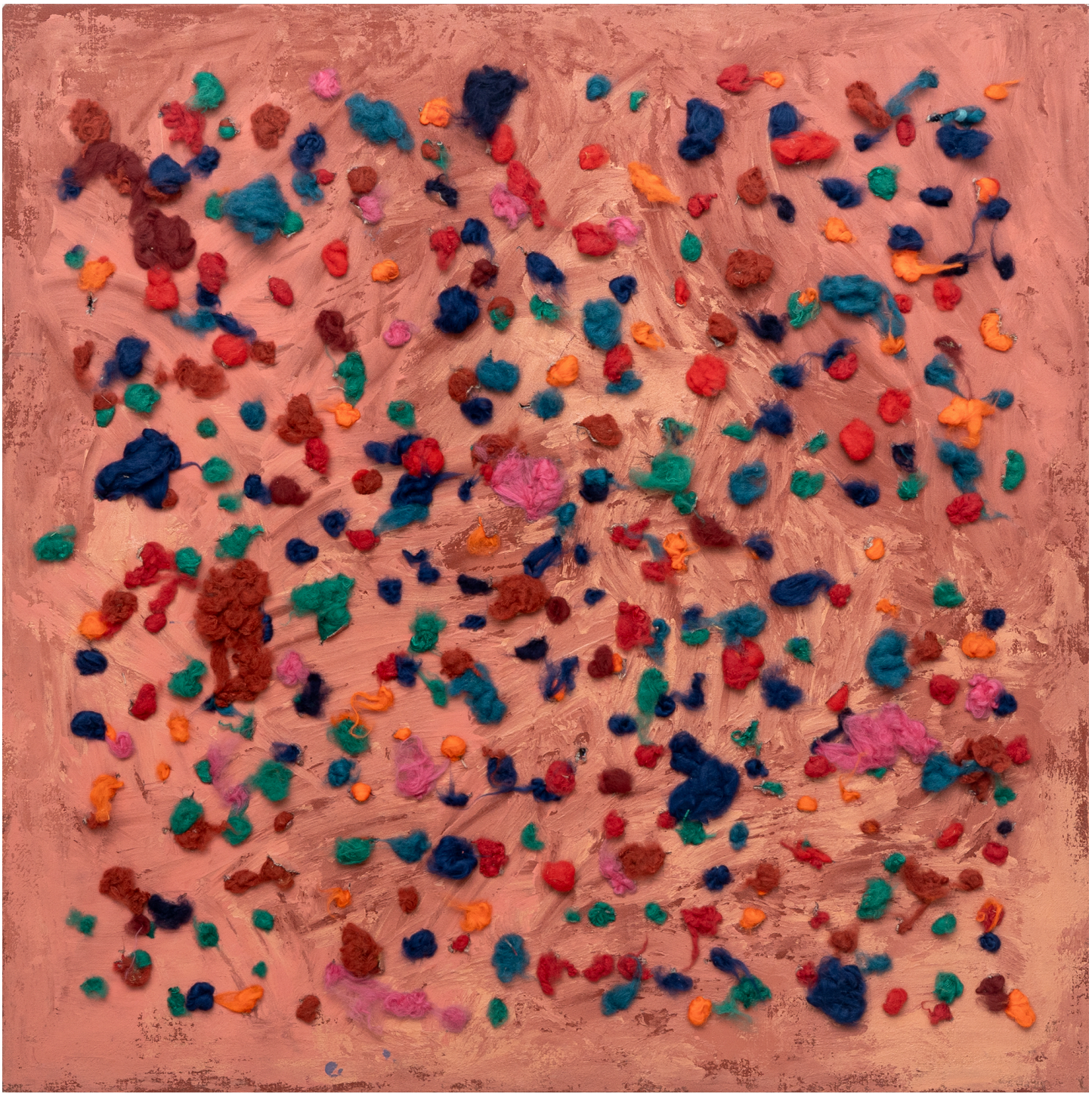

*Angelina con esperanza*, 2022, acrylic paint on canvas and synthetic fibre, 101 × 101 × 7 cm. Courtesy the artist and Nara Roesler, São Paulo

