



## NARRATIVE THREAD

Sheila Hicks has taken inspiration from decades spent travelling the world for her bright, dramatic artworks. She talks to *Caroline Roux*. Portraits by *Brigitte Lacombe*





Left: Hicks in her Paris studio. Right: creating a vast bas relief for the Ford Foundation building in 1966. Far right: the bas relief being installed. Below: 'Escalade Beyond Chromatic Lands', 2016-17



‘THREAD IS THE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE. IT COULD BECOME A HAMMOCK, OR A FISHING NET, OR A HOME’

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In 1977, the US artist Sheila Hicks took part in an exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, alongside other major names such as Christo, Antoni Tàpies and Alexander Calder, displaying her fibre-based artworks. That same year, she worked on the set design for Stanley Kubrick's film *The Shining*, making hand-woven carpets for the interior of the Overlook Hotel. What might have been an unusual mix of activities for another artist was quite normal for her. In her career, she has crossed so many of the boundaries by which an artist is traditionally defined - sculpture, craft, fine art and commerce - that she's basically wiped them out.

She has exhibited and travelled all over the world - Chile, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Japan. Her artworks, from small experiments woven on a handheld frame to huge piles of brightly coloured fibre bundles and lavish hanging columns, have been shown and acquired by museums everywhere.

At Machu Picchu in Peru, she slept in the ruins so she could rise early to take people-free photographs ("And that was 1959!"). In Saudi Arabia in 1980, she set up an art programme, wore an abaya and designed palm-tree tapestries, one of which is now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York ("I was scared as hell. Then I was too busy to care"). She has created fabrics for US design company Knoll and huge wall works to decorate Manhattan restaurants and Mexican hotels. She speaks English, French and Spanish and can write in Arabic. "You should try it! It's all about those sinuous curves. It's a wonderful feeling," she says in her Paris studio as we chat over Zoom.

Now 87, Hicks is working harder than ever. Everything in her huge and varied life is united by thread. She entered Yale's undergraduate art department as a painter in 1954, inspired by colour-field artists of the time such as Barnett Newman and Helen Frankenthaler, with their dramatic abstract planes of colour, but almost immediately was introduced to the rich history of

pre-Columbian textiles. There was no going back. "It opened up a whole world of human-made things," she says.

Hicks sees fibre in its multiple forms as an integral part of life in every corner of the world. "Thread is the universal language," she says. "It could become a hammock, or a fishing net, or a hat, or a home... It's the first thing you feel in the morning when you wake up in your bed sheets, then you step on a rug, you pick up a towel..." It also responded to her deep desire to work with colour. To apply paint to a canvas is simply to create a coating, but when making compositions with threads, the colour permeates the work. As Hicks says, "Thread is very friendly with colour."

**Born in 1934 in Hastings, Nebraska, where her family ran a general store, Hicks has based herself in Paris since 1964, even if she has been continually on the road. The past 14 months "is the longest time I've had breakfast looking at the same view for many years", she tells me. "It's been very productive."**

This is lucky, as she has shows in London and Milan opening soon, and in July she's returning to Zurich, where she had her first European show in 1964, for a big exhibition at its Design Museum. A major show at the Hepworth Wakefield in the north of England that should have launched in 2020 has now been shunted to spring 2021. She is typically cryptic about its contents: "We've got lots of hilarious ideas. But I'm excited about it because of the architecture of the galleries, with interesting spaces and unusual light. There are windows in the roof; it's not a closed cell."

Hicks's London show is with Alison Jacques, who has worked with the artist for 10 years. Among the pieces will be a panoply of her Boules and Comets: pebbly bundles of woven cotton, wool and linen that might contain mementoes in their hearts, "like Peruvian mummy bundles" do. There will be three showstopping Lianes - dense, cascading vines of linen, wool, sisal, raffia or cotton - that pour down from the ceiling and ▶



◀ sometimes pool on the floor. Wooden panels wound around with chromatically graduating thread will hang from the rafters. These last are close cousins of Mark Rothko (one of her favourite painters) and Gerhard Richter in their pulsating colours, but are uniquely and specifically Hicks's in their slick yet earthy materiality.

"She's an eternal optimist, a mentor to me," says Jacques, who wakes up to the sight of a large Hicks blush-rose panel in her bedroom every morning. "A lot of artists working with fibre and thread were, at least until recently, regarded as stereotypically female and were overlooked. But that's never happened with Sheila. She's shaped her own language, created her own world." Collectors now pay \$650,000 or more for a Lianes work, and \$100,000 for a Comet.

