Nasher Sculpture Center

Sheila Hicks in Conversation with Tyler Green

Presented May 11, 2019 at Nasher Sculpture Center

Anna Smith: Hello everyone, and welcome to a special Nasher 360 event. I'm Curator of Education, Anna Smith, and today we're happy to host a "Modern Art Notes Podcast" conversation between Tyler Green and Sheila Hicks. If you made it into this room, you were surely greeted by the monumental work Hicks has installed in our Lower Level Gallery. You'll find more of her work on view upstairs in Gallery II, on the terrace and in the Nasher garden - all of which flirts with the boundaries of sculpture, textile and painting, and is as multi-layered in its meaning as the fibers that make it up. Throughout her incredible, six-decade career, Sheila Hicks has exhibited internationally in both solo and group exhibitions. She was included in the 2017 Venice Biennale, the 2014 Whitney Biennial, and the 2012 São Paulo Biennial in Brazil. Her work has been the subject of recent solo presentations at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, Museo Amparo, Mexico, and at the Alison Jacques Gallery, London. A major retrospective of her work debuted at the Addison Gallery of American Art and traveled to the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia and the Mint Museum in Charlotte. Hicks' work is held in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Stedelijk Museum, the Centre Pompidou, the Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, and Museo de Bellas Artes, Santiago. After founding workshops in Mexico, Chile and South Africa, and working in Morocco and India, Hicks now divides her time between her Paris studio and New York. In conversation with Hicks is Tyler Green, a historian and award-winning critic. Since 2011, he has produced and hosted "The Modern Art Notes Podcast", the foremost American audio program featuring artists, curators and historians. The show has aired over 350 episodes and is in its seventh year. The BBC named the program one of the world's top 25 top cultural podcasts. Green is also the author of *Carleton Watkins: Making the West American*. I'm going to turn things over to Tyler in just a moment, but please join me in giving a warm welcome to Sheila Hicks and Tyler Green.

Tyler Green: Hi everybody, thank you for coming. Can we hear me okay? And Sheila can we hear you okay? This is going to be our podcast for next Thursday. If you don't already subscribe just google "Modern Art Notes Podcast" and we pop up. We're on iTunes, Stitcher, Spotify and Pandora and all the usual places. This week's show is… We have one. (*laughter*)

Sheila Hicks, welcome to the "Modern Art Notes Podcast." I want to start with something that's not in the show here at the Nasher but that's foundational to your practice. Starting in, I think, the late 1950's early 1960's you started making a series of work you call *Minims*. They're tiny, they're roughly and

2001 Flora Street
Dallas, TX 75201

+1 214.242.5100

broadly speaking about the size of a hand, top to bottom and width. I think there are hundreds of them, right?

Sheila Hicks: Thousands.

TG: Thousands? Wow! The curator of the retrospective of yours at the Pompidou last year, Michael Goatee called them, I love this phrase, “Embryos of the creative process.” How did you come to start them and why are they important to you?

SH: I’m not sure, but I think it began with lines.

TG: Oh.

SH: What’s your first contact with lines that are pliable, supple and moving space? When you learn how to walk and explore, you come across lines, maybe they’re electrical lines that are trailing from lamps. You pull on them and see what they are and what happens. Maybe they’re mops sitting in the corner someone’s cleaned the floor with. Look at lines that are moving in space. As a child, I tried to follow those lines and I’ve been doing that ever since, those lines moving in space. Without getting electrocuted. (*laughter*) Sometimes touching them and realizing that the lines might even have tactile qualities, texture. The game gets really interesting. If you sit on your grandpa’s lap and he has a beard and you touch it, it gets really interesting. All of these intermingled lines and threads and hair. If they start combing your hair as it grows, they start to clean the brush after they combed your hair, and they leave it on the table before they throw it away, which is kind of sad. (*laughs*) You start thinking about that. You start getting deeper and deeper into what becomes textiles. As you start getting dressed you start feeling and touching things. It could be handkerchiefs that they stuff in your pocket. When you were going to school did they stuff a hanky in your pocket?

TG: Oh yeah, I remember that.

SH: And you got very fond of that hanky?

TG: You remember how it felt and there was like, tactile memory.

SH: And you used it and it got even more tactile. (*laughter*)

TG: There was that.

SH: Then it rains and pours, like today, and you run around grabbing things to put on because they have impermeable potential. All of the stories get complicated because now you’re realizing you’re enveloped by and dependent on, daily, intensively on things that have to do with threads, yarns, lines and pliable umbrellas. Incredible. How can you not be aware? So, that’s where I got sort of lost in that trench, or that ditch. I’ve been squatting in that ditch ever since... Sorry. (*laughter*)

TG: No, so you started making the *Minims*, almost sounds like you’re saying in part because they were so tactile.

2001 Flora Street
Dallas, TX 75201

+1 214.242.5100

SH: Well, I didn't start calling them *Minims* until I was maybe 50 years old.

TG: Oh.

SH: I mean *minims* is a French word meaning something small. As I was making these little things, tchotchkes, or whatever you want to call them. Objects. People asked me, "Why don't you show them?" That's kind of silly. So, pin them on the wall or leave them on the table. Art critics, so dangerous, started giving them names. They would call them miniatures or small works. Sounds very pretentious, small works. You know, like you're going to an architecture meeting…(*laughter*)

I was in the foyer lobby waiting for my grandson's performance at school in Paris and there was a word posted, something about *minims*. It was a word I wasn't familiar with but it just stuck. I thought, "That's it! That's the name of what I'm making." It seemed appropriate.

