The Artistic Tornado Headed Toward Israel

Exhibited in the world's leading museums, work by 84-year-old Sheila Hicks are now on show in Israel, too – yet it is important for her to stress that she comes to Jaffa because, as she says, "there's still a lot for me to learn." In a high-octane interview, the textile artist explains why political art still drives the public away, and what she did in Israel in the 1980s with Bedouins and laundry staff

By Maya Asheri

Photographs: Daniel Tchetchik

If it were up to her, Sheila Hicks would have probably written this interview all by herself. Or she might have given up on it all together, instead printing carefully selected images of her works. Sharp and direct, Hicks sets the tone in every room she enters, and with every person she talks to, having little patience for superfluous words. As is evidenced by her works, she believes above all in manual workmanship and in what we see with our eyes. That is how what was supposed to be a regular an interview, with a celebrated, renowned artist in a Jaffa gallery, turned into a four-hour excursion during which she resorted to numerous images, asked a great deal of questions, answered only a few, and invited me to join her on a visit to the Kuchinate artists' collective of women asylum seekers – again, to look at activity on the space rather than discuss it. Once there, she suggested that later on we write together about these women – instead of such much talk centered on her.

For over 60 years now, Hicks has been traveling the world, producing work from yarns, fibers and textiles. Her pieces – from tapestries and grand-scale, three-dimensional installations, to miniature weaves made on a hand loom, what she calls "Minimes" – have been characterized by their vibrant colors, wealth of textures and the variety of techniques used, a result of endless years of research. She has been exhibiting continuously, and her works are in the collections of the MoMA and the Metropolitan in New York, the Stedelijk in Amsterdam, and the Victoria and Albert in London. In addition, she has received numerous commissions by architects, for both private and public buildings – works of hers are hung at the Ford Foundation headquarters in Manhattan, the Fuji City Cultural Center in Japan, and the King Saud University in Riyadh, to name a few. Her unclassifiable blend of design, art, architecture and craft is among her most recognizable features.

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Sheila Hicks. To translate into words a person whose whole essence is about doing things is a quite challenging task

Photography: Daniel Tchetchik

At 84, she shows no signs of slowing down: Just last April a large retrospective of her work, at the Pompidou Center in Paris, closed down. Her new show in Israel, which opens this Thursday at Magasin III in Jaffa – to coincide with the "Loving Art, Doing Art" events – is only one of at least five additional shows she takes part in at the moment, internationally. When again she asks why we couldn't discuss me rather than her, and I mention an upcoming project in October next year, she shoots right away: "at that time I'll be doing a show in Chile."

Creating Worldwide

Hicks – poised, colorfully dressed, with white hair and large clear eyes – was born in 1934 in the small town of Hastings, Nebraska. During the 1950s she studied at Yale, earning two degrees and focusing on painting, yet already then she began to err toward textile-making. It was at that time that her global approach to work began to take shape, with multiple sources of inspiration, in a way that still marks her work to this day: On the one hand, she was inspired by the Bauhaus veterans she studied with at Yale, especially Josef Albers and his wife Anni, whose work in weaving was groundbreaking. On the other, her love of textile-making was triggered by Latin

America – initially, through the teachings of George Kubler, and subsequently from personal experience.

In 1957 she received a Fulbright Scholarship to teach in Chile, which allowed her to travel throughout South America. She studied traditional weaving techniques in Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, returning to settle down in Mexico once she graduated. In the 1960s she moved to Paris, where she still lives today. When I ask why she never returned to live in the USA, she says she still travels there "once every month." Her Paris studio she defines as her "home base," while her third husband and some of her eight grandchildren live overseas.

Clearly, it is also her work that keeps her on the move. What she did during her formative years in Central and South America she has continued to do in the decades since. Wherever she travels, she studies traditional practices by working with locals. She had worked in Morocco, India, France, Japan and Sweden, and in some places – such as Mexico, Chile and South Africa – she set up workshops that remained active after her departure. "The reason I came to Jaffa today is because there's still more for me to learn," she says even now. "And I learn by working with people. This way you get to know them instead of being just another tourist. You have to *do* something."

That's how she got to Israel, too. In 1980, the Israel Museum held a massive show of her work, "Free Fall," curated by Izika Gaon. "The title is meant to convey Hicks's modus operandi, following the contours she gave to the project," wrote Gaon at the time. "Zeroing-in from afar, quickly and accurately parachuting down on a pre-targeted area, operating fast yet with the most impact, and signing off, until the next fall."

"We worked for two years on this exhibition," she tells me, producing a copy of the jacket from that exhibition's catalogue. All the works exhibited were made progressively, as Hicks worked alongside Israelis in different parts of the country – from Negev Bedouins to laundry personnel at the Hadassah Hospital – all of them named in the inner side of the dust jacket. "As I arrived in Israel, I came to a Kibbutz and sat to a table with local women, and we created something," she elaborates her creed. "And then I went to the Arab village on the other side of the road, sitting and working with them. We were doing things, and I could tell how experienced they were with their hands, what they looked like, their understanding and ability to connect things."

In contrast with her Israel Museum exhibition of 38 years ago, "Migdalor," her current show in Jaffa, includes only three installations that nonetheless demonstrate her range. "Comets" consists of round, multicolored pillow-like sculptures, of varying

sizes and textures; “Menhir” is made out of four groups of supple white threads cascading from ceiling to flour; and the highlight of the show, “Saffron Sentinel,” which occupies about half the space – a gigantic installation containing some 200 round bundles of pure pigment (unaffected by the harsh Jaffa sunlight that enters though the windows) in bright hues of orange and yellow that are soft and inviting.

