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Border Crossings

Sheila Hicks's *Minimes*

By Jennifer Higgie

'However fragmentary its condition, any work of art is actually a portion of arrested happening, or an emanation of past time. It is a graph of an activity now stilled, but a graph made visible like an astronomical body, by a light that originated with the activity.'¹

George Kubler, *The Shape of Time* (1962)

Sheila Hicks's small hand-woven works contain multitudes: vast landscapes and microscopic details. Each line of weaving is, in a way, a line of enquiry as unique as a sentence in a diary: a restless form of remembering, of sensual recording, evidence of the intertwining of thinking and making. Although the collective title *minimes* – which loosely translates from the French as 'minimals' or miniatures – implies something modest, the end results are far from it. Hicks's describes them as 'personal expressions, private investigations and ramblings'.² They are an important part of what she describes as her 'different investigatory channels', which include sculpture, commercial and architectural textile design and installations.³

Hicks has made more than one thousand *minimes* since the 1950s. She not only weaves materials traditionally associated with a loom – such as cotton, linen, silk and the wool of various animals – but has also, at various times, employed corn husks and dried pineapple, shoelaces and shirt collars, seashells, quills, different metals, feathers, ribbons, grasses, wood, bone, twigs, paper and razor clams; in recent years, she has explored the possibilities of synthetic fibres. Some of the *minimes* comprise quiet, monochromatic designs, while others are more exuberant: structurally complex and high-key. While ostensibly abstract, these wildly varied, often intense and intimate art works are portraits, of sorts: the remnant of a state of mind or a moment in time. Each one suggests a

¹ George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven, 1962), p.19

² Quoted by Joan Simon in 'Frames of Reference', *Sheila Hicks: Weaving as Metaphor*, published for The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture, New York, by Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2006, p.43 <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-sheila-hicks-11947>

³ *Ibid*, Joan Simon, p. 41

narrative, however oblique. In *Itaka* (2012), for example, delicate quills, trapped like daggers in the thick fibre, appear to bleed onto a dense brown composition created from alpaca wool. In *The Wandering Lady* (2016), lines of pink, green and ochre fibres meander like the route of an underground train map or the plaits of a girl blowing in the wind. Against a background of pale thread, robust tendrils seem to strain towards the light.

Hicks describes her approach as something akin to writing: ‘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.’⁴ Although she says that innovation and colour are her primary concerns, to discuss her work only in terms of how it is made – a temptation, as it is so powerfully physical – ‘would be limiting’.⁵ Ultimately, her aim is to ‘startle and capture your imagination. And cause you to react. Even violently or passionately.’⁶

When Hicks reflects on her *minimes*, she moves between haiku-like descriptions and something more evocative: poetic fragments enlivened by flashes of colour, glimpses of travel and autobiography. She thinks of her titles, many of which are enigmatic, as a ‘path of entry’ into understanding, or responding, to the weavings. They are ‘not descriptions’, she says. ‘Metaphors reign.’⁷ Each one could be the beginning of a short story: *Twill (Mexico)* (1956-7); *Fleming Maps* (1957-8); *Zapallar Domingo* (1957); *Twenty Years is Nothing* (1958), *Self-portrait on a Blue Day* (1977); *An Acre of Rain Forest* (1989), among others.

For example, Hicks wrote of *Tacna-Arica* (c.1957):

Weft striations climb uphill in this sparse weaving of previous vicuña. The title refers to the border crossing between Tacna, Peru, and Arica, Chile. My bus zig-zagged through the Atacama Desert near the Chuquicamata copper mine.⁸

⁴ Jennifer Higgle, Interview with Sheila Hicks, ‘Fibre Is My Alphabet’, *frieze*, 169 (March 2015), p.130

⁵ An interview of Sheila Hicks conducted 2004 February 3-March 11, by Monique Levi-Strauss, for the Archives of American Art's Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America, in Paris, France

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ Jennifer Higgle, Interview with Sheila Hicks, ‘Fibre Is My Alphabet’, *frieze*, 169 (March 2015), p.130

⁸ *Sheila Hicks: Weaving as Metaphor*, published for The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture, New York, by Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2006, p.82

A 'vicuña' is a wild relative of the llama that can be found in the mountainous regions of South America; its wool is silky. In *Tacna-Arica* the vicuña's wool does not simply evoke the landscape – it has *become* the landscape. (We are formed by where we come from.) The weaving is an earthy, light-brown composition comprised of small, soft geometric shapes that seem to bounce up and down like parcels on a bumpy journey. That said, this small weaving could also be the fragment of a piece of clothing, a map or an aerial view.

In *Solferino Tacubaya* (1960) materials, history and biography come together in something of a hallucinogenic celebration. It's a weaving made of varying tones of rich red; thick tendrils crowd its centre, while smaller shapes at the bottom and top fade like a sunset. Hicks explains:

Solferino – intense magenta – is worshipped in Mexico. Vivid red serpentine wrappings disengage and move freely on top of a solidly woven white warp. Tacubaya was the address of Luis Barragan, the architect who captured the spirit of his country. The work was included in my first exhibitions in Mexico and Chicago.⁹

Another high-key work, *A Grain of Desert Sand* (1988-89) – made from cotton, wool, silk and metallic-covered paper – is, despite its diminutive size, a fiercely hot, jaggedly geometric evocation of mood and place. Hicks describes it as:

Blazing orange, copper, rust, violet, blue and green weft cover the discreet warp. Staggered and stacked, the colours assemble like the tents of Bedouins in the desert.¹⁰

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The history of art – the history of human kind – is a history of materials: not just of canvas or a slab of marble but of what is worn – in a painting or on the street – and why: what does the choice of

⁹ *Sheila Hicks: Weaving as Metaphor*, published for The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture, New York, by Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2006, p.102

¹⁰ *Sheila Hicks: Weaving as Metaphor*, published for The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture, New York, by Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2006, p.266

fabric for a dress, say, and the way it is designed signify? What does the carpet in a room say about this person who inhabits it? In Hicks' weavings, material culture is given centre stage: not as a bit player, but the main character.