TG: So, they're all about yay big, the size of a human hand, maybe a little bit wider.

SH: The size of this book. (*holds up book*)

TG: Yeah, so why that size? What about that size has kept you engaged for so many years?

SH: Because it fits on your lap. Under your coat. You could hide and take it with you. You could steal something when you're in a…

TG: (*laughs*)

SH: Just slip it under, you know. (*hides book under her scarf*) (*laughter*)

SH: Then when you wake up at 4 o'clock in the morning because you're on jetlag, rather than turn on the television and listen to things that will cause you to have nightmares, (*laughter*) you sit and fiddle with it. Fiddle with whatever you forged during the day. You can intricately construct things that could become as big as the Eiffel Tower, because you start small. All the architecture in Dallas that we're surrounded by started with a sketch on a tablecloth by some architect, some would-be-architect or some entrepreneur who decided he didn't need an architect.

TG: (*laughs*)

SH: He'd figure it out himself. Then when he went bankrupt, he'd start thinking, "Maybe I should've talked to an architect." (*laughter*) So I start small and as I get older, I get braver and I get invited to do the impossible, kind of adventurous things. "Go to Dallas, Texas. We have a really nice garden right in the middle of all these glass monsters. (*laughter*) Get close to the grass and figure it out and maybe something will occur to you." That's why I'm here. At your invitation. Thank you. (*clapping*)

TG: So how often do you make *Minims* now?

SH: I'm doing them all the time.

TG: Oh, just constantly…

SH: I noticed your shoelaces. (*laughter*) And I'm walking around…. Look at her shoes right in the front row. We could take them and put them backwards and shove one inside the… Can I borrow?

TG: I should note for people who don't know the *minims*, often there is stuff within them. A piece of bone, for example.

(*person from audience approaches Hicks and hands her a pair of fancy women's backless, slip-on shoes*) (*laughter*)

SH: It's not easy in the rain to walk around with these. (*laughter*) But I mean, they're kind of interesting because you might even put them together. (*slides one shoe inside the other*) They're worn enough so they have a personality. (*shows the bottom of the shoes with wear on them)* You know, they're not out of North Park immediately. (*laughter*) They've walked out in the mud and the rain. They've had a life of their own for a few minutes and now we're going to make them into art. A sculpture maybe. (*shoves shoes more firmly together and holds them upright on the table next to her)*

TG: I like it.

SH: Oldenburg should be here. (*laughter*) Which side do you like best? (*rotates shoes around as they continue to rest on the table, indicating Tyler should answer*)

TG: That one.

SH: The profile's great.

TG: Well, if you'd like, I feel like I should take off my shoelaces and provide those, but I will refrain because I've been walking out in the rain. (*laughter*)

SH: Look at the soles. It could be Japanese lacquer. When you go to Japan and you see the simplicity, which the Japanese are experts at trimming down and burrowing down into the essentials and doing beautiful lacquer work. There's some sculpture in your collection of that kind. So, I'm doing them all the time. I'm thinking…that's what I'm thinking. I'm a visual person so don't take my words very seriously.

TG: I'm always fascinated by artists who work at a range of scales. So, the *Minims* are small scale, and then obviously you work in a very large, often decorative scale. So, let's talk a bit about your interest in decoration.

SH: I'm not interested in decoration. (*Hicks continues to fiddle with the shoes on the table*)

TG: The French decorative tradition doesn't interest you?

2001 Flora Street
Dallas, TX 75201

+1 214.242.5100

SH: No, (*she pulls away from the shoes*) I'm interested in enhancing your environment in an exciting, passionate, beautiful and comforting way.

TG: Regardless of what it's called or what art historical tradition it fits into?

SH: Decoration sounds like a birthday cake.

TG: That's why I brought it up, because there is this very American idea that decoration is to be resisted. You have all of those AbEx painters and macho videos videos...

SH: Oh, that's the fault of the Bauhaus.

TG: I agree, absolutely.

SH: So we're in the 100th anniversary all praising the Bauhaus. Threw everything in the trash…

TG: This summer, yeah.

SH: …and trimmed down to two zeroes. Right?

TG: Yeah. America has always resisted the idea of the decorative, but there was always a room in French or Austrian Modernism. The decorative tradition was so strong in those countries that those modernisms embraced it. Matisse or Klimt. I guess at some point, even though you had a Yale MFA background, you decided that the austerity and "purity" – air quotes - of modernism was to be rejected, and that you wanted to embrace the idea that you just described of wanting to bring spirit and life to spaces. Was that a transition or a process, or did it just become evident to you as you played with materials? How did you get from Josef and Anni Albers to…

SH: How I got from Anni Albers was I took a bus because Josef took me by force to his house to meet his wife.

TG: Who was not on faculty at Yale but who was…

SH: No women taught at Yale when I was at Yale. They reluctantly let a few women into the school, into the drama school. Architecture, there were two. So there were very few women. Imagine how we dressed not to call attention to ourselves in 1954. I went to the army surplus store. I put all my monogrammed sweaters in my closet. We didn't even have closets, we had a rack. We didn't have dormitories. The women at Yale at that time had nothing. I dressed in army surplus. I went to the classes not knowing what I was up for. I had never heard of the Bauhaus when I checked in.

TG: Wow.

SH: This is kind of stupid, isn't it?

TG: No, this is great.

