Wisdom: Artist Sheila Hicks on Success, Intuition, and "Not Wanting" a Legacy

I grew up in a car.

Because it was the Depression, I was born in 1934, and my father was seeking employment. So he packed his wife and his kids into a car in Nebraska and moved around the midwest, working. I had a fantastic upbringing—it was a migratory existence: modest but full of adventure. My brother and I learned how to play games and entertain ourselves in the backseat of the car. We
saw a lot of this country during the ’30s, until the war broke out, and then my father moved to Detroit and became an expert in ball and roller bearings.

He worked for the government during the war, working and stocking ball bearings for all the things that were being manufactured for the war effort in Detroit. And then as soon as the war was over, we moved to Chicago. Because my father was contacted and employed by the former sort of stock broker for bearings in the United States, and since he was maybe the only one who knew about where we had hidden all the ball bearings in the war, buried in various parts of the United States, in case we were bombed.

I remember all-night conversations on the telephone [with people from] all over the world about ball bearings. I was really happy when I went to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) one day, and I saw the catalog for the design department. What was on the cover of the design department of the MoMA? A ball bearing.

I think that influenced me because he would say things to me like, “What goes around comes around—everything turns on a ball bearing, from a watch to a locomotive”—that’s when watches were run mechanically. And you know what it is, it’s two concentric circles that turn all the time with tiny little balls. It is a fascinating design. I think I’m sort of programmed like a ball bearing, of working within a culture, taking into account all the different [elements] and working within it, making sure the whole thing turns even though it’s two directions at the same time. That’s probably the key to my upbringing.

My mother’s thing was remnants. Her father founded the general store in Hastings, Nebraska. The general store meant everything from buttons to seeds. She loved to make something out of something leftover from something else. She helped me make all my clothes out of things we’d find. In that area of the world, you’re so proud when people are industrious.
I was very successful very early in life, so I never really gave it much thought. I just kept doing what I liked to do, and it seemed to fly. I always tell young people, "Do what you like to do! It'll probably fly. If you’re doing something you don’t like to do, it probably won’t fly."

Don’t look up to somebody just because they’re successful. You should mistrust your culture. You should mistrust, I think, the people who dominate the cultural hierarchy, because they may be in place for the wrong reasons. So I don’t look up to successful artists, and I don’t look up to successful designers. I just look to people who are doing things that somehow grab my attention and I might be interested in.

Success has a lot to do with what you have access to and how you use it. If you’re healthy, you’re halfway there. If you have the benefit of some family and friends who are supportive, you’re another halfway home. And then if, economically, you have the possibility of eating and being housed somehow, you’re in a very small minority of the population. If you don’t figure it out from there, you’re a real loser in all senses.

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Lainey R. Sidell, *Surface Magazine*, 14 May 2019
My works are not signed—there’s no identification or signatures on paintings. For me, they have to live on their own. Let it live on its own—live or die. Survive, if it can.

People want authentication, and most of the big [questions are]: “Is it a tapestry? Is it not a tapestry? What is it? Is it art? Is it a craft?” Well, when Sotheby’s calls and they wanna know how many copies were made, I know they can make more. But I’m not a fan of this tapestry tradition where they just keep knocking them out, because I’ve sort of had a running, ongoing fight with the tapestry manufacturing mafia.

A few times, I almost did sink. But now we’re in a beautiful museum that could care less whether it’s a tapestry or not a tapestry. It’s sort of like, “Let’s open the discussion, and let’s see where we’re going and where we are.”

I wanted to take away the layers like veils and go into the subject of textile, tapestry, and art. Where are we going? We still don’t know. But it’s worth asking.

I’m having a wonderful time experimenting, and I couldn’t care less whether they’re gonna label it. Whether it’s gonna be acceptable to the art community, or to the craft community, or to no community. It’s sort of like, “Get this lady out of here … ”

I like to play and work and invent things that have crossover meaning.

Children usually know where to go. Kids are intuitive. Yesterday, as we were leaving a children’s workshop—I loved it—we said, “Would you like to put your art up with the others?” Someone said, “No, I want to take mine home.” Another one said, “Oh, it’s like a sleepover! They can sleep here overnight and I’ll come and get it next week, okay, mommy?” And so they’re nestled [with the other works], and they improved the piece considerably, for me, because they took it one step further.
[Color is important to me], probably because I think I’m going blind. [Yes, I’ve always worked with a lot of color] but I’ve always been afraid, because in my mother’s family there’s been a history of blindness.

[My works] are all the same style. The style being ... timeless.

The myth is that you gauge the sophistication of any culture, including ours, by what the archaeologists tell us in terms of what materials were available and how they were worked. That’s how you know the level of sophistication of society, and people do that with materials like textile and thread universally, [whether it’s] Chinese, Indonesian, pre-Incan, Andean, or pre-Hispanic.

I don’t honor any borders. The problem is not war, it’s demography: The population explosion will end by sinking us, and we will no longer exist by virtue of killing ourselves by overpopulation. So this idea of you can’t let any more people in because you’re threatened by the population explosion—there’s probably some basis to this. But it sounds to me like an inevitability, that we’re going to destruct with our methods of living. We’re in the process of our own destruction. We can make art in the meantime.

I don’t want to go do something I know how to do. I want to go do something I don’t know how to do. I don’t want a legacy. I just want to have fun while I’m here.

[Photos: Zachary Balber Courtesy Bass Museum Miami]