A strong advocate for craft as art: Sheila Hicks' Pêcher dans la Rivière at Alison Jacques Gallery

A beautiful exhibition that celebrates the personal quality of linen and weaving while asserting its capacity to communicate universal ideas, just as the supposed “fine arts” do. With an art career stretching over 6 decades, Sheila Hicks at Alison Jacques Gallery is a must-see.

Sophie Keyes, 5th June 2013

The name Sheila Hicks is familiar to any student of art history who has dabbled in the contentious discussion as to whether craft can be considered art. A typically "feminine pursuit", craft was relegated to the purely decorative and thought not to possess the intellectuality, or the skill, of the supposed "fine arts" (painting, sculpture, architecture, music and poetry). However, the Arts and Crafts movement in the late 19th century/early 20th century shook up these definitions, blurring the line between art and applied art.

Hicks is an American artist born in 1934, and her utilisation of fibre materials to create stunning artworks has made a solid impact on this debate, particularly their installation on the walls of significant modern art galleries around the world amongst "conventional" media. This exhibition, Pêcher dans la Rivière at Alison Jacques Gallery, is her first UK solo show, which seems outrageous given not only the sheer volume of her artistic output but also her palpable talent.

At times I found this exhibition slightly unbalanced and unresolved, particularly the layout of the main gallery in its installation of three large works that were at the same time close but far away from each other. But one is first drawn in by Procession Tumuco, a hanging work of long linen skeins in similar – but different – hues that when clustered together create an undulating tonal plane. For some reason it reminded me of Helen Frankenthaler's gorgeous soak-stained abstract expressionist canvases. Supposedly inspired by the vast palette for skin tone used by painters throughout the centuries, I was captivated by the presence of contrasting colours which, when assembled with similar tones, manage to blend in yet make a mark on the overall effect. The depth created by the overlapping skeins is truly beautiful and maintains a softness and tactility which other materials lack.

Sophie Keyes, One Stop Arts, 1 June 2013
This tangibility is also present in the sculptural work *Compass Arica*, but instead of seeming light and lively, the chameleon qualities of linen are revealed in their solid mass atop a white plinth. One can sense the weight of these materials, especially with the edges hacked to resemble linen bricks that are at once velvety and firm. The inclusion of a stonemason’s iron compass is slightly bewildering, and so is the title. *Arica* is a northern port city in Chile, and it is perhaps its mild desert climate that inspired the warm pinks and ivories of the linen.

The exhibition title’s namesake is perhaps the least successful major work, as it is too literal in its use of materials. The attempt to create a flowing, eel-filled river using white and cream linen and the random incorporation of ancient "Foines" (eel-fishing forks) falls short of the neighbouring glorious compositions.

A smaller room contains framed woven compositions, *Minimes*, and while I was initially underwhelmed after the cacophony of colour and texture in the main room, upon further reading of the exhibition text, I discovered they have all been woven using the same hand-held Indian wooden frame and that they “reflect memories of places and moments lived over the last eight decades”. With this supplementary information, they take on an element of magic in containing snippets of history; and what at first seemed to be random additions of glitter thread now take on their own stories of potential romance or success. Many take on the qualities of an aerial photograph filled with patchwork fields. However, the only double *Minime* were two white linen creations entitled *Monsieur et Madame* and one can easily read into each delicate weave – from the slight rip in the waist for *Madame* and the balancing of tight and loose across the two to communicate a well-adjusted relationship.

To close the exhibition were two paintings and another fibre work, but these seemed out of place in relation to the eloquent *Minimes*. Overall, though, while a bit more thought and editing may have been needed to create a successful total experience, this is an exhibition filled with stunning individual pieces.

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