



Left:
Exhibition views of “Sheila Hicks: 50 Years” at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. All photos by Aaron Iglar/Greenhouse Media.

Opposite page:
Top: Exhibition views of “Sheila Hicks: 50 Years” at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. All photos by Aaron Iglar/GreenhouseMedia.

Below:
Sheila Hicks
May I Have This Dance?
2002–03
Installation view
Photo by Aaron Iglar/Greenhouse Media

“SHEILA HICKS: 50 YEARS”

BY SHONQUIS MORENO

Rich with wild manipulations of color, texture, and proportion, “Sheila Hicks: 50 Years” is a gorgeous exhibition of work by the Nebraska-born, Paris-based artist. It reveals the extent to which Hicks became a pioneer in freeing weaving from the wall, even allowing it to burst exuberantly out of itself, and how her deep textures appear to be compositions made up of light and shadow. But the show is limited in reflecting her full range. Largely absent are two extremes of an extreme artist — her painting and photography — along with her commercial work.

The ICA exhibition space’s diminutive size was not to blame; some of her largest pieces were shown to great effect, one of them, the languid *May I Have This Dance?* (2002–03) cascading from the 40-foot ceiling and over the floor. Is this bias a failing of the curators? Also doubtful. Hicks was closely involved with every aspect of the exhibition’s creation. Instead, it may illustrate just how profoundly Hicks herself does not consider weaving merely weaving. “You may be too stuck on the idea of weaving,” Hicks parried in response to a series of questions regarding her work. “None of the works are about ‘weaving,’ except metaphorically.” And yet the metaphors are easily lost on the visitor: Of the approximately 130 pieces on display, more than 100 of them are weavings.

Hicks’s sculptures and bas-reliefs are well represented and nicely displayed, but the show includes only one of her paintings (*Red-Blue Painting*, 1956), along with several gouaches and ink drawings. Furthermore, Hicks has always mediated her experiences through photography — it has mightily influenced the texture and proportions of her work — but only

one of her photographs is on view. She relates photography to her textile work in one of two documentaries her son shot in 1985, but the screen hung in the lobby, the editing is disjunctive,



and it was difficult to hear the audio in this highly trafficked interstitial space, which abuts the street.

There is also a dearth of her commercial work, including her collaborations with the likes of Florence Knoll. Hicks is interesting in part because she moved with such alacrity, not just among craft, design, and art, but between studio art and mass production. In a workshop in India where she spent time between 1965 and 1974 studying local practices (a habit that has been a vast resource for her no-holds-barred experimentation throughout her career), Hicks produced functional textiles, woven by the yard, wall hangings sold in design

shops like Georg Jensen and Crate & Barrel — and then, when the workday was finished, would cobble together scraps salvaged from the workshop floor to make art pieces.

The show coyly downplays Hicks’s sometimes-radical material investigations. Shown here to fine effect were pieces consisting of stainless steel fiber that is as iridescent as an oil slick. The recent miniature weaving, or *minime*, *Triumph* (2010), threaded with human hair, along with a sock whose knit served as her warp and weft in *Footprints* (1978), hint clearly at the breadth of her explorations. But when “paper” is listed in the wall text for *Etiquette* (2009), it actually refers to paper price tags; infant girdles from a hospital laundry provided the textiles for *Raining Baby Bands* (1978), but are listed merely as “cotton.”

That said, the show’s inclusion of 62 of Hicks’s miniatures is laudable: These tiny pieces (up to 30 centimeters in length) are the sites of the artist’s greatest virtuosity. They are where she took her first steps in mimicking, mastering, and then transcending the rules of weaving techniques she picked up during exhaustive travels and from an extensive study of historical traditions. In 1960 she built her first improvised lap loom by hammering nails into the top and bottom edges of painting stretchers and began to doodle, sketch, and flout convention. Through these works, she returns repeatedly to the extraordinary “structural intelligence” and “very original engineering,”



as she describes it, of the pre-Incaic textiles on which she wrote her Yale master's thesis in 1959. This is the only place in the show where we see inspiration, experimentation, and innovation side by side.

The historical context given to Hicks's work in the Cliff Notes-sized exhibition text runs thin: Is Hicks important because she was the first to mix found materials, to pluck painting out of the frame and take tapestry off the wall? She was certainly in the advance guard. The ICA show was unexpectedly rounded out by the inclusion of a Hicks piece in the engrossing spring exhibition "Unpainted Paintings" at New York's Luxembourg & Dayan gallery. A cacophony of abstract art from the last half of the 20th century, it featured work by artists like Otto Muehl, Robert Rauschenberg, and Lucio Fontana, who had put aside paint and canvas to broaden, subvert, or attack the picture plane, using materials like urine, flowers, Kool-Aid, fire, expanded polystyrene — and fiber. Hicks, too, escaped the canvas, and then escaped the warp, weft, and selvedge of the loom and finally, coming full circle, escaped the wall again in order to continue to make what are, essentially, paintings. Any fan of her work should be interested in how the idea has passed through and between her multiple media. Although "50 Years" is beautiful, it gives us the destination, not the journey, and Hicks's work is all about what happened while we were making our way there.

"Sheila Hicks: 50 Years" will travel to the Mint Museum of Art in Charlotte, North Carolina, where it will be on view from October 1, 2011, to January 29, 2012.