

# Fibre Is My Alphabet

*Jennifer Higgle* talks to  
**Sheila Hicks** about the  
60-year evolution  
of her artistic language

*Atterrissage*, 2014,  
pigments and acrylic fibres,  
4.8 × 4.3 × 2.6 m

Courtesy  
the artist, Galerie Frank Elbaz,  
Paris, Alison Jacques Gallery  
and Michelle D'Souza Fine Art, London;  
photograph: Zarko Vijatovic



I first saw Sheila Hicks's work at the 30th Bienal de São Paulo in 2012 and it stopped me in my tracks: it was like nothing I had ever seen. Combining weaving, found objects and wood, along with notebooks and research material, it was at once textural and sculptural, sombre and wildly colourful. I wanted to touch it as much as I wanted to look at it.

Hicks was born in Nebraska, USA, in 1934, studied painting under Josef Albers at Yale between 1954–59, travelled extensively through South America, taught Albers's Bauhaus course at a university in Chile, founded textile workshops in various countries including Mexico and South Africa, worked with weavers in India and Morocco, and made monumental tapestries and wall hangings for companies from Ford to Fuji. She moved to Paris, where she still lives, in 1964. Hicks shows no sign of slowing down. Her major retrospective, 'Sheila Hicks: 50 Years', which debuted at the Addison Gallery of American Art in 2011, has travelled to the ICA, Philadelphia, and the Mint Museum, Charlotte. In 2014, her work was included in the Whitney Biennial in New York, while in Paris she created a major sculpture for the Fondation Louis Vuitton and her installation at the Palais de Tokyo will be in place until April. Last year, her work was featured in the group show 'Fiber: Sculpture 1960–present' at the ICA Boston, currently at the Wexner Center for the Arts until 12 April before it tours to Des Moines Art Center in May. In London, her solo show at the Hayward Project space, 'Foray into Chromatic Zones', runs until 19 April. She has also had recent solo exhibitions at Galerie Frank Elbaz, Paris, Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York, and Alison Jacques Gallery, London.

I visited Hicks at her atmospheric apartment in Saint Germain on a rainy day in December. It's full of the textiles, sculptures, paintings and wall hangings she has collected over the years. We talked for hours, during the course of which she drew diagrams in my notebook, gave me various fibres – from feathers to silk – to illustrate her ideas, discussed the provenance of what I was wearing, and fed me coffee and bananas. We then went downstairs to her warm, crowded studio – located in the same building that the painter Balthus worked in – where she pulled out books and showed me her works-in-progress, including a small weaving (a 'minime') that she was creating on the same hand loom she's had for half a century. It was one of the most inspiring days I have ever spent.

*The Double Prayer Rug, Atelier des Grand Augustins Paris, 1970, silk, linen, cotton and gold thread, 2 x 1.5 m*

Facing page and following spread courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

*Jennifer Higgie: How did your work, Baôli (2014), at the Palais de Tokyo come about?*

Sheila Hicks: I was given a free rein to do what I wanted in the Grande Rotonde for a year. The museum is open until midnight; it's a gathering venue. I wanted to create a feel-good space for the community, a place to which everyone is invited for concerts, receptions, poetry readings or to do as they please – hang out, meet friends or sleep while the children play. It was partially inspired by my time in India, where people socialize on the steps leading down to well water. The curator, Gallien Dejean, helped me title the environment after the famous stepwell in India, Rajon Ki Baoli. *Baôli* is comprised of many components, which shift and change every three months, when the shows at the Palais de Tokyo change. To create it, I primarily used synthetic fibre.

*How is synthetic fibre different to what you had been using previously?*

It's pigmented acrylic fibre; it's feather-weight, light friendly and weather resistant. I also used it in the work I made for the Whitney Biennial last year, *Pillar of Inquiry/Supple Column* (2013–14).

