



SHEILA HICKS WEAVING AS METAPHOR

BY SIGRID WORTMANN WELTGE

WHO CAN FORGET THE 1960S, THE HEADY, exhilarating period associated with profound change in the world of textiles? Museums presented a new kind of fiber art: boldly experimental, visionary in the use of materials, monumental or miniature in scale, deserting the wall for novel placement in space. Curators and publishers searched for definitions, a common descriptive nomenclature. Even the titles of three seminal publications, Ruth Kaufmann's *The New American Tapestry* (1968), the Museum of Modern Art's catalog *Wall Hangings* (1969) and Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larsen's *Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric* (1973), reflected confusion. Irrefutable alone was the emergence of a cutting-edge breed of artist.

Sheila Hicks was among the pacesetters and has remained an innovator ever since. In "Sheila Hicks: Weaving as Metaphor," the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture in New York City (July 12 – October 15, 2006) offered one aspect of her work, miniature weavings.

Born in 1934 in Hastings, Nebraska, Hicks embodies the American prairie spirit, an openness to adventure and discovery that has never abated. As a student of Josef Albers at Yale University, she was privileged not only to work with one of the foremost color theorists but to absorb the tenets of the Bauhaus, to clear the mind and be receptive to all impressions, to learn by doing. She studied painting, but architecture and sculpture became abiding passions. As a Fulbright scholar in the late 1950s, she traveled through several South American countries absorbing rich textile traditions that would ultimately lead her to work with soft materials. Important contacts with Anni Albers, Junius Bird, George Kubler and later Raoul d'Harcourt solidified her interest in archaeology and ethnography as well as her increasing technical knowledge of structures. She has lived and worked in Paris since 1964.

PHOTOGRAPHS ARE BY BASTIAAN VAN DEN BERG, EXCEPT FOR *M'HAMID*. UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED, THE WORKS ARE IN THE ARTIST'S COLLECTION. BELOW LEFT AND RIGHT: *M'HAMID*, MADE IN MOROCCO AND FRANCE, 1970, SILK, VICUÑA, RAZOR CLAM SHELL, SLIT WOVEN, REVERSIBLE, ALL SELVAGES FINISHED, 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ BY 7 INCHES, COLLECTION OF CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART; *FORÊT BLEUE II*, MADE IN PARIS, 2001, MILLINER'S SYNTHETIC PLAITED BANDING, COTTON, PLAITED, STITCHED, 10 BY 9 $\frac{7}{8}$ INCHES, COLLECTION OF COOPER-HEWITT, NATIONAL DESIGN MUSEUM. OPPOSITE PAGE: *CLUSTER OF SOUNDS*, MADE IN PARIS, 2005, SYNTHETIC FIBER, TANGLED, 9 $\frac{7}{8}$ BY 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ INCHES.

Hicks's career has been so multifaceted that its breadth and versatility take energy to absorb. Her cooperative ventures with Mexican, Chilean, Moroccan, Indian and European weavers reveal her deep empathy with different cultures and her generosity of spirit. Whether on an artisanal level, revitalizing native industries, working in factories or consulting on design issues, she has been teaching and learning, giving and receiving. To the art public she is known for her imagination, her beautiful and varied sculptural pieces and her sensitivity to color. The international tapestry biennials in Lausanne—she first participated in 1967—were springboards for ever more prestigious exhibitions in major museums around the globe. Permutations of prayer rugs, stacked sculptures and monumental commissions for corporations and public buildings spread her reputation. Entire walls constructed from wrapped linen warps pulsed with visual contrasts: matte and shiny, tightly gathered areas exploding unrestrainedly into loose threads, creating rhythms and colors to make the spirit soar.