### Just Doing What They Were Doing

**AR** *You've had a long relationship with South America, but* O que que é isso? *at Instituto Tomie Ohtake is your first museum show in Brazil.*

**SH** I was sent to Chile in 1957 and stayed for over a year. I was tasked with giving a version of the two- and three-dimensional design class Josef Albers taught me at Yale to the architecture students at the Universidad Católica [de Chile] in Santiago. He had initiated the course and then every year one of his US students went back to teach it. When I heard that it would be me, I had to check where Chile was on the map. I was interested in visiting all the archaeological sites and photographing them. That's what I was doing mostly. After being in Chile and going down to Teirra del Fuego, I came back up across the Andes. I made a small shop in Buenos Aires, then got up to Brazil. I met Lúcio Costa and Roberto Burle Marx [as they were embarking on the building of Brasília]. I think Burle Marx played the piano when I came. After Brazil, I passed into Venezuela. All by land, on foot, a lot of buses, hitchhiking with trucks.

**AR** *Alongside your own textile works at Instituto Tomie Ohtake, you'll be showing a small selection of Andean textiles. What did you learn about weaving during your early travels?*

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**AR** *Were they using backstrap looms?*

**SH** For instance, yes. Either four posts, pounded into the ground, or the two bars and the backstrap tied up to a tree. I was just sitting down and doing what they were doing.

**AR** *This woven connection between the body and a tree is beautiful.*

**SH** Yes. The two posts draw the thread into tension, and then you release the tension if you walk towards the tree. You can return to work any time. It's very improvisational because the weavers are herding llamas and guanaco and they're walking and tying up for a couple of hours, weaving a bit, and then setting off again with the herds. I saw a particular pattern being woven with two sticks on a backstep. I bought about two or three metres of the textile, and I made a skirt and a jacket. It became my uniform for the trip. I didn't need any luggage. I just wore that. I could take off the jacket and just have a blouse or something underneath. You wouldn't believe how simple the weaving technique was, just on a backstrap loom, compared to how complex the result was.



*Constellation d'Anniversaires*, 2025, cotton, cashmere, linen, silk, synthetic fibre, 122 × 180 cm. Photo: Michael Brzezinski. © the artist. Courtesy Alison Jacques, London

## So French

**AR** *After such an itinerant time you have been settled in Paris since 1964, living and working in the historic Cour de Rohan.*

**SH** Yes, it's where the French Revolution was born. The guillotine was invented in the three courtyards where I make my work. It's where they used to decapitate animals to test it out. These cobblestones run downhill from one courtyard to the next, so they could guillotine the animals and let the blood flow through the courtyard. It's so French.

**AR** *It's nice to know that so many soft and beautiful things come out of this courtyard now, a kind of compensation for this dark history.*

**SH** People ask, "How'd you find this place?" I found it because I'd walk through this series of arches in these three courtyards, going to the post office. And then coming back, I'd sit in the courtyard and read my mail. A man who helped restore it after the Second World War