SH: I think young students today, everyone's riding them all the time, "Where do you want to go to school? What do you want to study?" They're supposed to figure all that out when they're only 17, 18 or 19 years old? They're going to walk out in space and they are going to become the victims of chance. I am an example of, primary example of victim of chance. I didn't know where I was going or what I was doing, but when I heard a German accent, it reminded me of my grandfather. When I heard a German accent I did what I was told to do. (*laughter*) Did you?

TG: I never heard German accents when I was a youngster in San Francisco. San Francisco was not full of Germans in the 1970s.

SH: So they were speaking to you in British English?

TG: Yeah, kind of. With a little West Coast (changes to a California accent) drawl, dude. Like that way. (*laughter*) A little surfer…

SH: I lost the subject to tell you the truth. (*laughter*)

TG: We were talking about the large works you do. A commission you fulfilled for a Gordon Bunshaft building in Dallas in the 1980s has been remade for a piece that's here at the Nasher, it's called *Interchangeable Warp and Weft.*

SH: Do you know what warp and weft are?

TG: Yeah, they're in weaving. No?

SH: Which is the warp and which is the weft?

TG: That's the part I don't know. (*laughter*) So they're interchangeable because?

SH: Danto, there's an art critic, Arthur Danto, who wrote a text about Greece (picks up book) and about how the Greeks dealt with weavers and weaving, which were used in this books. (*holds up book*) The first meeting he came. We had a meeting and he said, "Okay, let's get down to the basics, the warp and the weft." I think I got it. I think I understand it, but what about this thing called the woof. You ever heard that word?

TG: Only in relation to dogs.

SH: (*laughs*) Anybody know what the woof is? (*indicates the audience should raise their hands*) Anybody know what the warp is? Anybody know what the weft is? Okay, so now we're into Agnes Martin, we're sort of into the grid. The verticals and the interlacing horizontals. Maybe the woof is something in between, might start being the surface and the textures. Maybe you get to tufting, nodding, or maybe we get to all of these spin offs of threads moving around doing acrobatically different things. He sorted out and he quoted, and I'm picking this book up (*holds up book*) because if you don't mind I'm going to pass it around.

TG: Sure, let's do it.

SH: So on that side, (*hands one book to audience member on her right, another book to audience member on her left*) while we're talking when you get bored you can thumb through this. (*laughter*) This is a book we published in 2005, Yale University Press. We're in the 5th printing because it helps people follow your line of questioning.

TG: Well while we're talking about the *Interchangeable Warp and Weft* piece, one of the things…

SH: Take a weaving and turn it sideways. All the medieval tapestries were woven sideways and back to front. Really complicated. Imagine all these battles and colossal unicorn tapestries and things, think about how they made them. They're not made like painting. Like a canvas you approach and begin to paint like Delacroix or someone else would paint. They're woven on usually what they call upright obsoles, "les" being for the warp, (*moves her fingers to indicate vertical threads*) and backwards with a cartoon, a gouache, a drawing or indications, numbered cartoons. We think in computer society right now that we're into digital. The weavers in the Middle Ages, were using digital coding to weave tapestries but by hand of course. One, one, three, seven, seven, nine, twelve… Then they would have all the threads and the colors labeled and grab the little… We're off into tapestry. A lot of people, when they start seeing what I do, immediately they want to talk about tapestry.

TG: I'd believe it.

SH: And you talk about decor and decoration. Well what was the best and most appreciated and most used decoration in those periods?

TG: Tapestry.

SH: Tapestry, huh? All of the chateaus, I mean nobody had a decent chateau without tapestries. They were filled with them, and of course rolled-up, supple, rolled-up, stored, rehung. Fiesta next. La fête de la République - All the tapestries come out, and then of course all the banners come out. So this is an integral part of art. Cleaning the closet, getting dressed in the morning and then sitting in an environment and enjoying being enveloped by stories that are told with thread and yarn.

TG: Well I think the material that *Interchangeable Warp and Weft* is made from, came from the *Aubusson Tapestry Atelier* in France, which has been around since the 16th century.

SH: The studio that helped me weave those bands, of course went bankrupt. Not because of my…(*laughter*)

TG: Your demands… (*laughs*)

SH: They ran out of orders because the auditoriums that need acoustical properties… The glorious houses and estates that need to be enveloped in

2001 Flora Street
Dallas, TX 75201

+1 214.242.5100

some kind of acoustical, beautiful, warm environmental note of some kind. Which I'm reluctant to call decoration, because decorators have a bad reputation. You get bills and bills from decorators for giving you "advice." Right, Ben? *(She points to a man in the audience.)* Architect. *(laughter)* No?

TG: Well, *Interchangeable Warp and Weft* and *Sentinel of Saffron* are both pieces that have taken other forms in other places. You've reused the material and remade them as new works.

SH: These are bands. Thank God he stays on track. See, these are bands. (*She demonstrates with her hands.*) Just woven bands with two finished salvages. Then with the warp threads, once the wefts have completed their passage, I tucked in and inserted back into the warp structure. So, it's nice. It feels like four-sided salvage finish, but we're cheating. It's only two salvage finish. Then these bands can be interlaced. They can go either way. They're interchangeable. The bands can either become symbolically the warp, and they can insert the wefts, or vice versa. I made six or eight paddles out of these bands. We installed them in this building over here that is now Landmark Building in Dallas?

TG: A Gordon Bunshaft design.

SH: It was a Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. It's one of your early…

TG: '84 I think.

SH: …attractive skyscrapers that's become a kind of seedy looking hotel right now. *(laughter)* Right?

