



WEAVING HER MAGIC

Sheila Hicks with several works in progress at her studio in Paris's 6th arrondissement.

EPIC YARNS

For six decades, artist Sheila Hicks has been pushing the boundaries of her chosen medium, fiber, and in the process, challenging conceptions of art more broadly.

BY ALICE CAVANAGH
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THE 85-YEAR-OLD Paris-based American artist Sheila Hicks officially speaks three languages—English, French and Spanish—but her most remarkable fluency is with the yarn she weaves, wraps, knots and assembles into her monumental works of art.

Hicks views her practice as a *passee-partout*—the French word for “master key,” or literally “go everywhere”—a universal language that everyone can access and enjoy, regardless of cultural, political and socioeconomic status. “If a locksmith has that key, you can send him out to any emergency situation, and he’ll manage to go through the barrier,” she says one summer afternoon in her 6th arrondissement studio. “This is the *métier* that I practice, and the material that I have chosen to use, and the way I have chosen to work.”

Around us is a hive of activity, with three or four people working on multiple pieces, which Hicks oversees with a canny attention to detail. She guides two young assistants in the room as they experiment with wrapping methods for new soft sculptural forms; she fields a stream of phone calls; and she never once loses her place in the conversation, which she steers entirely, often answering a question with a question.

“I have a roving vision,” she says. “There are no binoculars that I look through, and I am watching, discovering and thinking and processing. That’s why

people don’t like to walk down the street with me,” she says. Hicks delivers her punch lines with theatrical suspense and a drawn-out, raspy chuckle.

The artist has long been driven to explore, challenge and bring new meaning to her medium. She’s done this without being confined by fiber’s perceived functional or decorative purposes—an approach that has made her something of an iconoclast.

In the sixth decade of her career, Hicks is still experimenting and creating at a prolific pace. In just the past two years, Hicks’s site-specific, prismatic sculptures have inhabited the basin of the Bosquet de la Colonnade at the Palace of Versailles, the High Line in New York and the Arsenale at the 2017 Venice Biennale. She works with multiple galleries, including Sikkema Jenkins & Co. and Demisch Danant in New York, Galerie Frank Elbaz in Paris and Alison Jacques Gallery in London.

Last year saw her first major retrospective in her adopted home city—the exhibition *Lignes de Vie* at the Centre Pompidou—and her work currently features in four shows, including three solo presentations: *Sheila Hicks: Secret Structures, Looming Presence* at the Dallas Museum of Art, *Campo Abierto (Open Field)* at the Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach and *Reencuentro* at the Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino in Santiago, Chile. “When you say recent,” she clarifies when a work from 2017 comes up in conversation, “I think in months.”

One of the pieces coming to life in the studio today—a graded, colored yarn-wrapped canvas that draws you in immediately—doesn’t have a destination in mind. Hicks says she doesn’t sit by the phone and wait for commissions. “I’m making these panels because I want to make them, because I’m intrigued with what’s happening,” she says, adding, “I don’t work toward anything.... But if someone tells me to walk left, I walk 10 feet right. It’s just kind of an independent spirit, doing whatever I want to do.”

We pause to watch the process, which involves an assistant meticulously arranging lines of yarn so that some of the colors come to the surface and others are submerged, while another assistant pulls each fibrous thread down over the other side of the frame to achieve tension. There’s no front or back to this work. It is seamless like a painting.

Hicks began experimenting with this wrapping technique in the early 2010s. Dior artistic director Maria Grazia Chiuri recently used a number of similar pieces as backdrops for the house’s fall 2019 campaign, with Jennifer Lawrence posing among them. “Sheila’s works create a special relationship with space,” says Chiuri. “They invade it as much as they give shape to it, and through their materiality, form and color they manage to transfigure it as well.”

“This technique of wrapping and making threads intermingle, and not at right angles, like in weaving,” Hicks explains, intertwining her fingers to

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demonstrate, “we’re going off track and doing something completely different.”

Hicks was born Francine Rae Hicks in Hastings, Nebraska, in 1934. The oldest of three children, she grew up in Detroit and went on to study art at Syracuse University for two years, before enrolling in the Yale School of Art, where she was one of three female bachelor of fine arts graduates in 1957. (In 1959 she earned her master of fine arts from Yale, and in May of this year, she received her third degree from the university: an honorary doctor of fine arts alongside other luminaries like Gloria Steinem and Chimamanda Adichie.)

At Yale, she specialized in painting and took art history classes with George Kubler, whose teachings on pre-Columbian art—specifically images of Peruvian mummies—sparked her interest in textile traditions. When she graduated, in 1957, she went to Chile on a Fulbright scholarship at the behest of her teacher Josef Albers, the Yale design department chair and former Bauhaus and Black Mountain College professor whose analytical approach to form and color resonates in her work to this day. (Hicks met Albers’s wife, the renowned Bauhaus weaver Anni Albers, only a few times.)