Her success, though, goes back years. From the 1960s she was working with the most highly regarded architects of the time - a vast bas-relief panel for the auditorium of Kevin Roche's Ford Foundation building; another for Eero Saarinen's TWA terminal at John F Kennedy International airport. By 1972, she was one of only two women among 70 artists in an exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris designed to put France back on the cultural map. In the 1980s she led a Unesco-

backed team to establish a design centre in Cape Town, and the mayor of Jerusalem invited her to bring her skills to Israel. "I've always gone to places to do things and because I was invited," she says. "Not to hang out."

Along the way, she has incorporated the fruits of her travels - sensory, technical and anthropological - into her work. References to everything from natural phenomena, such as rivers and trees, to states of mind are encoded into her woven panels. Her colour palette comes from the world around her. Her favourite brilliant yellow is inspired by Normandy's rapeseed fields; the hot-pink Solferino is a legacy of her time spent with the master of Mexican modernism Luis Barragán - a man who showed her what happens when planes of colour and architecture combine.

**Hicks has never taken French citizenship.**

"I never even asked," she says. "I read the other day that Picasso applied for citizenship and was refused, so maybe it's for the best. I'm quite high up on their Ministry of Culture list, though." (She is an *officier* of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.) She has been married three times; to a beekeeper in Mexico in 1960; then to the painter Enrique Zañartu in 1965. In 1989, she married the lawyer



Clockwise from above: Hicks in 1970; 'Wave Wave Wave', 2021; 'No Turning Back', 2021; 'Lianes Ivoires', 2020

Melvin Bedrick, whom she had first met at Yale in the 1950s. "Yale gave me a doctorate last year," says Hicks. "And we both went back there. It was very strange... knowing that everyone influential to me had all gone."

Bedrick lives in New York and Hicks in Paris, and theirs has (until recently) been a commuting relationship. "I didn't mind getting married again, but I wasn't leaving Paris" is her explanation.

**Yale has pervaded Hicks's career. It was**

there she met the artist Josef Albers, as he was beginning to work on his Homages to the Square - a series of more than 2,000 works in which he endlessly explored the juxtaposition of colours through squares within squares. Then Yale art historian George Kubler introduced her to the complex world of pre-Columbian textiles and ignited her fascination with thread. "When Albers saw me making textile works for Kubler, he insisted I meet his wife Anni," says Hicks, referring to the weaver, a renowned artist in her own right. "He forced us to meet. She took it in good sport, but we didn't become friends."

She also attended lectures in the architecture department (teachers included Louis Kahn) which, along with her relationship with Barragán, has led to an unerring ability to work within, and not be subjugated by, an architectural context. In 2015, she was the only artist allowed by Dan Graham to make an intervention in his all-glass Waterloo Sunset Pavilion outside the Hayward Gallery.

"I filled it like a fish bowl, with mounds and mounds of fibre," she says. "People came every day; some would just sit there surrounded by all this fibre and colour, and work on their laptops." At the Venice Biennale in 2016, her vast installation "Escalade beyond Chromatic Lands" became the emblematic work of the entire event. The hundreds of pneumatic bales in shades of turquoise, orange, purple, scarlet and lime seemed on the point of taking over the gritty interior of the Arsenale building. Piled and pushed up against the huge back wall of the cavernous space, they looked like they might surge forth at any moment - a tsunami of brilliantly coloured cushions. The piece, since acquired by a collector, is now on its way to a museum in Oslo. "It's going to brighten up their winter," remarks Hicks wryly.

Since the 1970s, Hicks has worked and lived at the exquisite Cour de Rohan in Paris's 6th arrondissement, a series of buildings around three courtyards that date back to the 14th century. "Look, here's where they invented the guillotine," she says, Zooming me around the space and pointing her phone down an archway. She shows me the courtyard where her team often works outdoors in the summer. Right now it's filled with clematis and wisteria, but there are pots of geraniums and yellow climbing roses that will bloom soon. The young artists who make up her studio come from all over the world. "Korean, Greek, Breton... It's important that everyone is from a different nationality or culture," she says. "That way we learn from each other every day."

"It's like a beehive," says Jacques, "and she's the queen bee. When you've been to visit, you come away feeling like you've tasted honey." **FT**

Sheila Hicks's 'Music to My Eyes' is at Alison Jacques Gallery, London, June 4-July 31; [alisonjacquesgallery.com](http://alisonjacquesgallery.com)

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