Sheila Hicks
ALISON JACQUES GALLERY

Visiting Paris-based artist Sheila Hicks’s first solo show in the UK, “Pêcher dans la Rivière” (Fishing in the River), was like entering a seductive subterranean realm. In the titular installation, 1989-2013, some thirteen feet of creamy linen threads are wrapped together to resemble rippling waves. As one walked around the rectangular piece, its surface appeared to heave; shadows appeared and disappeared, as if cast by moving threads of sunlight on a sandy riverbed. When the fabric filaments caught the light filtering through the windows, they shimmered like schools of silver-scaled fish dancing through sparkling water. Contributing to the underwater ambiance were five antique fondes (eel-fishing forks) entwined within the flowing linen. If references to watery worlds ran through Hicks’s display, so did allusions to the sands (and strands) of time.

Hicks’s riverine exhibition of twenty-three (mostly) new artworks encompassed sculptures of cascading skeins of silk, knotted nylon, and bundles of flaxen linen. Compass Arctica, 2012-13, was representative. An ivory mound of linen threads (mimicking a slightly grubby cloud) is pinned down by a stonemason’s old compass. These material-centered voyages continued in a side room filled with miniature woven confections from the series “Minimes,” 1956–, which simultaneously resemble abstract paintings and the squashy samples of cloth found in fabric stores. In one such work, My Way or Your Way, 2013, maroon cotton, metallic fibers, and the glinting shells of razor clams entwine to create a tidy tapestry.

Hicks was born in Nebraska in 1934, but her artworks (or “unbiased weaves,” as she calls them) move fluidly through time and space, picking up references to ancient cultures along the way. While an MFA student at Yale (she graduated in 1957), Hicks studied pre-Columbian textiles under George Kubler; in 1959, she went to Mexico, where she learned about the Moorish influences on the country’s Spanish colonial architecture. The year 1965 saw her in India for the first time, working in Kerala with the Commonwealth Trust, a weaving company, using materials such as sissal, hemp, and jute to fabricate art. All these cultural influences criss-crossed at this London show. For instance, the “Minimes” were woven on hand-held wooden frames, like those used in India. My Way’s intricate textures echo the facades of medieval Moorish monuments. And the yellow-and-saffron checkerboard pattern of Codex, Mar, Mar, Mar, 2013, riffs on Inca textiles, in which lighter blocks of color are customarily enmeshed with darker ones. The work’s threads contain porcupine quills, which recall knitting needles. Cleverly, the piece also echoes the geometry of modernist painting; might its sun-hued squares allude to Josef Albers’s 1972 portfolio of prints Formulations: Articulations I and II? It is well known that Hicks encountered the Bauhaus master during her time at Yale, but what is less known is that she also studied with his wife, the textile artist Anni Albers.

Hicks’s weaving together of non-Western traditions and archetypal modernist forms—nay to mention her pairing of abstract painting and “ethnic” handicrafts—has often worked to her disadvantage. In the 1960s, her work was defined as “the new tapestry”; by the ’70s and ’80s, it was termed “fiber art.” Either way, it often found itself labeled (and looked down upon) as design or craft. While other thread-obsessed female practitioners have overcome the prejudice against what was once dubbed “women’s work,” Hicks’s productions have yet to be as widely celebrated as they should be. Here, Hicks seemed to give the art establishment a prod. In Pierced, 2013, a square of white-painted linen is perforated with holes. Is this a reference to Lucio Fontana’s signature tagli, the cuts he made into canvas with a knife? If Fontana’s slashes ruptured he boundaries between painting and real space, perhaps Pierced aims to puncture those dividing art and craft.

—Zehra Jumabhoy