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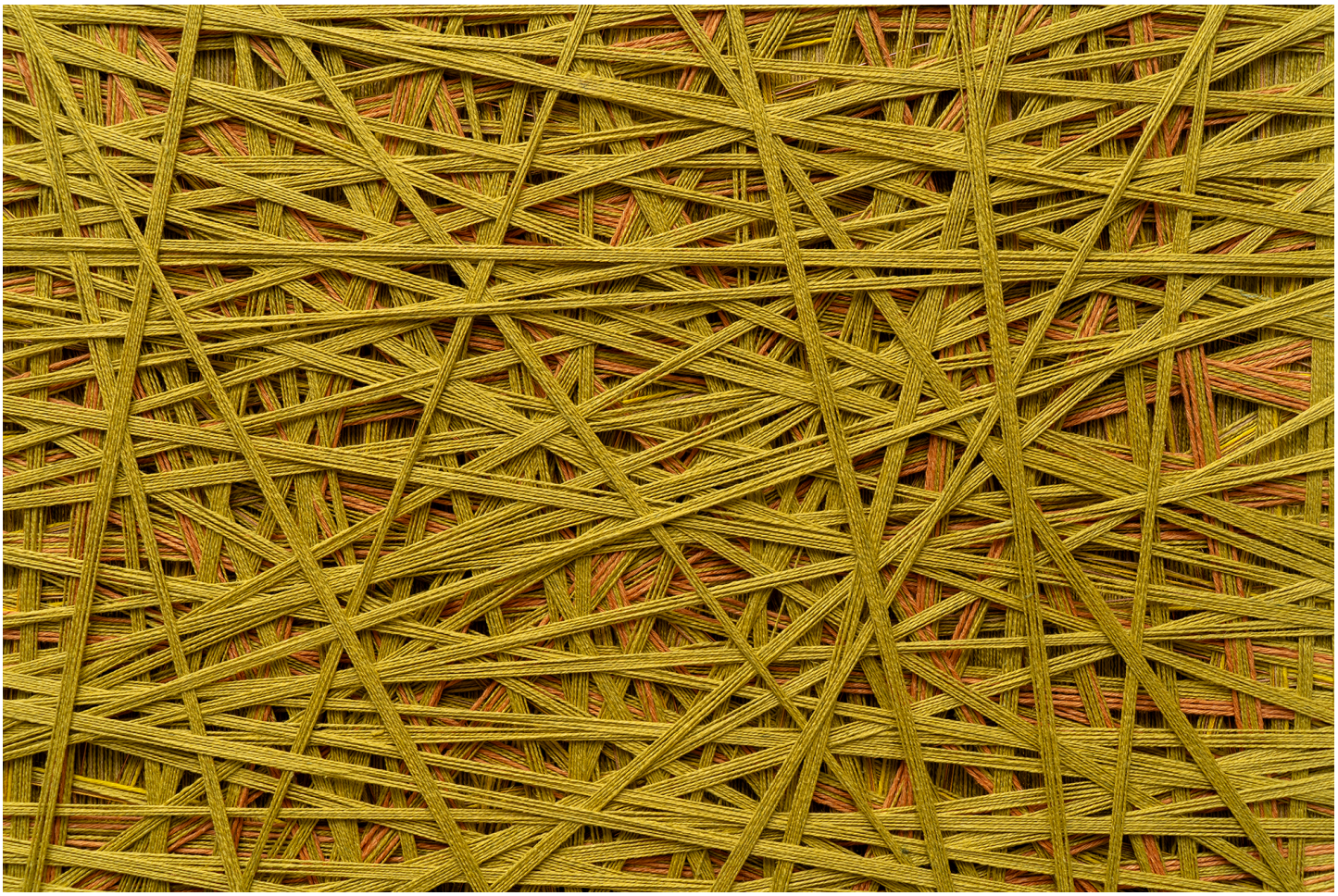
He was an elderly gentleman, Monsieur Branellec. He stopped one day and spoke to me as I was sitting on a bench downstairs, a stone bench in the court, and said to me, "Ah, you seem to really like our courtyard", and I said, "I love the courtyard." And he said, "Well, why don't you move here? Because my wife and I are retiring and going to Brittany." I said, "Fat chance." I didn't have money to buy an apartment in this courtyard. "Maybe you'll find a way because we don't need the money right away," he told me. "We're going to retire, and we expect to live a good long time, and you can pay us over the years." He said they didn't want to give it to someone who's going to sell it, they wanted someone to move in. One day I'll make something and dedicate it to this guy. That's how I ended up doing that Ford Foundation project. I did it instead of happily playing in my studio and making my *Minimes* [a series of small loom-based 'meditations', which Hicks makes daily]. I thought by doing the Ford Foundation project, I could pass part of this money over to Monsieur Branellec.



