

SHEILA HICKS ON OFF-GRID AT HEPWORTH WAKEFIELD: 'MY WORKS NEED TO BE TOUCHED!'

At her Hepworth Wakefield show, the masterful textile artist tells Hettie Judah why she wants to take visitors back to their childhood

Hettie Judah, *The i newspaper*, 7 April 2022



Artist Sheila Hicks at The Hepworth Wakefield (Photo: Joanne Crawford)

On a blustery, drizzly Yorkshire day, I am tempted to throw myself into a mountain of billowy-soft bales of coloured fibre and hibernate until the sun comes back. Sheila Hicks has provided the cushiony, downy, pillowy mountain of my dreams – part of the finale to her show at Hepworth Wakefield.

The outsized bundles pass through gradations of deep indigo through cumulus grey to palest aqua, like a northern skyscape. It is only through great force of will that I restrain myself from crawling in among them.

Now 87, Hicks is the *ne plus ultra* of textile artists: fierce, exacting, brilliant and individual. Her exhibition *Off Grid* is a bath of colour, texture, tempo and suggested (but absent) bodies. Works range in scale from a tiny woven square of dried reeds to a towering knotted rug, monumental as the stone gates to a Moroccan citadel.

They evoke thoughts of how humans have used knotted fibres to count and keep time, for shelter and warmth, to record stories, to broadcast allegiance: but often they are pure, meticulous, abstract compositions that play with weight, light, depth and tone.

ALISON JACQUES

Born in Hastings, Nebraska, Hicks studied under influential colour theorist Josef Albers at Yale in the 1950s, and was encouraged in her experiments in weaving by his wife, the great textile artist Anni Albers.

Hicks has explored dyeing and textile traditions around the world and the exhibition at Wakefield shows her working in Chile, Mexico, Morocco, India and France, her work moving off the grid of the loom into sculptures using skeins of thread, bundles of fluffy fibre and found materials ranging from porcupine quills to corn husks. I want to touch everything.



The show surveys some 70 years of Sheila Hicks's work (Photo: Joanne Crawford)

Dressed in an aquatic blue shirt of an intense tone that makes me think of Mexico, Hicks has been in Wakefield for two weeks directing the installation with sharp wit and a gimlet eye. How does she feel about her works being touched, I wonder? "They need to be!", she says, raising her eyebrows.

When her coloured bundles of soft, netted fibre were exhibited at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris in 2014, visitors could sit on them, but alas no more. Nevertheless, much in this show was made with the body in mind: glossy yarn cascades like ponytails, a small frame carries the sole of a nun's sock darned over years, circular bundles of tightly wrapped threads (concealing who knows what) have the yielding plumpness of floor cushions.

Of course people want to immerse themselves in all that coloured fibre: the attraction to bright things and soft textures is woven into us. "It's inviting, it's essential, it's reassuring," says Hicks.

ALISON JACQUES

The Hepworth is often full of schoolchildren. Hicks ponders, mischievously, the job the museum guards have ahead of them keeping young visitors at a respectful distance from the exhibits.

“The kids will just walk in and take over,” she says. “They’ll do whatever they want. They have their own spontaneity and naturally respond to colour and texture. I’m trying to open the way for people of all ages to recapture their childhood.”



Sheila Hicks: Off Grid at The Hepworth Wakefield (Photo: Tom Bird)

I admit that I had surreptitiously sniffed one of her works – a wall hanging with a cascade of woolly tendrils. “What did it smell like? Did it still smell like sheep?”, she asks approvingly, suggesting that I was having some kind of animal encounter. “You need to see if it’s friendly or if it bites!”

The show surveys some 70 years of work. There’s an early painting by Hicks from her time at Yale – an abstracted landscape in splodges of richly pigmented paint, composed in much the way she works today with bales of fibre.

Early experiments in weaving and knotting include a wall hanging commissioned by the (equally colour-obsessed) Mexican architect Luis Barragán.

Hicks is enormously sensitive to space and light, and has collaborated with architects throughout her career, stitching and weaving huge wall panels (the acme of cool modernity) for the Ford Foundation and Eero Saarinen’s building at JFK Airport in New York.

She is very taken by the Hepworth, which, like Barragán’s buildings in Mexico, makes artful use of natural light. “I think it’s one of the most beautiful buildings I’ve ever shown in,” she says.

ALISON JACQUES



Wall hangings at Sheila Hicks: *Off Grid* at The Hepworth Wakefield (Photo: Tom Bird)

Hicks has been based in Paris since 1964, and travel restrictions stopped her visiting Wakefield until now, so everything was planned remotely on a scale model, like an outsized doll's house.

Dotted between the larger works are photos from Hicks's travels, allowing connections to be traced between, say, a sheet of corrugated iron in a shop doorway in Chile and the thick horizontal ribbing of a monochrome wall hanging, or the sailcloth folded beneath sailors dozing on deck, and a piece made from stitched squares of old canvas.

A favourite photograph shows her in 1977, walking through the streets of a French suburb adorned in a huge bush of bougainvillea-coloured cloth strips. The fabric came from 3,000 nurses' blouses, which Hicks dyed at home in her washing machine for a community project.

"The day before the inauguration, I carried it through the street, so that all the shopkeepers and people who lived there would notice," she says. Her fabric-bedecked promenade was an invitation to come check out the sculpture she was installing.

"And it worked! The mayor decided this was a town happening, and so they let the prisoners out of the local jail: instead of going to forced workstations, he sent them over to the exhibition. When they came we were still making adjustments, so the local prisoners pitched in and helped us. The mayor was delighted – he knew something was happening here, but it was certainly not 'art' because 'art' is very intimidating!"

ALISON JACQUES

High winds have prevented Hicks installing richly coloured outdoor fibre works in the Hepworth's garden. She imagines these performing as an invitation to local residents to enter the museum, much as her parade through the streets of Montreuil in Paris did 45 years ago.

In May, another outdoor fibre work will be installed at Coal Drops Yard in London: an invitation to walk to nearby King's Cross, and hop on a train to Wakefield.



Works at Sheila Hicks: Off Grid at The Hepworth Wakefield (Photo: Tom Bird)

The show is punctuated by Hicks's particular form of record-keeping – small woven works she calls *minimes*. She has made them since 1956, often while travelling, and likens them to a diary. Some incorporate shapes or materials (sweet wrappers, razor clam shells) derived from her location.

She has brought her little loom with her to Wakefield. “I play with it and think about things, because it calms me down: I sit there quietly and interlock threads, trying to bring the verbs and the nouns together,” she says.

What from her time in Yorkshire might make its way into the diary-like weavings, I wonder. “Well: these paper napkins,” she thinks.

“Stuff is coming into my room now too: flowers and wrapping papers. I can twist them, and see the typography appearing and disappearing.”

We admire, too, the vivid rose colour of the forced rhubarb, now in season. Next time I see a cluster of Hicks's *minimes*, I'll look out for that acid-sweet pink of the Yorkshire spring.