Hicks made her first hand loom by taking a painting stretcher, pounding two nails into two ends and stretching yarn between them. She taught herself how to weave because she was interested in how the pre-Incas structured 'thought with thread, with lines'. She had been studying typography, lettering, photography and colour theory with Josef Albers – formerly of the Bauhaus – at Yale School of Art in the 1950s, but when she discovered, in a class on 'The Art of Latin America' given by the art historian George Kubler, that ancient tribes in the Andes had communicated with textiles it 'blew her mind'. She believes that pre-Incaic textile language was 'the most complex of any textile culture in history'.¹¹

In order to understand it more deeply, Hicks needed to experience what it meant to make a weaving. She began her exploration using techniques that she had observed in pre-Incaic textiles, trying out things and learning as she went along.¹² She was also influenced by Josef Albers' wife Anni. She wrote: 'If Josef had awakened me to the world of colour and ways of using colour in his teaching at the school, I believe that, in the six or seven brief meetings I had with Anni, she helped me to think about structure.'¹³ At first Hicks used simple materials: cotton and wool. In Mexico, the fibre was either undyed – 'crusty and tough looking', in her words, or coloured with 'brilliant, shocking' natural dyes; she was also inspired by the mellow tones – yellows, pinks, oranges and greens – in paintings by Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard, which she loved. Her colours were a mix of 'Mexico, Albers and France'.¹⁴ She was hooked.

¹¹ All quotes in this paragraph, Jennifer Higgie interview with Sheila Hicks, 'Fibre Is My Alphabet', *frieze*, 169 (March 2015), p.130

¹² An interview of Sheila Hicks conducted 2004 February 3-March 11, by Monique Levi-Strauss, for the Archives of American Art's Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America, in Paris, France London, 2006, p.17 <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-sheila-hicks-11947>

¹³ Sheila Hicks, 'My Encounters with Anni Albers', *Tate Etc*, 10 October 2018, accessed online: <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-44-autumn-2018/anni-albers-sheila-hicks>

¹⁴ An interview of Sheila Hicks conducted 2004 February 3-March 11, by Monique Levi-Strauss, for the Archives of American Art's Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America, in Paris, France London, 2006, p.17 <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-sheila-hicks-11947>

The function of the *minimes* is multifaceted: they are at once completed works and points of departure for larger ideas. Each one is an exercise in possibility, unhindered by the constraints of commissions, clients or economics. Hicks says: 'If you're a soloist and you practice every day and experiment when someone invites you to become part of an opera or an orchestra, you don't lose your personal voice.'¹⁵ Their size enabled her to 'build bridges between art, design, architecture, decorative arts, crafts'.¹⁶ She describes how, in the early years, 'texture would spring loose, then reintegrate' and that it was 'almost like drawing with yarn.' A 60-year variation-on-a-theme, the myriad complexity of the *minimes* reflects what Hicks describes as her 'integrated, multi-faceted personality'.¹⁷ She does not relate to distinctions between artist and designer: each is part of the other. For example, when Hicks was designing textiles in India in the hand-weaving workshop of the Commonwealth Trust at Calicut in Kerala, at the end of each day she would pick up cuttings from the floor and weave them into small, complex works that had nothing to do with the job at hand: a creative exercise that allowed her imagination to roam and her skills to be honed. She is always, she says, looking for 'a clever way of going around a corner or a new way of moving from one group of yarns to the next – jumping, looping, acrobatically passing from front to back repetitively'.¹⁸ She says the 'big workshops and abundant material stocks opened my mind. I felt quite free. There was an osmotic cross fertilization – large to small and small to large, continuously.'¹⁹

Although Hicks is, of course, everywhere in her work, it is rare for her to make a self-portrait. In 2010, however, she made a *minime* titled *Self-portrait*. A tangle of purple, orange and golden thread, it's like a storm of hair on a pillow or a glimpse of the back of a woman's head, striding down the street in a high wind. It's a wonderfully exuberant evocation of life and a reiteration of the fact that what we see and experience as we move through the world is never one thing. Asked how she judges the

¹⁵ Jennifer Higgle, Interview with Sheila Hicks, 'Fibre Is My Alphabet', *frieze*, 169 (March 2015), p.130

¹⁶ Quoted in Nina Strizler-Levine, Introduction to *Sheila Hicks: Weaving as Metaphor*, Published for The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture, New York, by Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2006, p.17 <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-sheila-hicks-11947>

¹⁷ An interview of Sheila Hicks conducted 2004 February 3-March 11, by Monique Levi-Strauss, for the Archives of American Art's Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America, in Paris, France London, 2006, p.17 <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-sheila-hicks-11947>

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

success or failure of a work, Hicks replied that the essential test is if her work 'transmits joy'.²⁰ It's clear she's passed – and then some – with flying colours.

²⁰ Ibid