

when

SHEILA

met

SANDER

American artist Sheila Hicks' fiber-based practice incorporates traditional crafting techniques from around the world. Designer Sander Lak's New York-based label Sies Marjan builds collections rooted in the harmonious interplay of colors and textures. On a summer afternoon in Paris, GARAGE brought together these two artisans for a conversation about light, the difference between art and fashion, and upending the oppressive cycles that are thrust onto creators.

Photographer
ESTELLE HANANIA



Sheila wears SIES MARJAN and her own clothes throughout.

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SANDER LAK: *Is Paris home for you?*

SHEILA HICKS: Home is wherever I am.

SL: *I read that you went to Yale in 1954, not knowing who Josef Albers was, and that this lack of awareness was, as you described, an advantage.*

SH: It's a big advantage to just open the door and walk in—you're not intimidated that way.

SL: *I was in Charlotte, North Carolina, a month ago, because we sell Sies Marjan at a store there, and I saw a piece of yours at a museum called the Mint, and I loved it at the time but didn't even know then I'd be interviewing you! It was meant to be. You've said before that you really respect the weaving cultures that exist around the Andes, in South America, and I quote: "It's a culture that didn't have a written language. What interests me, is that they could write their language in textiles." Do you find it easier to express yourself in words or textiles? Or do you use them to express different things?*



SH: Sometimes I can express the same thing by using either. If I were unable to speak, I could make something and show it to you, and you would get the idea without my having to verbalize it. I still have time, and I'm trying to say everything I can say.

SL: *What has been the hardest thing for you to express in your work?*

SH: Invisibility. Photographers can do it, with the blank negative. If there's a photo you shot and it turns out blank that's pretty powerful; it's something you

missed. How can I do that? I can't. With my work, there's the material, and you might work it to express absence through the material. An advantage of what we do is that there's not only movement, there's also light. And with my pieces there tend to be slits and holes in the final piece. If you don't have light, you just see the façade of the piece, but as soon as you light it, a shadow gets casted, or you can see through it. And then the shadow might become more fascinating than the object.

SL: *Similar with people, as well—the shadow of them, or their absence can be more telling.*

SH: When they die, the absence becomes their existence. If you checked out and you couldn't do your next show, there'd be people waiting, but nothing would happen.

SL: *Do you ever think about what your legacy would be or of your work when you're no longer on this Earth?*

SH: I think all of the things I've made are not me, but a separate entity. Like the American opera singer Renée Fleming—she's retired from the stage but she's still out there. Her presence is felt.

SL: *Is it instinctive for you to use certain materials, colors, or shapes?*

SH: Can I ask you the same question? You go first.

SL: *For me, the instinctual part comes at the beginning when we start a collection. We begin with color, and then think, "What color works? What color doesn't work on what skin tone? What color is difficult? And what fabric?" And then we go into textiles, and every step after that is 75 percent instinct, 25 percent knowledge. When we really start building the collection through garments though, the balance of our approach shifts to the opposite. That initial compulsion gets smaller towards the end when you're finishing a collection, but I think that's because what we do as a label is product-based, as opposed to what you do.*

SH: Color comes later for me. You can't start with pure color, you start with light. Close your eyes and then try and tell me about color. How about if your product becomes art?

SL: *I don't do that—I'm not an artist. My product doesn't become art. I don't think fashion is an art form.*

SH: I think the couturier Madame Grès was an artist though. In fact, I nominated her for membership of the Royal Academy of Art at the Hague, and they accepted her. And then, it can also work the other way too; for instance, my studio shares a courtyard with the Giacometti Institute, which preserves the legacy of Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti. They just opened here and recreated his studio at another address.

SL: *Do you think you'll have something like that one day, too?*

SH: I hope not.

SL: *Why not?*

SH: Because I don't expect 14 people to be working 12 hours a day on what I leave behind. When I go to bed at night after working in my studio late, I still see all these lights burning over in their building, and it makes me think of him. I'm sure he could never have imagined that his work was going to become like a product.

SL: *But isn't that, in a way, also what art turns out to be, just maybe in a different way than I do product?*

SH: The gallery is in the marketing brigade now, and they have turned art into a full-fledged product. But I'm moving in reverse. Did I ever tell you how I took over the direction of a fashion, design, and textile magazine in 1982? *American Fabrics and Fashion*. I have photographs in it of Madame Grès when she accepted her award from the Royal Academy. She got into her chauffeured Jaguar and drove over to the Hague to attend the ceremony—and you know how they do receptions or cocktails after such things? Instead of sticking around, she went down the steps and got back into her car to drive to Paris.

SL: *Wow.*

SH: To go back to work. But she was an artist, and I nominated her as a sculptor. I could do the same to you.

SL: *Well then you'd be giving something to me that I would never give myself, let's put it that way.*

SH: You're no amateur though.

