SHEILA HICKS TAKES THE POMPIDOU

The eighty-three-year-old Nebraska-born Parisian fills the museum with bales and balls of her fibre art.

By Lauren Collins

“At eighty-three years old, Sheila Hicks, born in the summer of 1934, in Hastings, Nebraska, is the artist that everyone is fighting over,” the French newspaper Le Figaro wrote recently, listing Hicks as one of twenty cultural figures who would “make Paris in 2018.” Hicks has been on a streak. Her monumental works have recently appeared on the High Line (fibre-wrapped tubes like giant pool noodles) and in the gardens of Versailles (where she cocooned a statue of Proserpine in blue, purple, and orange ribbons). “Life Lines,” an exhibition devoted to her seven decades of work, opened last month at the Pompidou, in Paris.

The tempting storyline is that of a long-neglected genius finally having her moment. But Hicks has been a star all along. She was just out of Yale, where she studied with Josef Albers, and living in Mexico, where Luis Barragán helped install her first show, when the Museum of Modern Art acquired “Blue Letter,” a double-sided woven panel on which she’d inscribed hieroglyphs by varying each row of weft. Told the other day that the fashion label Proenza Schouler had cited her as the inspiration for its Fall 2018 collection, she shrugged and said, “Every year, there’s one of them.”
Hicks's forebears had a general store in Nebraska. The family moved around: Detroit, Winnetka. She went to France and met Raoul d'Harcourt, the author of “Textiles of Ancient Peru and their Techniques,” a book she'd been obsessed with at Yale, to the point of choosing textile over painting as her preferred medium. Paris has been her base since 1964, in a life that has included marrying a beekeeper, and then a Chilean artist; having two children; collaborating with Stanley Kubrick on “The Shining”; working as a textile designer for Knoll; creating bas-reliefs for Eero Saarinen's TWA terminal at J.F.K.; and spending time in Morocco, Japan, and India, where the ponytails of schoolgirls gave her the idea for a series of braided wall hangings. After two husbands, she met a lawyer who lives in New York. She recalled, “When we married, I said, ‘Am I getting married again? O.K. I can get married, but I can’t divorce Paris.’” The couple commute.

The other day, Hicks was at the Pompidou, watching a series of documentary films that the curators had resurrected as part of the show. “A friend who saw it called me and said it looked like Julia Child was in the kitchen,” she said. “Pass me the salt and give me the vinegar!”

“You see the junk all over my studio?” she said, when the camera panned her atelier, settling on a piece made of several hundred nurses' blouses, which she'd dyed in a washing machine, flayed, and then stitched back together into a collage. “It’s like drawing or sculpting with the scissors.”

There was footage from Saudi Arabia, where in the nineteen-eighties Hicks brought a huge, dune-like tapestry that she'd made for King Saud University. “Look at this, ten people weaving sand!” she exclaimed. She went on, in that dry, twinkly way of the great women of her generation, “People don’t know what to do with my work. I mean, if someone told you you inherited this, what would you do with it?”

Since her student days, Hicks has carried around a pocket loom that she uses to make "miniwe"—little things on which to try out new techniques, or just to meditate. (“War ist das, girl?” she recalls Albers saying, of the loom.) “The only time I didn’t do them was in 1988, after I stepped off the curb into a gutter in New York. I had screws in my right leg like the Eiffel Tower.”

A curator stuck his head in and said that they were bringing in extra benches, owing to the show's popularity.

“You thought four people might come to see it,” Hicks said. She stepped out of the alcove in which the film was being projected. Cords that she had constructed from linen, synthetic raffia, wool, cotton, and sisal hung from the rafters like gnarled vines. Strands of acrylic seemed to gush from the ceiling, pooling into reservoirs on the floor. In a corner, Hicks had piled bales of brightly colored fibre—orange, yellow—into a bulbous formation that called up all kinds of associations, from mountaineering to McDonald’s ball pits. (A child psychologist once commissioned a few pieces for use as therapeutic tools.)
“It was about changing the shape of the room,” Hicks said. “The room was a cube, so I took away this feeling of being in a box.” The piece was called “The Saffron Sentinel,” which led a visitor to ask why she had chosen the color.

“That’s a silly question,” she replied. “Let’s go by process of elimination. Are you going to do gray? Honey, like the floor? How about blue, like the sky outside?” Saffron it was, then.

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Lauren Collins began working at The New Yorker in 2003 and became a staff writer in 2008. She is the author of “When in French: Love in a Second Language.” Read more »