“Some days ago I spotted a little girl of about six who passed by, she stopped to stare at the window and her grandmother attempted to pull her away and move on – but she refused to go. This made me happy,” Hicks says as we ride the car to the Kuchinate Collective. “She stared at the window. I walked outside, asking if they wouldn’t come in. As they entered, the grandmother tells me, “orange is her favorite color.” She was the first visitor in the show. So I have a feeling it’s going to work.”

Works by Hicks at Magasin III in Jaffa. Travelling the world and working with yarns, fibers and textiles

Photography: Daniel Tchetchik

Hands, Eyes, Brain

If her works come across as no more than fluffy, Hicks would like to make it clear – as usual, in her own manner – that they are not disconnected from a much wider social context. The first thing she does as we sit down across from each other to talk is show me an email she had just received just that day, from an old friend of hers ("you might as well quote him," she suggest with aplomb): "You assist people from rough geographical areas who want to participate in European culture," writes the friend. "You open the window to a wider world."

"When I'm being asked why I am coming to Jaffa – this is why," she says. "And I say in particular that I'm going to Jaffa, not that I'm going to Israel," she says, producing yet another visual reference – a personal diary of sorts containing keepsakes from previous travels. Every page is a reminder of why she went there. There's something from a close friend's show in Prague, from her own show in Vienna, from places she visited before she came here. This friend's email she'll insert in the blank page reserved for Israel. "My works aren't political in the strict sense, to not get people angered and have them thinking they're on the right or wrong side of things," she answers my question with surprising breadth. "They have a humanity in them – but they don't overdo it with the message. This is why I operate the way that I do, so I don't lose half the people the minute they come in."

Piles of pure pigment, circular, multicolored sculptures and threads cascading down from the ceiling Photography: Daniel Tchetchik

The is probably why she joins Sandra Weil, a curator of Swedish origin living in Israel, on a visit to Kuchinate, a collective of women asylum seekers based in southern Tel Aviv. And why she offers me, too, to join. “We’d still be talking, you can continue working on your article and see some action,” she explains. “That way we won’t be late. You don’t let people wait.” “That’s a good idea,” says Weil to Hicks, “after all, that’s who you are.”

The members of Kuchinate – most of them from Eritrea – weave baskets, earning pay for their work and a portion of proceeds while staying in a safe, friendly environment during the day, where they can bring their children. Hicks did not sit down to knit by their side, but in her questions and guidance there was an art that was no less than impressive. “I approach places like this one from a place of problem-solving,” she would explain later. “I look into people’s level of skill, how flexible they are and able to adjust themselves, whether they can resist being swallowed up by the good intentions of rich women. Intentions are always good, but they tend to navigate in other directions.”

She talked with some English-speaking members of the collective, then interrogated the Israeli women who run it, asking about their business model, and never letting them digress to lesser matters (“that’s all very good,” she said at some point, “but that’s just literature. I want to see the actual thing”). She wants to know who’s in charge of marketing, design and fundraising; why the women always repeat the same basket model, why there isn’t greater variety in the designs. She inquires where materials come from, who brings them here, why the decision to work with Jersey (it’s the cheapest), and why go for a fabric imported from China. “You’ve said there isn’t any textile industry left in Israel. But what can be done to avoid importing?” she asks. “What do you have available here in Israel that you can work with, so you’re not supporting another country’s industry? That’s a big question.”

When Ruth Garon, an Israeli worker at the collective, shows her a basket with an African motif, created by one of the group’s highest-skilled weavers, Hicks immediately responds with “that’s too African. It doesn’t seem to have anything to do with Israel at all.” When Garon points out that the women are African and not Israeli, hicks explains that “the whole point is to try and help them stay here. Isn’t it? And to do that, there needs to be a way to bring their culture to Israel and create a product that’s Israeli. There has to be a cultural dialogue. It needs to be something fabulous that sits in someone’s house in Long Island, so that a guess who comes in would want to know where it came from. It can’t look like anything you buy in Stockholm or New York.”

Photography: Daniel Tchetchik

Later, she would characterize Garon as someone smart, with an open mind, who knows what she's doing ("not someone who will tell me what she thinks I'd like to hear," she adds). "We can go on talking. I think you have a lot of options," she tells her. "You have a need for it. It's not some nice little hobby. You do really need it and you're motivated." Before concluding, Hicks collects a pile of brochures to hand out at the Jaffa opening. "I'll let you have some of the materials I used for the show, you can use them to make something that stands outside without getting discolored," she adds.

As the visit concludes, I part from hicks like someone who just survived a tornado that buzzed by before moving on: quite shaken, yet safe and sound. To translate someone like her, whose whole essence is in making, not in words, is a daunting task, but in the end, Hicks had already engineered that from the start. While still at the gallery, before we sit down to talk, and as Daniel the photographer patiently awaits for her to consent to photo, she lays beside me the booklet for a group show she participates in, which is taking place these days in Stockholm, dedicated to craft works in wood, ceramics and textile.

Without saying a word, she opens the booklet and points to a quote of hers' which serves as the motto for the whole show. "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." After spending this time with her, there's no doubt for me that this is her motto, too.