As a 23-year-old en route to Chile in the late 1950s, she traveled by bus, plane and whatever means available through Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, taking photos, sketching and journaling as she went. The prominent archaeologist Junius Bird guided her to certain points on the map and encouraged her to seek out indigenous populations.

In Santiago, Hicks connected with the architect Sergio Larraín García-Moreno, the dean of the architecture school at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, and taught a Bauhaus-designed course to

architecture students there. Through Larraín’s son, also named Sergio, she was introduced to the painter Nemesio Antúnez and the writer Pablo Neruda. Later in his life, the older Larraín founded the Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino, where Hicks’s retrospective is currently installed alongside the permanent collection of pre-Columbian textiles. “It’s a big closing of the circle,” Hicks says of the exhibition.

After completing her master’s at Yale, Hicks traveled to Mexico, where she met architects Luis Barragán and Mathias Goeritz, who both encouraged her early experiments in textiles. On a personal note, she met the first of her three husbands, Henrik Tati Schlubach, settling for a period in his adobe house in the valley of Taxco el Viejo, giving birth to their daughter, Itaka Marama, in 1960, and making textiles on a makeshift loom—the legs of an upside-down table. To this day, Hicks still doesn’t work on a loom but on a painting stretcher with nails. “I am not a weaver...but I have a very big weaving following,” she says with a laugh.

These years formed a crucial period when Hicks began to believe she could work with fiber as an art form. Zoë Ryan, the curator of architecture and design at the Art Institute of Chicago, is in charge of the upcoming exhibition *In a Cloud, in a Wall, in a Chair: Six Modernists in Mexico at Midcentury*, which includes a selection of Hicks’s work from this era in Mexico. Ryan sees this as a critical moment: when the artist “broke free from the loom” and recognized that weaving wasn’t a utilitarian, two-dimensional practice. “Modernists were looking for universal languages through their art, and of course, abstraction was all about that. When they went to Latin America, they realized the locals had been using abstract forms for centuries,” says Ryan of Hicks and the other women featured in the show. “Through the structure



FLOWER
OF CREATIVITY
Hicks in her
studio's courtyard.



LOOMING LARGE

From top: Hicks weaving on a backstrap loom in Mitla, Mexico, in 1961; her installation *Escalade Beyond Chromatic Lands* at the 2017 Venice Biennale.

of the making they could create universal language—the crossed cultures and language barriers.”

In 1964, Hicks left both her husband and Mexico and relocated to Paris. She married her second husband, the Chilean painter and engraver Enrique Zañartu, there, and they had a son, Cristobal Juan, in 1965. In her Paris studio today, Hicks leafs through a book and lands on an image of an ancient Andean shirt that was woven with a backstrap loom, a tool that requires the weaver to use a tree or a post to create tension. “The people who worked in the altiplano in South America were very sophisticated in the sense of their technical ingenuity,” she says, pointing at the work. “I am not drawn to the compositions or the iconography...[but] their vocabulary, their way of moving lines in space and threads.”

Such textile traditions, along with those she encountered in India and Morocco in the 1960s and 1970s, have fueled both the foundation and the innovation of Hicks’s practice, allowing her to reinvent the wheel with fibrous form and blur the boundaries between art, design, architecture and fashion. “These trips in the Andes always gave me ideas, and then

I’d say aha! and try and think of a new way that they didn’t do or I haven’t done yet,” she says.

“What Sheila does is very playful. She plays with construction and technique and imbues them with modernist ideals of color, form, textures, order and shape,” says Ryan. “Coming up to the present day, all of those early influences have persisted, though she is more and more liberated.”

Hicks says she has always learned by doing. While previous reports have traced her craft skills back to her family, Hicks dismisses this: “I always make a different answer to that question, and I give credit to all different kinds of imaginary scenarios,” she says of her talents. Then she clarifies, “My hands are curious; I am curious. It’s unbelievable to someone like me that someone doesn’t pick up something to figure out how it works and where did it come from, and wonder who made it and how they made it.”

An encounter with Hicks’s work invites the same level of inquiry and engagement. At the 2017 Venice Biennale, “the mayor came to inaugurate the show, and he walked right up to [my installation] and just plonked himself down in the middle,” Hicks says, visibly thrilled. She even recalls mounting an exhibition in the early ’80s in Australia where, she says, people began to cry, for reasons she doesn’t understand to this day: “People became very emotional, so much so that I thought I had to stop. I wasn’t sure I could go on with the show.”