"Weaving as Metaphor" offers the intimate side of the artist's oeuvre. Over half a century, Hicks has woven the text of her personal and professional development into exquisite miniatures. Using simple frames, the largest no more than 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ by 16 inches, she has experimented with materials and found objects, developed ideas for large projects and created records of her travels. Complementing her notebooks and just as portable, the frames became tools for translating artistic concepts into tangible entities, affording her the freedom to work simultaneously from any angle, with finished selvages on all four sides. The resulting works are a compendium of a lifetime's experience, testimony to a tremendous variety of



BELOW LEFT AND RIGHT: *LUNA*, MADE IN SEOUL AND PARIS, 2001, HANDMADE NEPALESE PAPER, WOVEN, REVERSIBLE, ALL SELVAGES FINISHED, 9¹/₂ BY 5³/₄ INCHES, COLLECTION OF CRISTINA GRAJALES; *ROULADE AMAZONE*, MADE IN PARIS, 1965, CRUSHED, ROLLED, SEWN PRINTED PAPER, REVERSIBLE, 6³/₄ BY 3¹/₂ INCHES. OPPOSITE PAGE LEFT AND RIGHT: *PROMENEUR*, MADE IN NEW YORK, 1988, SYNTHETIC MONOFILAMENT, SILK, BUTTONHOLE STITCH, 8⁵/₈ BY 4³/₄ INCHES, COLLECTION OF COOPER-HEWITT, NATIONAL DESIGN MUSEUM; *WIL BERTHEUX*, MADE IN INDIA AND FRANCE, 1973, SILK, WOOL, 9 BY 7 INCHES, COLLECTION OF MAARTEN BERTHEUX.

techniques and boundless creativity. If, as the artist states, it was her ambition to become one with her work, she convinces the viewer who is drawn into her world and shares, through a close reading of these small weavings, the times and places of Hicks's artistic journey.

Monsieur Hulot, 1988, as quirky and unconventional as its namesake, the character played by the French actor Jacques Tati, greeted the visitor on the third floor of the Bard Center, which was entirely devoted to Hicks's work. It was a felicitous installation providing an instant overview, while allowing the proximity to commune with each piece. Two videos, *Opening the Archives* and *Petites Pièces*, presented the artist's philosophy and recapped her career. The lyricism in Hicks's miniatures is mirrored in her poetic language, in which she refers to her small weavings as "people or presences." Her description of "beaches as the flea markets of the sea" is aptly echoed in *Les Couteaux*, ca. 1972, *M'hamid*, 1970, *Rivage de Chablis*, 1988, and others incorporating shells. While the nearly 200 weavings share the commonality of size, they exhibit the singularity of iconography, structure, technique and range of color, from muted to vibrant. *Escribiendo con Textura*, 1960, and *Hieroglyph*, 1968, both monochromatic, not only convey the surface variations achieved by altering the density of the structure, but also have taken on a patina reminiscent of ancient Peruvian textiles. In their transparent delicacy, *Grand Portal*, *Portal* and *Side Portal*, all 1974, evoke Moroccan architecture, while *Wil Bertheux*, 1973, *Forest Aflame*, 1978, and *Paper Season*, 1992, are examples of exuberant color explosions. Hicks's whimsy is evident in *Royaume*, 1994, made of bundled uncooked Chinese cellophane noodles. Intermingled synthetic fibers in the 2005 works





Ninety Colors and *Cluster of Sounds* are, as *Vine Drawing*, also 2005, suggests, pure tracings with threads. From handspun wool (*Quadrado Obscuro*, ca. 1961) to synthetic fibers (two variations of *Forêt Bleue*, 2001) to handmade Nepalese paper (*Luna*, 2001), Hicks's voracious artistic appetite seizes on the possibilities of each material. *Leaves of Ibbey*, 1987-88, a traditional, meticulously executed small tapestry woven at Aubusson, demonstrates the artist's skill but is lifeless compared to the pulsating vitality of her freely woven miniatures.

Hicks teaches the viewer to follow the process of her hand and to rejoice with her in making textiles alive to the past, present and future.

Emulating a gallery setting, the catalog, itself a work of art, presents each weaving on a separate page. Trenchant information as well as thought-provoking essays—by Arthur C. Danto, Joan Simon and Nina Stritzler-Levine—archival photographs and notebooks round out this wonderful publication.*

It chronicles a significant part of Sheila Hicks's distinguished career, which began with the creation of semaphores for a whole new direction in weaving. She has succeeded in forging a unique visual language which, while steeped in tradition, communicates the power and beauty of contemporary fiber art. ■

**Sheila Hicks: Weaving as Metaphor*, 415 pages, three essays, illustrated, is \$45 from Yale University Press, 203-432-0960.

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