SL: *But I don't think that refusing to call oneself an artist is demeaning in my profession in any kind of way. I think what I do is really important for me, but just by not calling it art that also doesn't mean that I'm less sincere about it.*

SH: All the doors are open now—you can move easily in and out of different practices. That's why I think I got away with murder when I was editor in chief of a publication. For three years, I attended all the fashion shows and moved in all the circles around the textile industry, figuring out where it all comes from. And I saw that there was a totally invisible osmosis in what I was doing in my work and what all of the others were doing in fashion and fabrication.

SL: *Would you ever consider doing a magazine again?*

SH: I think so. We're working on a couple of ideas right now, but nobody reads anymore.

SL: *It might be a silly question, but I was wondering—because sometimes I feel the limitation of the ingredients and the boundaries within the work that I do—so I was wondering if you ever feel constrained. Do you ever feel limited by your medium?*

SH: You can't. There are no limitations. And in what you do, there are no limitations either. Try and release yourself.

SL: *Would you ever consider making clothes?*

SH: I have. I do a lot all the time.

SL: *Are there certain fibers that you prefer working in?*

SH: I like linen, and I like a lot of the new industrial fibers because they're sunproof, fireproof. These fibers don't fade or attract insects. Industry can help us a lot in terms of materials, but it's not good for artists to get involved in mass communication mediums like magazines, televisions, large-scale exhibitions—it diminishes their mystique. There are so many people who are not interested in art but are interested in other factors, or their own personal involvement in it. It's very seldom you meet someone who's really interested in art. It's also rare to meet someone who's truly interested in fashion or clothes—looking at and thinking about them—even though they're all there watching and buying and wearing. Who are the designers who really interest you?

SL: *Miuccia Prada, Rei Kawakubo...*

SH: I was the first person who interviewed Kawakubo, and it was for my magazine.

SL: *Wow, did you enjoy that?*

SH: I tried to help her because she was so sad from the French trashing her after she came from Japan to do her first show here in the 1980s, when she was young, full of hope and ambition. She was devastated, so I said to one of the people with her, "What would cheer her up before she leaves Paris? Would she like to meet somebody? Who does she admire? Who does she like?" She said, "Madame Grès."

SL: *She's really good with color actually. She really is. She just doesn't use it as much. I think the way that she is radical is she keeps stubbornly doing her own thing, and maybe has the same kind of punk attitude that you have, which I find really fascinating. I think there's a clear link between the two of us because we're using the same foundation and materials, but working towards completely different end results. And I think also what is very interesting about that is that as a designer, especially now, the amount of work we have to do and the amount of newness you have to put out in the world, it's so immense that it kind of takes away sometimes from the actual development of the work.*

SH: Why? You can just slow down your machine.

SL: *No, we can't, that's the thing. We cannot slow down our machine because fashion is really hooked on dates and a schedule that you cannot go around. And if you don't stick to the same calendar you basically won't get people buying your product for the stores. It's the sort of cycle that once you're in it you cannot get out of it. We end up with very little time.*

SH: People can corrupt the cycle, like you do on your cellphone: You can say repeat, and you can give a command to delete or drop five spaces. It can give you a



new sentence structure in three minutes.

SL: *It doesn't work like that in fashion.*

SH: I don't buy into that.

SL: *Why?*

SH: Because I've seen it done otherwise. I've seen people go into a meditative state of mind and edit ideas that they think they have to get out in 14 hours. And instead they rethink them, realizing they don't have to be in the rat race. They can look through or into another window, like in this courtyard; by just switching seats with you and looking in a different direction from a different perspective, or getting off the train at a different stop. You might say, "What the hell? I'm not tired. I can get off at this station." So I don't get into this routine where everything has to be, like, people shouting on the telephone, "I've got to have it by noon!"

SL: *I think that's also really where our industries are different, though. You don't have the same kind of strict deadlines.*

SH: I create against orders. But I also have clients waiting for things on certain dates, like you have.

SL: *Can you imagine having to create works every three months on exactly the same timeline or schedule?*

SH: Easy. Easy. It's a cycle. It's cyclic thinking—people who have to give. Teachers are up against those kinds of cycles, too.

SL: *You should be in fashion. You could change the way we work.*

SH: This was a crucial week in Paris for students taking exams. But their new cycle starts immediately the week after, because they have to prepare for where they are going to be in September. What country? What school? What language will they be speaking? There are multiple choices today. You had mentioned seven countries to me, either where your parents were from or where you lived growing up—what determined that you're operating in the language and the place you are now? Did somebody make you do that, or did you choose it? You chose it.

SL: *Right, of course.*

SH: It's like the train, like the metro. You know what stop you're planning to get off at. But all the way along the way keep your ears and eyes open to figure out what you're doing and why. And then modulate or modify accordingly. Today, this afternoon, you may change your program completely because you may run across the opportunity of your life.

SL: *Like interviewing you!* **G**