TG: I'm not sure.

SH: Well, when they transferred ownership, because even… Can you imagine these skyscrapers transfer ownership or occupancy frequently? I never imagined that could happen. Once you build a building like a pyramid or a chateau, you don't imagine that 20 years later it's going to change occupancy and ownership. You tear out the decor.

TG: Which is so amazing to me that you would fairly routinely get material back to do other things with.

SH: Little did I imagine that I needed a loading dock. I didn't have a loading dock in my studio, I just have a simple studio in an old, paved courtyard in Paris. We don't have a loading dock. But there are boxes coming and going of things made for certain places and coming back, because those places are changing.

TG: So was getting those boxes… What gave you the idea, if you will, that it's perfectly fine if not ideal to reuse old works?

SH: Isn't it all necessity today learning about upcycling, recycling and finding ways to use and not destroy things? Especially if made by hand. If made with loving care by hand.

TG: We had images on the screen before we talked and we'll have them on manpodcast.com of *Sentinel and Saffron* as you installed it at the Pompidou last year, and as it is here at the Nasher in different forms. Upstairs here at the Nasher in the show of works from the Nasher collection, you've included a gorgeous work by Richard Long. I'm guessing that part of what you like about that Richard Long is that it is also made of a substance - stone - that is taken apart and re-put together every time it's installed.

SH: No comment. *(laughter)*

TG: One of the other things I wanted to ask you about is the relationship between your work and faith traditions.

SH: And what?

TG: Faith traditions.

SH: Fake?

TG: Faith. Religious traditions.

SH: Oh. They're interchangeable sometimes. *(laughter)*

TG: I… would agree.

SH: How do you spell faith?

TG: F-A-I-T-H.

SH: And how do you spell fake?

TG: F-A-K-E.

SH: How'd they get so close? *(laughter)*

TG: I feel like we should be calling up the Oxford English Dictionary while we're sitting up here and maybe we'll learn something. (*laughs*)

SH: When you smile and speak, words get joined sometimes. Everyone ingratiates themselves by smiling when they're speaking to you. I have such a hard time understanding what they're saying, because I've lived for 50 years in Paris and I don't even understand half of what's being said. *(laughter)*

Now I'm coming back into the States and doing shows here, enjoying it. But I admit, I only understand about half what's being said.

TG: How many languages do you speak now?

SH: Half speak: French, English and Spanish.

TG: It's pretty good.

SH: And a few other odds and ends. But when people come up and start smiling and speaking to me… Anyone else have that problem? *(audience responds yes)* Yes. Especially service staff when you're at a restaurant, or

2001 Flora Street
Dallas, TX 75201

+1 214.242.5100

when you're in a public space or taxi drivers and things. Do you get it the first time? I thought I should attribute this to age. I'm getting on there. People think I'm hard of hearing, but communication is tough and language is tough. People usually don't even say what they mean. *(laughter)*

TG: We can all just go look at art, it doesn't talk except just visually, which is great.

SH: Louder?

TG: We have art, we can just communicate visually.

SH: Art?

TG: Yeah, we can just look and let things communicate that way rather than having to hear.

SH: Except art's being invaded by the artists who want to do it audio-ly (sic). They want it to have sound. Venice Biennale, no? You've just come from Venice Biennale? How much of the Venice Biennale normally or usually have a visual art manifestation? How much of it is audio or video?

Audience member: Venice Biennale? 30%.

SH: At least?

Audience member: Yeah, about

TG: I wanted to ask you about your print rugs.

SH: You see, we're back to faith and fake. *(laughter)*

TG: So in the mid-60's you made a series of works called *Prayer Rug*. You made a number of works called *Ascension.* Yesterday when you and I were talking, you referred to one of the works here, the long hanging white piece called *Menhir*.

SH: *Menhir*. In Brittany they have these stones, erect standing stones. They call them menhir.

TG: But you also referred to it yesterday as an ascension and this is a long way to my question, which is why in the 1960s and indeed since, at a time when artists weren't interested in making art that referenced faith traditions, were you interested in things like prayers rugs and ascensions?

SH: How can you eliminate someone like Rothko?

TG: Well he was maybe being more metaphysical than specifically referencing a specific faith.

SH: Wasn't he the son of a rabbi? *(laughter)*

TG: Yeah, I don't know. I don't know if I think of those as being particularly…

SH: What about this chapel over in…

TG: Houston.

SH: Not spiritual?

TG: Spiritual, but not a specific kind of spiritual. Not specifically referring to Christianity.

SH: Open ended spiritual. Not a specific kind, sort of open. That's the name of my show right now in Miami. It's called *Campo Abierto*. *Open Field*. It's a spiritual quest of open field. I'm trying to avoid speaking about politics so I come at it diagonally or peripherally. My work, a lot of people think is abstract. Did you think it was abstract?

TG: I think there's abstraction there.

SH: (*laughs*) It's all representational in a very subtle way. *Ascension* is exactly where I'm going, hopefully. *(laughter)*

TG: So, when we look at a work like *Menhir* here and if we think of it as representational, is there one way to think of it? Or if we see a waterfall, for example, are we free to think of it that way?

SH: Once more?