*I recently visited the Sonia Delaunay retrospective at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. She worked across genres and disciplines, as you do. Do you admire her?*

I met Delaunay in the 1960s in her apartment here in Paris: she was impressive. I went there at the invitation of Charles E. Slatkin, a New York art dealer who was interested in buying some of her gouache paintings to make into tapestries. At that point, she was an aged *grande dame*: she was astute, very aware, extremely talented and a good businesswoman. When I moved to Paris in 1964, conversion was the key word: the second- and third-hand editing of works, whereby an artist would make a drawing and then give it to someone else who would become the editor; they would then re-do the cartoon before passing it on to master dyers, weavers and so on. The final product was so removed from the original that I objected to it. I had come to Paris from Mexico, where I had lived for five years, and there it was all hands on, not four or five or six times removed. Whether an artist works directly with materials, or on the telephone or the computer and never touches materials, colours my view.

*What does touching the materials add?*

The hand connected to the eyes and the brain. Hands, eyes, brain: it's the magic triangulation. It comes from passion, heart and intellect inseparably cemented to your times and to your emotional experiences. If I gave my designs to someone else, it would be their interpretation of my idea.

*Were you showing with Slatkin yourself?*

He was doing a series of exhibitions around tapestry, although what I was making wasn't quite tapestry or painting or sculpture. But he invited me to exhibit in his gallery in 1974 – a kind of heretic show. It was reviewed positively by John Russell, *The New York Times* critic.

*What could be better than to sit and weave and think and then not to think, to just interlace yarns and amass networks of threads?*

*To go back to the beginning: you studied at Yale School of Art under Josef Albers from 1954–59. Was he a big influence?*

Yes. I studied painting with him and was under the influence and pressure of him. At that time, there were no women teachers at Yale School of Art and not many women students, although Eva Hesse and I overlapped in some crit sessions. Mark Strand, who became the Poet Laureate of the US, was also there studying painting. But he spun off into poetry.

*Was Hesse making interesting work then?*

Our school was so much about perception of colour, and colour wasn't her thing. But Albers's teaching was very much about analytical perception, so there was something to be learned by everyone. He would always ask me: 'Wass ist das, girl?' What is that, girl?

*How would you answer him?*

It was very important that we could articulate our thoughts concisely. I had no precise answer because I was mining indescribable territories and felt somewhat insecure.

*Was he a good listener?*

He certainly was, because he knew the right questions to ask, which are as important as the answers. Perhaps even more so.

*What inspired your interest in fibre?*

George Kubler [author of *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, 1962] taught an art history class at Yale on pre-Columbian art. I had written my term paper on pre-Incaic Andean Textiles and, at that time, there was only one reference book, by Raul D'Harcourt, which had been published in 1934 – the year I was born. Kubler was flashing slides of incredible weavings up on the screen and what caught my interest was their colour, design and shape. I began teaching myself how to weave because I was interested in how the pre-Incas structured thought with threads, with lines. The more I got into it, the more I realized how sophisticated these weavings were; more intriguing, in fact, than what we were learning in the Bauhaus programme, where we were studying typography, lettering, photography and colour theory. The work I discovered that the tribes in the Andes were doing – without a written language – blew my mind. They were engineering in three dimensions and creating their own materials; every tribe did its own thing and there was infinite variety. Their language moved in a network of lines that became pliable planes in their clothes and ritual cloths. Later, when the Inca tribes dominated the region, ingenuity declined. The richness of the pre-Incaic textile language is the most complex of any textile culture in history.





*Arc with Rose*, 2012,  
cotton and metallic fibre,  
24 x 13 cm



*Feeling Blue, Seeing White*,  
2013, cotton on  
bast fibre, 25 x 13 cm



*Frequency Grid*, 2011,  
cotton, 24 x 15 cm



*Wed to Singular Paths*,  
2013, cotton, linen, metallic fibre  
and silk, 24 x 14 cm



*Port Bas Relief*,  
2011, cotton and linen,  
24 x 15 cm



*Zapallar*,  
1957-58, wool,  
23 x 12 cm



*Falcon and Eye (blue, gold)*,  
2009, cotton, metallic fibres  
and silk, 23 x 14 cm



*Kangaroo Haven*, 2014,  
cotton, linen, paper, pineapple fibre  
and silk, 24 x 14 cm

*My ambition and entertainment every day is to exploit my chosen material for a visual result. How can I bring it into the domain of art and poetry?*

The structures and the complications, the thinking – these people win the prize.

*What did Albers think of your interest in all of this?*

When he saw me trying to figure it out, sitting on the floor with an improvised back strap loom, he took me home to meet his wife, Anni – she had checked out the same book from the school library that I used for my research. I think she was terribly bored stuck out in the suburbs, because she couldn't teach, as she had in the Bauhaus and at Black Mountain College.