*Secrets Entwined* (detail), 2024, linen, cotton, synthetic fibre, 50 × 50 cm. Courtesy the artist and Nara Roesler, São Paulo

## More Confrontational

**AR** *Is there anywhere that you've been on your travels or a body of work that you made in the past that you would like to return to? Like for example, the prayer rugs series that you made in Morocco?*

**SH** How did you figure that out?

**AR** *I was hoping to see one here in Brazil.*

**SH** No, those didn't travel. Those have stayed with me the longest. Because they're archways, and when you contemplate them, or kneel before them, or sit on them, or lie down, you feel like you might be able to navigate through them to the next destiny. Something you can walk through like a portal, instead of it speaking back to you and diminishing you and making you feel obeisant. It's more a gesture that invites you to come and walk through, and imagine what's on the other side.

**AR** *But is that true of all your work?*

**SH** Some of it is more confrontational. Some works are more invitational.

**AR** *Is it the arch form itself that you have a spiritual connection with? You're still working at a great pace, are you searching for something in particular?*

**SH** Yes. I've got to figure out how to get up tomorrow. I can't do anything too stupid today, so that I can get up tomorrow. Because

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down the steps. Now I watch where I'm stepping. And I try to concentrate when I'm going up and down, not talking to people, just going down alone, quietly, up and down the steps, because that's where I have good ideas. But we're surrounded by so many people who are nonstop talkers. Have you noticed?

**AR** *I saw a photo of your bundles on those steps – densely bound circular or sticklike masses of vibrantly coloured fibre – many examples of which are also on show in the São Paulo exhibitions in varying formations. They have a portable, nomadic quality.*

**SH** They're invitational. You want to pick them up or turn them around, or put them under your coat and walk out the door. I'm disappointed with any visitor who comes to my studio and doesn't try to steal one.

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*O que que é isso?* (What Is This?), 2026 (installation view). Courtesy the artist and Instituto Tomie Ohtake, São Paulo

**Things That Are Meaningul**

**AR** *I heard that people give you things to wrap.*

**SH** Yes, especially the things that are meaningful to them. People who have someone in the family who has died, or disappeared, or left them, and left their clothes behind. What do they do with the clothes? What would you do with the clothes if your partner left? When someone brings me a sack of things, and they say, "I can't stand looking at these things anymore. My son left, and he left these things behind." They could put them in a laundry bag and give them to the Salvation Army, but it doesn't seem very honourable to do that. I say, "Leave him here, tell me his name", and when I'm sitting listening to music or talking to someone at my studio table, I pick up the clothes and I start wrapping with them, and I see what the fabric tells me. If it starts to tell me to go this way, I'll go that way.

**AR** *You give them a new life.*

**SH** I give them a new life, and I pile them up, and they look fantastic together. They start to come alive together. They become very curious and funny, and then you can knock them with your elbow, and they fall down, and they splatter, and they become another composition. And then I just shove them in a laundry bag and give them back to the person. A lot of friends have pianos and they stick these bundles on top of them. They look at all these little compositions on the piano as they're playing, and it brings back good memories of when they went on trips or vacations or things they did with their son. They become part of your odds and ends. Do you have a lot of odds and ends around?

**AR** *I do. I'm a terrible collector and hoarder of things.*

**SH** Wrap it!

**Sheila Hicks: O que que é isso?** ***(What Is This?) is on view at the Instituto Tomie Ohtake, São Paulo, through 25 October;*** **Autobiografia de um fio** ***(Autobiography of a Thread) is on view at Nara Roesler, São Paulo, through 24 October***

*From the October 2026 issue of ArtReview – get your copy.*

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