TG: Well if we see *Menhir,* if we think of it as representation…

SH: Here's the white linen column in the first room here. (*gestures to room*)

TG: If we think of your work as representational, is there a specific way we should think of that work? Should we think of it as a waterfall? Should we think of it as…as…

SH: Not a specific way. I would say, "Campo Abierto". Each person sitting here has the right democratically, that's where we are, to think about it the way they want to think about it. I make things and then I add titles. I don't start with title. I make something I feel and want to see, see is the important part. After see, I want to see and feel. Feel meaning symbolically, I want to feel it. I want to feel connected to it. I want a certain dose of passion involved and a certain dose of eagerness to communicate. Then the title comes later. Some people I know, each has their right to see, think and feel. They shouldn't read too many art critics who tell them how to see. *(laughter)* Don't you agree?

TG: I do agree with that.

SH: I mean, you're a bright fellow but there are a few other characters wandering around out there that are misleading us. Wouldn't you say?

TG: I think there's great fun in the open-endedness of looking at a work such as the one we're discussing and finding things in it, and finding connections to art historical traditions. You have quite recently last year in Belgium hung a piece that hangs down, or appears to hang down and flow over a body of water at the Horse Festival in Belgium.

SH: Good for you. That's real research. *(Hicks high-fives Green) (laughter)*

TG: I started thinking about those pieces in the context of water and waterfalls. I don't know if I would have gotten there with those works until you installed them that way. I guess I wonder if they live as waterfalls in your mind a little bit.

SH: Has anyone been out in the garden in the rain out here? I did something I've never done before, so I'm still sort of puzzled about it and not quite sure about it. It's bound to be a pain in the neck for the maintenance people here. It has to do with taking soft lines of fabric and wrapping them in circular motions around the trees over on the right-hand side of the garden. Has something to do with waterfall. It's on the ground and it's as though it's puddles.

TG: At the base of the trees.

SH: At the base of the trees - puddles. If it's there for four months maybe the grass will grow in between the circular textile. Sort of snail-like circles. I'm trying something out there. The word you are asking about is ascension.

TG: Yeah, that too.

SH: Okay, we're on the ground. We're eight years old and we've got twenty other little kids with us who are eight years old. They're all walking along the path. What are they going to see first of all? Not the trees, not the sky. They're watching where they're walking. They're going to see something on the ground. They're going to be drawn over there to see by those trees. They're going to see those trees are majestic, important. They're going to see those trees like no one has ever seen those trees before. Those trees are really special. They're even walking in circles now around the trees. Then they look up. So I'm pulling the vision. First of all, I'm grounded. That's where I am, we all are today, grounded. We're spiraling up. So it's even grounded sculpture on the ground. Call it a sculpture? That's very daring to call that a sculpture. (*laughs*) It's a discovery, if you please, of how to go up. Start by looking at the ground and where you are, figuring it out, enjoying it. Most of all, enjoying it. Go back to when you were very, very young and enjoy every day and the way you used to know how to do. Then move with it and keep moving and you're going to see a few skyscrapers that look menacing, but you're under trees and you're protected. The reason you're protected is because you're in that magic circle.

TG: You've made a number of pieces in the last 20 years or so that both hang vertically and when they meet the ground they flow horizontally. You know, they just have this big sweeping…

SH: Gravity.

TG: Yeah, but not just the gravity, but you are happy for the pieces to lie on the ground and extend into the room 10 or 20 feet. It sounds like you like for visitors to kind of think of those metaphorically. You approach something on

2001 Flora Street
Dallas, TX 75201

+1 214.242.5100

the ground and then can go up, or your eyes can start up at the top and then come to where we are.

SH: And then come down and get real. We're walking in museums and looking at paintings that we're supposed to honor and obey on the walls. Then something comes down, hits the floor and enters your domain. Be careful don't step on it. Get real and think about where you are and what you're doing. Then think, "Is this art?" Keep asking yourself, "Is this art?" Keep asking yourself, "Well, what is art?" Have you figured it out?

TG: Art can be a lot of things depending on what the people who make it decide it's going to be.

SH: Or the ones who receive it.

TG: Yes. Let's talk about the materials you use. You've used a little bit of everything over the years, a range of textiles, and you always have used a lot of materials. I want to just throw out a couple of materials and maybe you can tell us with specific textile materials what you like about them or what about them you find useful. One to start with would be silk. What about silk do you like? What does it provide you?

SH: How many do you have in your list?

TG: Four. Wool, linen, silk and cotton. *(laughter)*

SH: I think North Park was built on a cotton plantation.

TG: Cotton field.

SH: I mean, we're all here thanks to that history, and the Mississippi and the whole region. Cotton. But you want to talk about silk. *(laughter)*

TG: We'll get to cotton, but yes let's do silk first. What does silk do that you like? Why do you like using silk?

SH: Where'd you see silk in this exhibition?

TG: I did not, but I know you've used it a lot in the *minims* for example.

SH: So we're back to those little works in that book that's passing around. Did someone take it home? There's no silk in this show.

TG: No.

SH: We can talk about silk if you want to talk about silk. *(laughter)* Do you have anything in your wardrobe that's made of silk?

TG: I don't. I probably have ties that are made of silk or a necktie.

SH: Real silk?

TG: Some old family things.

SH: You inherited?

TG: Yes.

SH: Yeah, because it's kind of behind us now. I think they should go home and Google silk. Its associations are the aristocracy, wealth, history, the Orient, the Far East, the mythology surrounding the silkworms and the cocoons. All this is exciting. But it hasn't much to do with this show.

TG: There's linen in the show.