*Was she making things then?*

She had a small standing floor loom and was weaving lovely pictorial panels, but she was quite isolated in a suburb of New Haven in the boondocks. Josef was painting in the basement of their modest house. Last month, I visited the house that Walter Gropius designed and lived in when he taught at Harvard and I thought: 'Oh, it's so much nicer than where the Albers were living.'

*You were awarded a scholarship to Chile and you travelled in South America in 1957–58.*

Yes, I went to Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil and photographed extensively. Then I went back to Yale, since Albers had said to me that, if I returned, he would count the period I spent traveling as fieldwork. It became part of my Masters degree in painting. Junius Bird was my thesis advisor. He was an archaeologist at the Museum of Natural History in New York, and the keeper of its extensive collection of pre-Incaic textiles. My interest in textiles didn't mean I stopped painting – I loved it – but my fascination with coloured lines and inventing pliable two- and three-dimensional structures slowly overtook every other enthusiasm.

*During that time, you taught Albers's Bauhaus basic two- and three-dimensional design class in Spanish at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile in Santiago. How did that come about?*

Albers was invited by the director of the architecture department to instigate a programme similar to the one he was running at Yale. He sent a student annually to teach and perpetuate the class. One day he said: 'I'm sending you to Chile, because I know you're interested in Andean textiles, and you can see them on the way.' And that's how I enlarged my knowledge of textile culture.

*But you were exploring your own language?*

I was trying to, but I hadn't gone heretic yet. Around that time, I met a photographer, Sergio Larrain, who was my age and the son of the man who invited Albers and me to his school. Together we travelled south all the way to Tierra del Fuego, and later to Peru and Bolivia; it was amazing and influenced me deeply – the landscape was incredible. Before leaving Chile, Larrain and I had an exhibition at the Palace of the Fine Arts in Santiago, of his photography and my paintings. Then he went his way (he became a Magnum photographer) and I went mine, back to Yale. I was then awarded a grant to continue my studies in France and, once that was finished, I moved to rural Mexico, where I set up a weaving studio in Taxco el Viejo.

*What kind of fibres were you using then?*

Whatever was locally available. Mostly sheep's wool and cotton in Mexico. Now, living in France these past 50 years, I tend to use linen and new synthetic fibres.

*You've talked about fibre and textile having memory. What do you mean by this?*

When you twist fibres tightly they react to tension in different ways. They retract or stretch and move in different rhythms according to environmental conditions such as heat, humidity and light.

*Is there a therapeutic aspect to weaving?*

Probably. People are desperate for a grounding and what could be better than to sit and weave and think, and then not to think, to just interlace yarns and amass networks of threads? I am a *plasticienne* more than psychologist, though. My brother was a psychoanalyst; I think he envied my simplicity of mind.

*You once said: 'There's fibre in almost every photograph in a newspaper,' the implication being that our lives are surrounded by, and even defined by, fibre. You often make your own clothes, in fact.*

I enjoy making things for friends, too. It's true, you can't go anywhere in the world without touching fibre. I've conducted workshops where I ask everyone to get undressed and to examine the materials they're wearing layer by layer. Everything you wear has connotations. You can learn a lot about people from their clothes, their wrappings, their packaging.

*That's like Oscar Wilde saying that only a fool doesn't judge by appearances.*

[laughter] Weaving grass, reed, hair and tree bark is one of the oldest occupations of mankind. So, how do you deal with that in 2015, without getting stuck in folklore or clichés about women's work?

*There's been much discussion around definitions of your work: whether it's craft or art or design. How do you think of it?*



1  
Commission for MGIC Investment Corporation Headquarters, Milwaukee, 1972–73, photographed by Ezra Stoller

2  
Sheila Hicks working on Solferino Tacubaya in Taxco el Viejo, Guerrero, Mexico, 1960–61, photographed by Ferdinand Bosch

Courtesy  
1 Esto • 2 the artist, Alison Jacques Gallery and Michelle D'Souza Fine Art, London

I care less and less about what definitions people give to my work, whether it's art or not. I keep probing ideas and fumble to give them form. Everyone has a relationship to material. The interesting question is: how sensitive are they to it? You take a pencil and you write or draw lines, but who moves those lines into a poem or a novel? The pencil is at once an extension of the brain and a tool that registers sensitivity and awareness. There's a hop, skip and a jump that takes you from material to art and often it's circuitous. Take Richard Tuttle's recent show at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. When people who are just entering the sphere of thinking about art see a Tuttle show, the subtlety of his process may not even occur to them. What is art? Well, it's personal and barely definable now.

