



**WEAVE GOT IT MADE**

This page, Sheila Hicks in front of *Ver mala* bas-relief, linen, 2009. The artist, who studied under Josef Albers in the 1950s, is based between Paris and New York

Opposite, *Cour de Rohan*, *Cascade Rose VII*, linen, 2010

# WARP FACTOR

*On a 50-year mission, Sheila Hicks has boldly taken textiles where no textiles have gone before*

PHOTOGRAPHY: GIULIA NONI WRITER: SHONQUIS MORENO



There is a creative synaesthesia that marks American artist Sheila Hicks as a master: her tapestries are architecture, her architecture is sculpture, her sculptures are textiles, her textiles are paintings and photographs, and her photographs are colour studies. Coming of age in the late 1950s, when the gulf between design and art, and art and craft, was profound and seemingly intractable, Hicks refused any categorisation at all. She didn't say it; she just did it, which makes it tempting to think that Sheila Hicks has got balls. And they're not made of yarn.

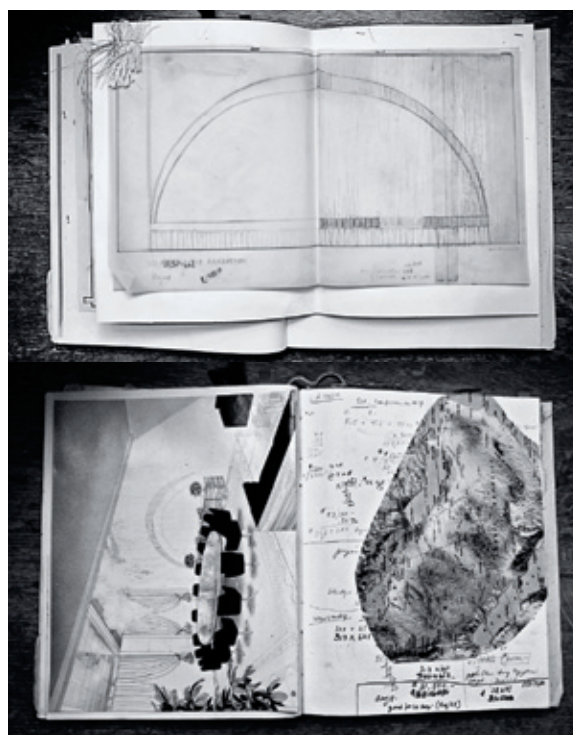
This month, 'Sheila Hicks: 50 Years', a 100-piece retrospective of the artist's career, opens at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Philadelphia, demonstrating a fearless versatility. Hicks has woven together the decorative arts, art, architecture and design. She switches dexterously between monumental sculptures and tapestries, and 30cm weavings called minimes, assembled from everything from soba noodles to goat hair, to the discarded linen socks of French Carmelite nuns.

In the 1950s Hicks trained as a painter at Yale, where neither ceramics nor glassware, never mind weaving, was taught. At the time, there was a powerful bias against craft. But Hicks, as she observed the knitting of painted lines on her canvases, began to wonder why the same couldn't be done with thread. Halfway through her undergraduate degree, her tutor, Bauhaus master Josef Albers, whose wife Anni was a gifted weaver, persuaded Hicks to apply for a Fulbright scholarship and she set off for Chile in 1957. While there, she taught colour classes, travelled and established her fascination with textiles. Two years later, after finishing her master's degree, she married and moved to a beekeeping ranch in Mexico, where she had a daughter and began to develop her techniques in earnest. She observed local weavers and befriended architects such as Luis Barragán, Ricardo Legorreta and Félix Candela. Within a year, at the age of 26, she had sold her first piece to MoMA, New York. Within five years, she had moved to Paris, remarried, had a son and begun consulting for Florence Knoll.

Nearly half a century later, Hicks sits in a window seat at the New York restaurant SD26, where her work is integrated into the interior design: cord-wrapped fibres run along the walls of the bar, in the rear dining room, huge wobbly balls of yarn hang from the ceiling and walls. She pulls out a picture frame from her bag. Inside, her newly completed minime, *Ta Fterá*, is crowned with flame-coloured feathers that leave the bottom half of the warp exposed except for several lines of



**SPIN A YARN**  
This picture,  
*Les Escargots*, cork  
and linen, 2003-4  
Below, pages from  
Hicks' sketchbooks



cobweb-thin, synthetic-metallic and silk filaments. Several years ago, Hicks, who finds materials 'wherever I'm walking', came upon the plumes for *Ta Fterá* in a fishing and hunting supply store somewhere near Grand Central station.

