

SHEILA HICKS

MAK – Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna, Austria

Brigitte Huck, translated by Gerrit Jackson, *Artforum*, 1 April 2021



Sheila Hicks, *Apprentissages de la Victoire*, 2008–16, wool, coconut fiber. Installation view. Photo: Georg Mayer.

Textiles were long widely dismissed as craft rather than art. Sheila Hicks’s exhibition “Thread, Trees, River” demonstrates how to wash away the stigma. Though Hicks defends manual labor and artisanship, she does so to make plain the method of her art; sprucing up the dreariness of workaday life with beauty is not her mission. In countless small-format woven pieces she calls minimes—daily meditations and color and material studies—she presses forward with an endeavor that predates even the time she spent at the Yale School of Art in New Haven as a student of Josef Albers in the 1950s, when she discovered the textile designs and persuasive personality of his wife, Anni Albers. The quantum leap

into abstraction was the adventure in twentieth-century art, and textiles were a springboard: The structures and materials of woven fabrics found their correlate in the modernist aesthetic with its rectangular grids. Other influences that informed Hicks's life and art include a childhood in Nebraska, a ranch in Mexico, a studio in Paris, the textile techniques of Latin America, and architects such as Luis Barragán and Louis Kahn.

Sustainable art, Hicks says, grows out of curiosity and the dogged scrutiny of the physical world. This intensity of observation explains why she is just as invested in making pieces of modest dimensions, approximately as small as a letter-size sheet of paper, as she is in titanic and monumental creations.

Visitors enter the building from the side, finding themselves immediately in one of the three galleries that, along with the enormous skylighted main hall in their center, house the exhibition. Back in 1990, the austere spaces prompted Walter Pichler's sculpture *Tor zum Garten* (Gate to the Garden), a doorway with a flight of stairs holding out the possibility of escape. In a nod to Pichler's barrier between inside and outside, Hicks and curator Bärbel Vischer have mounted on the facing wall the ravishing Moroccan Prayer Rug, 1972, one of several such works the artist made after being invited by the Moroccan government to help invigorate the country's rug-making industry in 1971. The work evokes the gate of a medina as well as Mark Rothko's sublime and emotional fields of color.

Moroccan Prayer Rug anchors Hicks's proliferating and positively fractious coloristic escapades: from the asphalt-hued anthropomorphic *Menhir*, 1998–2004, to the purple cascade of *Perruque aubergine*, 1984/85; onward past the majestic *Lianes ivoires*, 2019/20, and *Lianes indigo*, 2020, to the dramatically illuminated *Racines de la culture/Roots of Culture*, 2018, a pastiche of nature and technology, of tangled roots and cables; and finally into the grand hall, where the visitor is greeted by the floor-to-ceiling column of *Apprentissages de la Victoire*, 2008–16, with cords and twines in shimmering gold and coconut fibers sheathed in spun yellow wool. Not far away beckons *La sentinelle de safran*, 2018, a soft, mound-shaped sculpture of pillowy bales of pigmented yarn in yellow and orange, saffron and cinnamon hues, facing *Constellation*, 2018–20, a planetary firmament in red, dark blue, green, and ivory.

A poignant story connects the most modest work in the exhibition, *Footprints*, 1978, which unframed would measure no more than eight by three-and-a-half inches, to the three prodigious cloths—as big as ten by twenty-six feet—of *Le démêloir*, 1977: Both pieces are about injuries, about repair and protection. The pair of socks in the former was worn threadbare by the wooden sabots of the nuns of the reformed Order of the Discalced Carmelites, who darned them beautifully in the 1970s. They also embroidered their similarly humble used bedsheets for a work commissioned from the artist by Air France, a work related to *Le démêloir* and its three linen panels with roughly stitched lines in a grid pattern, hung in a staggered arrangement like stage backdrops. These pieces were created in response to the brutal 1971 demolition of “the belly of Paris”—the wholesale market of Les Halles—to make way for a modern shopping mall. Whatever the scale, every piece is a triumph, proving Hicks to be a wizard of structure as well as of color.