SH: There you go! *(laughter)* There's lots of linen. France is the linen producing country. Belgium, France, Italy, Chile. I discovered linen… I didn't know linen as I was living in the United States and going to school here. Then when I left, I went to Latin America, fell more into the territory of llamas, guanacos and vicunas, into the wools story, in the Andes in Latin America. Then when I moved to France and started living and working in France, I sort of discovered linen and really went for it as you can see in this show. In the very big room where all of the other sculptures are displayed, the primary work in the one work I show is of linen.

TG: Upstairs.

SH: Upstairs. It looks so great on the travertine. Is that marble walls in this museum? It has to stay here somehow. *(laughter)* That's the thing I'll think about on when I fall asleep on the plane this afternoon. I'll think about that on that wall. It's in such good company and it looks so beautiful there. Not just because I made it, I'm very impartial. *(laughter)*

Back to linen. Linen is a beautiful material. It's dry. It behaves itself. It doesn't lose its personality. When you use it and work with, it has a very strong personality. People don't like to wear it because it wrinkles. You sit in linen trousers, a linen jacket or linen shirt, you're reluctant to take it with you in your suitcase because you know it's going to be wrinkled. You don't want to travel with, or have to go someplace with an iron. So this thing about always having to be impeccable and no wrinkles and no creases, that's kind of sad. Because you take a piece of paper which sometimes has a cotton base. The book you're passing around is cotton fiber, the paper. But take a piece of paper and touch it. We've got a few of these so I'm going to… (*crumples up piece of paper*) That's what happens when you do this sometimes to linen. Then you open it if it's a woven linen, warp and weft, both linen. Then open it and it becomes a plane but it has shadows, it has creases. It has a real lively sort of surface. Not like a flat painting that's stretched along a wooden stretcher. Oh, I've got linen right here. (*picks up her linen scarf to demonstrate*) When you take this and stretch it around wooden stretchers it becomes taunt. So now you're into the whole textile field about tension. Tension. So with linen you can stretch it. These could almost be linen walls, stretched on stretchers here. Linen, I really fell in love with when I got to France. I bought, instead of ordering from suppliers, I would be visited by people who were selling leftovers. It's the fashion industry, which is very active in France. So suppliers and the manufacturers would come and say, "Left over from the last season,

we've got all these samples of all these leftover materials. Do you want any of them? We'll give them to you for less than half price, or for practically nothing because we've got to get them out of the warehouse to get ready for the next season." So I became a part of the dumpster circuit. *(laughter)*

And I'd say, "Yes!" "Well we've only got one kilo of this color, but we've got three kilos of this color and we've got half a kilo of…" "I'll take it all." Then I started experimenting. That helps to experiment when you don't have prefixed ideas, you just have availability of something. So you can then start to play with it freely, and it's not costing you a fortune because you haven't paid $17 a pound. That liberated me. Linen liberated me. And the eagerness of the suppliers of linen in France to get rid of their supplies and dump them in my studio helped me make a lot of new things.

TG: And you've stuck with it all these years. You still make…

SH: They keep at it.

TG: But you could use anything you want practically now but you still…

SH: I am a bargain hunter. I'm not going to go and order this extraordinary silk from Japan just because of its prestige. I'd like to use some available materials. Whenever I go to India, Morocco or Peru or somewhere, the first thing I look at are what are the obvious available materials in this place, and what are they making with it? And how can I maybe create my own creative input? In some way, can I work with them on what they have? That's what I did when you asked me about *Prayer Rugs*. The Moroccan government asked me to come and look at their rug making workshops and to introduce ideas, because they were eager to export more rugs. So I looked at what they had, what materials there were. They had cotton warp usually, wool nodding and weft. I made rugs, and then I made rugs I could hoist on the wall. All of them for me were whole series of *Prayer Rugs* because of the tradition, which I loved, when at a certain moment of the day, everyone would take off their shoes and kneel on a rug. Hopefully pointing it toward Mecca, but they'd get confused and sometimes it would be bedlam *(laughter)* the way their rugs were pointing. But they're all prayer rugs. Then it was nice taking and looking at the architecture of all the arches in the way that Marrakesh, you've been to Morocco some of you, so you know. Fes, Meknes, they took me around to all the rug making centers. The Ministry of *Artisanat* and the Ministry of Community Development. I made ideas about rugs, and I called them *Prayer Rugs.* In a way, I was praying it was going to work. *(laughter)*

TG: Well it did.

SH: We don't have one in this show. In the book there's some photographs.

TG: Let me ask you another thing about the piece upstairs, the linen piece upstairs. There is a move that has been in your practice for a while…

SH: Wait a minute. Did we do cotton? We did silk, wool and we did linen.

TG: So the piece upstairs it has these strands…

SH: But you know what we forgot? Most of this show is made out of synthetic material. Have you noticed?

TG: Yeah, the big piece.

SH: Everywhere. Outside, things on the columns out by the café and toward the garden. Those twisted, vertical zips on the columns, the things that I mentioned of the escargot in the garden. This is a really interesting material. This is a material of our time. You might even be wearing some kind of that material without realizing. The women are in their underwear probably. These are the new man-made, industrial fibers and fabrics.

TG: Where did you find them, or how did they come into your studio?

SH: Well they're in our existence. You go to North Park, about half of it is going to be synthetic fibers and fabrics in imaginative versions. Some of it looks like leather, some of it looks like blue jeans, some of it looks like blouses, some that looks like wedding dresses. But it's our civilization. We are making man-made, synthetic, interesting, industrial, revolutionary, waterproof, lightweight, non-creasable kind of things. Who in the art world is not using all these new things? Venice Biennale, you said it was 30% digital…

Audience Member: Maybe a bit more, now with reflection.

