
For over seven decades, Sheila Hicks has devised a diversity of forms in fiber from the perspective of painting and photography, including weavings, sculptures, architectural commissions, and monumental installations. Her abstractions triumph and transcend hierarchies of medium, gender, and geography. Pioneering contemporary art’s global turn, Hicks embraced opportunities in novel exhibition, manufacturing, and design contexts in Latin America, Africa, India, Japan, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, well before such engagement became the norm. Below, she reflects on her upbringing in the American Midwest through the prism of two new exhibitions, “Campo Abierto [Open Field],” a survey of historic and more recent work at the Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach, which is on view until September 29, 2019, and “Sheila Hicks: Seize, Weave Space,” which features new site-specific installations and is on view at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas until August 18, 2019.

I ALWAYS SAY I GREW UP IN A CAR. In the Midwest, during the Depression, we were migratory. My father was moving about for work. So my brother and I learned how to play games and...
entertain ourselves in the back seat. We know probably most of the middle part of the United States, from Nebraska to Iowa to Missouri to Texas to Kansas. We lived in Oklahoma, Tennessee, Kentucky, Florida, and Louisiana. I remember seeing Louis Armstrong at Mardi Gras in New Orleans when I was a little kid. So I had a fantastic upbringing that was a migratory existence, modest and full of adventure until the war broke out. Then my father moved to Detroit and became an expert in ball bearings, roller bearings. He worked for the government during the war, locating and buying and stocking ball bearings for the war effort, for all the things that were being manufactured. Then, as soon as the war was over, we moved to Chicago because he was contacted by and employed by the foremost stockbroker of ball bearings in the Midwest, maybe even in all of the United States. My father was the one who knew all about where we had hidden all the ball bearings during the war, buried in different parts of the United States in case we were bombed.

So I was really happy when I went to the Museum of Modern Art one day and I saw the 1934 catalogue for “Machine Art,” an exhibition produced by the design department—because what was on the cover? It was a self-aligning ball bearing, “good design.” I think that influenced me. Because my father would say things like, “Well, everything turns on ball bearings,” from a watch to a locomotive—just on two concentric circles that turn in different directions all the time, with balls all around. It is a fascinating design. I think that I was programmed to be like a ball bearing, working within a culture, making sure the whole thing turns, even though it’s going in two directions at the same time. That’s probably the key to my upbringing.

My mother’s thing was remnants. Her father had the general store in Hastings, Nebraska. The general store meant everything from buttons to tractors. Farms surrounded Hastings. My mother loved to make something out of something that was left over from something else. So she helped me make all my clothes out of things that we’d find. She was a forager, and everyone was so proud; in that area of the world, people are proudly industrious in a way without showing off. Even Warren Buffet has this philosophy of not being ostentatious. So that’s why showing my work in Miami is such a shock. It’s amazing. And it’s a shock in Dallas, too. I think it’s a little more hard-core in Texas: They’re profoundly proud of their wealth, their collections, their houses, and how they live their lives. It’s not like someone from the Midwest who doesn’t show off.

I don’t honor any borders. Claude Lévi-Strauss said the problem is not wars; 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 that you can’t let any more people in because we’re threatened by the population explosion—there’s probably some basis to it. But it sounds to me like inevitability. We may auto-destruct. Meanwhile, we make art. Or as people in Miami say: Live today because who knows what’s happening tomorrow.

— As told to Grant Johnson