Her family moved around during the Depression and Hicks' childhood was spliced together from stints in places such as Hastings, Nebraska (where she was born), Detroit, Chicago and later Syracuse, New York, where she first attended university. Now she lives between New York and Paris, where she's maintained a studio in the 6th arrondissement for the past 45 years. In between, she's studied practices first hand in Mexico, Morocco, Germany, South America, South Africa and India. In 1957, she began to record her meditations in 'daybooks', sketching, writing and pasting photos and swatches, to the point that each notebook came to resemble a tiny tapestry in its own right. These observations are woven throughout her work, says her New York gallerist Cristina Grajales.

Observation is crucial to Hicks' work. Though an autodidact of the highest >>





order, she nonetheless does not consider herself a teacher. When she does teach workshops, she takes her students outside the classroom: into a bakery as the dough goes into the oven, into the local newsroom, into a courtroom while a trial is in session. 'I didn't live in one place as a child,' says the 76-year-old. 'So, to understand, I had to be observant. To understand: what am I doing here and, if I am here, why? And as long as I'm here, what do I feel like doing?'

Early on, what Hicks felt like doing, and what she pioneered, was taking textiles off the wall and turning them into three-dimensional elements that helped shape architecture rather than just dress it. *Lion's Lair*, now part of the Saint Louis Art Museum's collection, was made in 1968 for the Warren Platner-designed interior of New York's Georg Jensen Center for Advanced Design. 'It's a huge wall piece, but it's not a wall piece,' says Matilda McQuaid, the deputy curatorial director and head of textiles at the Cooper-Hewitt. 'It spills out from the wall and shows her love of tapestry, a love of maintaining that experience of being attached to the wall, but then bursting from it.' Ask Hicks what relationship her large-scale work has to architecture and she says: 'It is architecture.'

On the other hand, for 55 years, Hicks has also composed hundreds of minimes, on a portable apparatus she

#### THREAD CAREFULLY

*Soft Stones – Family Treasures*, linen, cotton, silk, wool. Part of an ongoing series of works in which found objects or memorabilia are wrapped in layers of cloth and thread

calls a 'lap loom'. She made her first from artist's stretcher bars, lined with a row of nails at top and bottom, in the late 1950s. She made another a few years later that she still uses. The career-long series of minimes is documented in *Weaving as Metaphor*, a book the artist made with Dutch designer Irma Boom. With its fleecy, deckle-edged pages, the book itself resembles a textile and illustrates the richness of Hicks' minimes, each of which takes tens of hours to weave. 'The miniatures often serve as sketches that inform larger works,' says the ICA show's organising curator Jenelle Porter, now a senior curator at Boston's ICA.

Hicks, as an abstract and landscape painter, constant photographer and consummate colourist, has translated the two-dimensional into textural objects, developing a weaving vernacular that is uniquely her own. She began to move her line on the 'lap loom' not just vertically and crosswise, but on the diagonal, 'breaking with the plane', says the show's co-curator Joan Simon, 'leaving holes in the middle', untethering herself from the warp-weft grid with great eloquence. Outside the textile industry, warp means to bend or distort, which describes exactly what Hicks does. In *Inca Chinchero* (2007), she divides warp and weft into discreet visual elements as if on a canvas. In other pieces, she creates voluptuous curves that never touch the edges, much less form a

proper selvedge. She picked this up from ancient Andean tribes in whose work she sees both innovative engineering and structural intelligence. 'It's not drawing plans on a computer. It's using real materials and thinking it through with the fingers,' she says.

In moving from paint to thread, Hicks, says Porter, became her own patron. Design and architectural commissions (and even a magazine-editing gig in the 1980s at *American Fabrics and Fashions*) paid the bills, while she continued her fine art experiments in colour, material and form. 'Divisions between art and craft dissolved long ago for makers, but museums and galleries have been slow to follow,' Porter says. 'Hicks' work is exemplary of an ideal: a rich life where creating, no matter the context or client, is the end goal.'

It is a goal that, by definition, means she never knows what will happen next. She compares her career to a landscape: 'Often we don't know if we're on a hill or in a valley, about to experience a dead end or a loss of time. But when something doesn't go as you imagined and there's a pause, it's a starting point for something else,' Hicks says. 'But is it a moment of defeat, or is it a wake-up call?' ★  
*'Sheila Hicks: 50 Years' is on from 24 March to 7 August at ICA, University of Pennsylvania, www.icaphila.org. The accompanying book of the same title is by Joan Simon, Susan C Faxon and Whitney Chadwick (Yale, £45)*