SH: How much synthetic was it? With artificial and synthetic materials. 80%?

Audience Member: A little less, but a lot.

SH: Might be that art is 80% with where we're moving. You have an exhibition in the annex gallery upstairs. The first gallery you walk into upstairs, how much of it is made of synthetic and artificial materials? Maybe 80%? It's interesting.

TG: Did you ever have to think about whether or not you wanted to use synthetic materials, or if you wanted to stick to natural materials?

SH: That's the kind of backward way of thinking. I mean, are we going to live today or we're going to live yesterday?

TG: So, it's a step toward modernity and the contemporary.

SH: It's a step toward actuality.

TG: I want to ask one more thing about the piece upstairs with the linen. So the linen is tightly wrapped by these bands of color.

SH: They're lines of color…

TG: Yeah. They go around…

SH: Of cotton, of embroidery cotton. Embroidery cotton that's used to embroider traditionally things like tablecloths, because then you can wash it, wash it, and wash it. The sun and the light don't damage.

TG: So, that is a move that's been in your repertoire for years, wrapping linen with cotton. You have these very tightly controlled areas and these looser flowing areas of linen.

SH: Reveal and camouflage. Reveal and camouflage.

TG: Does that come from the natural world?

SH: From life. Women are very covert. *(laughter)*

TG: You once called works with the linen bound with cotton *lianes.*

SH: I didn't have any way of knowing what they should be called. So, people just walking into the studio would say, "Can you make me a wall of…" And they were looking, searching for the word. What's the word? Right, Frank? So, what are they going to call those things? (*looks at member of audience*) Did you invent the word?

Frank Elbaz: *(from audience)* No.

SH: It's in French. It means…

TG: Well, it's also a kind of tree that are these vines that grow from the ground up into trees, that are kind of about the same width and circumference as the works you made. So, I thought maybe your use of the word *liane* might have come from…

SH: Must be from the associations that people have when they walk into my studio and see us making. They're coming maybe from their chateau, their garden, or their… People give names to my things and I don't usually until I'm finished with whatever I'm doing. Do you like the word?

TG: I think it's a great word, because I know virtually no French. I mean I have vaguely art historical French. I can read painting titles and that's about it. So, when I tried to find out what a *liane* was, the first thing that comes up when you look at Google are these reedy, thick, woody vines. It made me think that maybe those forms you borrowed from nature, directly from nature.

SH: I think people's imaginations were gift by association where people start calling these things. Here in America, they like it in the gallery circuit when something sounds vaguely French, like in restaurants. *(laughter)*

So it works. If you call them woody, reedy, kind of woodsy… I don't think they'd order it in the restaurants. (*laughs*)

TG: The last thing I want to ask you about is a work over here in the lower gallery called *To Take Roots*. It's a canvas which has been diagonally…

SH: Actually the original title, I have to tell you right away on that same subject, not to lose that idea of titles, *Cordes Sauvage*. They called the title and the reference we always use in my studio. Ever since I've been making them is *Cordes Sauvage*. You know, just a cord gone crazy, sort of sauvage.

2001 Flora Street
Dallas, TX 75201

+1 214.242.5100

Savage. The savage cords. My grandson loves to come and work on them. He comes and helps, sits there at the table and tells us his adventures, who he's flirting with. He's 12 and likes to integrate in the studio and talk to some of the young girls who are doing an apprenticeship or something at the studio. He wants to know this week, "Anybody up to making *Cordes Sauvage*?" He'll wander over on his Wednesday afternoon. So, we call them *Cordes Sauvage.* They're endless. We love making them.

TG: I can see why. They're playful and gorgeous.

SH: And you're calling them?

TG: Well, I think the specific title of this one was *To Take Roots*.

SH: Okay, so that seemed like a nice one. We put it in an art fair, right? We put it in an art fair in FIAC and Basel Miami. Most of the visitors were American. Maybe they thought it was creepy to have these *Cordes Sauvage*. If you have it in a gallery they want to sell it, so put on a title that's not going to make people feel like it's creepy.

TG: (*laughs*) Well it's a nice title too. The roots of that object are the canvas underneath the wrapping.

SH: There's no canvas. What canvas?

TG: You can see some canvas peeking out from under…

SH: You see everything peeking out. Look in there, you've got all kinds of things inside.

TG: I wanted to ask about that peeking out.

SH: Now you see it, now you don't.

TG: Yeah, is that why?

SH: Now you want to touch it. I want to figure out what it is. So, we're during the end right?

TG: Yeah.

SH: The people who were brave enough to come out today in the rain and who are here, would the museum allow them to touch the *Cordes Sauvage*? If they wanted to in the first gallery out here, because it's really a kick?

TG: I have to tell a story. So, Sheila was on the podcast about five years ago and she told a story about how obviously people aren't supposed to touch the art when you see sculptures and stuff. But one of the things you liked about bronze sculptures that were old, was that you could see the history of how people had tacitly interacted with them on the surface of the sculpture. You could see with a 200-year-old sculpture in a park in France what people had been drawn to. That helped make the old thing contemporary, tactile and revealed something about humans too.

SH: I'm sort of like that. I've been touched. *(laughter)*

TG: That's probably a good place to stop. Sheila Hicks, thank you.

(*Applause*)

SH: Any questions?

TG: People who have questions, we're going to have a microphone. Just raise your hand and we'll bring the microphone to you.