*Do your titles function as guides to how you want someone to understand your work?*

Titles are a parallel path of entry. They are not descriptions. Metaphors reign. The implications are not too literal or illustrative. Right now, for example, I'm considering titles for my show in the project space at the Hayward Gallery in London. I'm thinking about 'Material Implications', as I'm wondering what the implications might be for the people visiting the show. Are they, say, in an awakened state, in a sad or a mourning frame of mind. Are they curious tourists, art students or young people finding themselves by looking at the work of others?

*Do you write poetry?*

I hesitate to say yes.

*Why hesitate?*

I tend to compose fables with coloured and textured lines and work out *en route* what to do with them or how to interpret them. Fibre is my alphabet and help-mate.

*Since 1964, you have created a lot of large-scale commissions. Important ones include the bas-relief tapestries you made for the Ford Foundation in New York in 1967; the wall-hanging for the MGIC Investment Corporation Headquarters in Milwaukee in 1972–73; the series of embroideries you did for the first-class cabins of Air France in the mid-'70s; La Memoire (Memory), which you created for the IBM headquarters in Paris in 1972; and the 100-metre-long linen panel you made in 1992–93 for the Fuji City Cultural Centre. Of course, each of these projects is the result of a different design solution but, simply put, given the diversity of these works, what determines your initial approach?*

I ask: 'What might be good in this room or space in this country and culture?' I imagine how the place will be used and maintained. I dream of what I would like to create and how I can make it. Actually, in 2013–14, I re-created the work I made for the Ford Foundation, as the tapestries had been ruined by a poisonous fire-prevention chemical. It took me, with the aid of many assistants, a year to re-create them in my studio in Paris. They have a timeless quality and still look appropriate.



2

*In 1971, the Moroccan Government invited you to help invigorate the country's rug-making industry. How did you approach this enormous task?*

I talked with local crafts people and suggested trying to fabricate new designs, while respecting their traditional methods and materials. I did my best to get to know the country. I worked with weavers in Tangier, Meknes and Sale/Rabat; I also made wall hangings, inspired by the country's historic architecture and prayer rugs, which are still in production.

*You worked in India for 15 years, creating textile collections for Air India, hotels and government buildings. How did that come about?*

In 1966, I was invited to one of the oldest hand-weaving factories in the world – the Commonwealth Trust in Kozikode, Kerala – to develop commercial designs for export. I studied the regional historical production and learned from the local spinners, dyers and weavers. Together, we created collections using cotton, coconut fibre and silk. Many of the designs continue to be produced and sold in Europe, Australia, Africa and the Americas.

*When you're weaving are you inspired by the work of other artists?*

My eyes are always open at a 360-degree angle. Anything that comes across my path, I register, whether I'm attracted to it or not.

*Does that get exhausting? Or is it simply about being alive?*

Children do it all the time. It's only as people grow up that they start shutting down.

*Do you edit your work much?*

I find I often go back to the first 'take'; the final 'take' is usually close to the first one.

*What else are you working on at the moment?*

Well, on the same small loom I've had for 50 years, I continue to make what I call 'minimes'. As for larger works, I'm about to install a five-metre sculpture in the new Fondation Louis Vuitton in the Bois de Boulogne. And I am getting work ready for my show at the Hayward Gallery.

*Do you feel like you're still learning?*

I'm trying! But things are getting more technically complex; materials are being invented for space travel and linkage systems. We're mixing materials that we never thought of mixing before. I ask myself questions, such as: Who is my audience? Who am I talking to and why? What are the implications? My ambition and entertainment every day is to exploit my chosen material for a visual result. How can I bring it into the domain of art and poetry? ♦♦

*Jennifer Higgin is co-editor of frieze and editor of Frieze Masters. She lives in London, UK.*