For her commissioned works, like the two linen-and-silk modernist wall panels she made for the Ford Foundation in 1966–67, Hicks has always set out to consider this interaction with the audience in clear-cut terms: “Who is inhabiting the space? Who are these people? Where are they coming from? What might they need and appreciate? How are they going to use the space?” The Ford Foundation works, which sat unprotected in the boardroom and auditorium, were damaged over time, and Hicks replaced them entirely in 2014, almost 50 years after the original installation. “That’s a life-affirming experience,” she says.

“The work is timeless: It is as powerful today as it was 50 years ago,” says Ford Foundation president Darren Walker. “I observe people looking up at it; they are awestruck or they are not sure exactly what they’re looking at. Sometimes I see people not looking at the stage but to their left towards Sheila’s work.”

The term *pioneer* comes up a lot when people talk about Hicks. (“Does that have anything to do with Nebraska?” she jokes.) Stella McCartney, for whose winter 2019 runway collection Hicks created a bright and imaginative selection of what she calls “adornments, not accessories,” is one of many who use the word. “Sheila is the real deal. There are very few people like her on the planet,” says McCartney. “I mean, the life she’s led and the things she’s achieved; it’s important to look at that.”

For her part, Hicks evades conversations around feminism and which equation she fits into. “These are kind of easy questions that writers and journalists and people grab at now because it makes their life easier,” she says of the imperative to box her in. As

such, we tiptoe around themes of her achievements as a woman artist—“Was I ever repressed? Probably left and right, but you can see what kind of character I have,” she says—and any line of thought that textile work is traditionally female. “It’s not gender-based. In India it’s the men who weave. Also, who’s growing the material?” she says with a shrug. And she even pushes back on the narrative that she has broken boundaries. “Someone who sets out in a direction that hasn’t been mapped? But don’t you do that every day?” says Hicks. “Don’t you walk down a street you don’t know?”

There was a time, in line with trends in art history, when the world of textile art, with its tapestry biennials and craft councils, was more interested than the art world at large in Hicks’s works. Yet it is also true that Hicks was recognized as an artist from day one: The Museum of Modern Art was the first museum to acquire one of her pieces, *Blue Letter* (1959), a monochromatic hand-woven wool work.

Though MoMA has since amassed a significant collection of Hicks’s work, there were long gaps between the 1960s exhibitions that first featured her work, one show in 1986, and 2012, when she started to be included more regularly. The reason for this, says MoMA modern design curator Juliet Kinchin, is multifaceted: “One of my heroes is Mildred Constantine, curator in architecture and design from 1943 to 1971, who staged the groundbreaking 1969 exhibition *Wall Hangings*, which launched the fiber art movement in the United States and featured the work of Sheila Hicks. After Constantine left MoMA, there was undoubtedly a lull in acquiring and exhibiting textiles that was consistent with a more general trend in contemporary art museums and the marginalization of work by women artists,” Kinchin says. “The situation is very different now—textiles are undoubtedly having a moment.” This fall, as part of MoMA’s re-opening lineup, Hicks’s monumental 2013–14 work for the Whitney Biennial, *Pillar of Inquiry/Supple Column*, will be part of the mixed-medium group exhibition *Surrounds: II Installations*.

Michel Gauthier, the curator of Hicks’s Pompidou retrospective, agrees with Kinchin but offers a cautionary note: “Sheila Hicks is now considered to have played a leading role in the textile recognition process, but let’s not imprison her in this category of textile artist even if it’s to make her queen,” he says. “To Hicks, textile is above all the ideal material for resisting formal reification and striving to keep the work of art alive.”

In the studio, Hicks turns her attention back to the work at hand: The wrapped panel is almost finished, and the colors have evolved from vibrant blue and green—the rich hues you might see in Morocco—to a hint of deep red. The evolution of color is determined by the ratio of colored yarn each time; more spools of one color will set the tone, but this can always change and evolve—such is the spontaneous nature of her process. “You’re making something as it is happening, and it can be changed at any moment,” she says, adding that there is never a recipe. “The genesis is [the] doing, working and thinking. That’s what I am doing all the time: I’m walking out on a plank.” ●



FIBERS OF BEING

Top, from left: A 2019 work, *Hamdollah*, hangs on a door; two scenes from the studio, including works in progress. Middle, from left: A tray of works in progress; ceramics by Rebecca Clark sit on the windowsill; a basket of unspun wool. Bottom, from left: Works in progress hang from a rack; the lush courtyard; a broomlike found object in front of containers of Chinese noodles.

FROM TOP: FAITH STERN, COURTESY OF SHEILA HICKS; PIERLUIGI PALAZZI/ALAMY