Audience Question: Hi, I am also from Nebraska from a town very close to where you're from.

SH: What's it called?

AQ: Columbus. So, I am very curious because when you went to college at Yale, it was really unheard of for young women to go to Yale. I was really happy to go to the University of Nebraska. I'm just curious if you could talk about how you launched from Nebraska to Yale at that time.

SH: Very devious route. You see, the mythology is I come from Nebraska. Well, it's true in a way, but I didn't spend that much time in Nebraska. It explains it in these few monographs and books, I won't bore you with my biography. My grandfather asked his children whenever they were giving birth, his daughters, to come back and birth in Nebraska. They were once the founders of Hastings. The idea being, you wander as you will and curiosity, as you will. I have cousins who became doctors, lawyers and all kinds of things, but they all did it out in other territories. All of the children and all of the cousins, everyone has a link to Hastings. So, I have this mythological, wonderful link to Hastings, Nebraska. There's even someone I met here also from Hastings, right? He asked me if my grandfather was a Mason in Hastings or something like that. So, how'd I get from Hastings from Yale. Let's go the short path. When my mother and father graduated from Hastings College, they eloped and took off. They became Bonnie and Clyde and traveled throughout the Midwest. He was seeking employment. He got employed by someone who wanted him to establish branch offices of a certain ball and roller bearing kind of company. So, he moved and opened offices all throughout different cities. I say as a joke, my brother and I learned to entertain ourselves playing games in the back seat of the car. We moved from different places during the Depression. During Detroit, he worked with the Army Ordnance, specialized in ball and roller bearings. So, in Detroit I was there during the war, right? Go fast. As soon as that was over, we moved to Chicago. I went to high school on the North Shore of Chicago. Then I went to, because I fell in love with the guy who recruited students for college. I fell in love with a guy who came to our high school who looked like Cary Grant. (*laughs*) True story. Nobody wanted to go to his school. It was college day where they're looking trying to get young kids. "What are you 17, 18, 19? Where are you going to go to school? What are you going to study?" I had two very serious brothers who went to bona fide legitimate colleges. This guy convinced me to come with another friend, we

wanted to study art we thought, to his school which was Syracuse University. There we met a Yugoslavian sculptor called Meštrović. Ever heard of him?

TG: No.

SH: Ever been to Chicago and seen all the bareback Indian riders? All these huge sculptures along Lake Michigan? It's the most important sculpture in Chicago, all these bareback Indian riders. Very powerful. He had his big studio at Syracuse. He was a sculpture, and we were fascinated this other friend and I, with this man's work. We studied art at Syracuse for two years until one day she said, "The Dean is leaving, the guy who's our protector. I'm going home for spring vacation. Let's look at…" It was another student, a person I spent a lot of time with. We were making prints, lithographs, woodcuts, and engravings. "Give me your portfolio of prints." She had hers. "Give me yours too. I'm going to scout another school in case we don't like the new Dean coming into this school and we don't like the atmosphere and we're not happy." What is there to lose? I gave her my portfolio. She took off for spring vacation and she came back. You know what she told me? "If we don't like it here we've got a choice. I took our portfolios to Yale. I met with the director, his name is German. He's kind of fearsome, but he accepted both of us, the portfolios, and gave us advanced standing on the basis of these prints and drawings we were making. Now that's a happy story. Except she committed suicide that summer. So you see how life turns? My father said, "What do you do now, smarty? You going back to school where you know what's going on at Syracuse? Or are you going to go someplace where you don't know anybody and you don't know anything?" I said, "I'm going where I don't know anything. I don't want to go back to Syracuse. I don't want people asking, "What ever happened to that friend of yours?"" So I ran away from Syracuse, went to Yale and there was destiny. That's how I got to Yale. I wasn't a brave women or brilliant applying to one of these good schools. I might mention I had a brother, Princeton. He was pretty embarrassed. (*laughter*)

He refused to come visit me even when they had the football games. He wasn't going to say he had a sister hiding at the art school in Yale. We had a sort of life apart at this little art school. Nobody took us seriously. None of the Yaleys, not the medical school, not the law school. None of the schools took us seriously, but watch out because this story has a happy ending. I'm sorry to introduce the sad note, but it's sort of part of the whole ensemble of what goes on. You know, we have up days, we have down days. We have sunshine, we have rain.

AQ: I have another Nebraska question. There was a great writer from Nebraska named Marie Santos. She wrote old jewels, big phenomenon in the 1930s. Lived until the mid-1960s, I'm not asking you if you ever crossed paths with her, but did her work inspire, influence or affect you in any way?

SH: Since you're into literature, you know Willa Cather. Well my grandfather's sister, my great aunt, was friends with her. I believe she probably inspired me,

because they would put giants on the earth and all kinds of books on my table all the time. I read Willa Cather very early on a lot. She's a kind of adopted Nebraska. With Santos, no. I didn't know.

TG: Leigh.

AQ: Sheila, I was wondering if you have given a title to the work you've done in the garden and on the terrace?

SH: Because you have to write the caption.

AQ: That's right. (*laughter*)

SH: We have had such a good time, well I have had such a good time working with Leigh. Will you stand up? She's been the wheels on the coach that's made the car run, making this exhibition happen following it from beginning to end. So, you want to put the last dot on the last I of the legend. All right. Let's go out there, take a look at it and we'll do it. Nice way to finish.

TG: That's probably a good place to finish. Sheila Hicks, thank you.

(*Applause*)