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Fiber Artist Sheila Hicks weaves storytelling into her custom installations

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By Lauren Smart



Comets and Confidentiality, part of the "Sheila Hicks: Seize, Weave Space" 2019 installation, on view through Aug. 18 at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas.

"What will you do with your grandmother's clothes when she dies?" It's just a few minutes into my conversation with artist Sheila Hicks and she's started asking me the questions. "Who will take responsibility for her things? Will you keep them? Will you wear them?"

We're downstairs in the gallery at the Nasher Sculpture Center where her exhibition "Seize, Weave Space" opened on May 11 and remains on display through Aug. 18. She's overseeing the installation of a site-specific piece for the Nasher garden. We're sitting on a bench among a handful of works — four total, one series per wall — that offer a glimpse into her career.



"Sentinel of Saffron," 2018, and "Ba li Chords," 2014-15, part of the "Sheila Hicks: Seize, Weave Space" 2019 installation, on view through Aug. 18 at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. (Nasher Sculpture Center)

I've asked her a question about materials used for her *Comets Sculpture*, a series of round bursts of color and fabric that fills one wall. In addition to linen, wool and several other recognizable textiles, the description includes "various discoveries." Hicks, it turns out, tucks clothing items donated to her studio into the works. Clothes people don't want to throw away take on another life in her art. The question about my grandmother is rhetorical; she's both engaging me in a conversation, teaching me something and revealing something about her process.

"I become their accomplice in creating that sense of continuity from life to death," says Hicks, 84. "A lot of the work I do celebrates life and honors death. It's important that these works come from a place of real concern and caring and not only crocodile tears."

This is the kind of artist Hicks has always been: contemplative, gentle and wise. In almost any

interview with Hicks, the reporter seems to be taken off guard by her approach to conversation. Which is to say that she is genuinely interested in the conversation, either that she's having with a writer or that her art is having with the viewer. Or that her art is having with the space, which is different in every installation.

"I'm not a performance artist," she says. "I'm very careful about walking into a place or space and dealing with what already exists."

A career in color and shape



Artist Sheila Hicks poses with a part of her "Sheila Hicks: Seize, Weave Space" 2019 installation, on view through Aug. 18 at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. (Kevin Todara/Nasher Sculpture Center)

Throughout her six-decade career, her experiments with scale and scope have contributed significantly to the fiber arts. She's created art everywhere from the Israel Museum to the Gardens in the Palace of Versailles to the High Line in New York to the Venice Biennale. And now, the Nasher Sculpture Center garden, where for this exhibit she has snaked tree trunks and draped columns in vivid color.

Working this way combines her interests in architecture and art. In the 1950s, Hicks studied under Josef Albers at Yale School of Art, one of the few co-ed art programs at the time. There, she studied painting and traveled to Chile on a Fulbright Program fellowship, where she photographed archaeology and architecture. She lived in Mexico for several years, where painter and sculptor Mathias Goeritz recruited her to teach architecture students at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico.

In 1964, she moved to Paris, where she continues to live and work. Just last year, the French newspaper *Le Figaro* called her "the artist that everyone is fighting over" as part of an issue that listed the 20 most important cultural figures in Paris. Throughout her

career, Hicks remains one of the artists who has helped push the medium of textiles out of the arts and crafts realm and into the fine arts.

In 1969, she was part of a groundbreaking show at the Museum of Modern Art, "Wall Hangings," an exhibition meant to challenge the traditional notion of the tapestry. Hicks' piece, *The Evolving Tapestry: He/She*, was a sculptural mass of linen and silk that stood side by side on the floor, nowhere near the walls. That work, like many by Hicks, looks different in each iteration. She likes art that you could flip upside down and still see something interesting.

"Part of the inherent concept or thinking in my work is it's OK no matter what you do with it, it still holds," Hicks says. "Of course, some versions are better than others. But there's not a singular interpretation."

Purpose driven

Her work at the Nasher lends itself to varied viewing interpretations as well, but Hicks says that one thing is not to be misinterpreted, which is the attitude of the work.

"The work is acrobatic and limitless. They are very expressive; they are all attitudes, but none of them are pouting or complaining about politics, they're co-existing as best they can," Hicks says of the pieces. "Together is better, that is what my work is trying to say."



Chaine et trame interchangeable by Sheila Hicks. (Nasher Sculpture Center)

The idea of upcycling comes up a lot during our conversation. Whether it's about a deceased loved one's belongings or about reusing materials for new projects. Or, later over coffee and cake in the garden, about culture itself.

"Right now, I think, we're trying to upcycle our sensibilities," Hicks says. "We're trying to upgrade our culture."

This message carries through even in her work outside of textile sculpture. In 2000, she was recruited by UNESCO to found Madesa (Manufacturing and Design Academy of South Africa), which taught women

practical and artistic skills in various artistic and entrepreneurial practices. They took over the old women's prison in downtown Cape Town and bused women in from their townships. The women returned to their villages where they shared their skills with their communities and started businesses.

"I don't always have a mission as I did in South Africa," Hicks says. "But always the kind of work I like to do is to think about leaving places better."



"Sheila Hicks: Seize, Weave Space," 2019 installation, on view through Aug. 18, 2019, at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. (Nasher Sculpture Center)

Lauren Smart is an arts writer and critic. She teaches journalism at Southern Methodist University.

Details

"Seize, Weave Space" runs through Aug. 18, Nasher Sculpture Center, 2001 Flora St. Dallas. 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday. nashersculpturecenter.org. 214-242-5100. See more on the artist at her website, <http://sheilahicks.com/sheilahicks.com>.