

Press Release

SHEILA HICKS: Thread, Trees, River

Opening	Wednesday, 9 December 2020, 10 a.m.–7 p.m.
	Free admission
Exhibition Venue	MAK Exhibition Hall
	MAK, Stubenring 5, 1010 Vienna
Exhibition Dates	9 December 2020 – 18 April 2021

Dynamic, sensually enticing, infinitely colorful, delicately intimate, and often monumental and space-defining: the fabrics, sculptures, and installations of artist Sheila Hicks challenge traditional notions of art and explore new territories. Hicks is a virtuoso in textile vocabularies and their historical traditions, interweaving the fine arts with design, the applied arts, and architecture to create objects and environments in which materiality, tactility, form, and color—ranging from the subtle to the vibrantly luminous—become a fascinating language of their own. In the MAK exhibition *SHEILA HICKS: Thread, Trees, River*, her first solo show in Austria, the artist presents both recent and familiar works with room-filling sculptures, relating them to the architecture.

Born in Nebraska (1934), Sheila Hicks, trained as a painter, sees fibers and textiles as more than merely working materials, regarding them as both archaic and contemporary media linking interdisciplinary fields around the globe. Exploring and working in different cultures since the 1950s, she has been one of the most significant figures in contemporary art, whose multifaceted creations are characterized by an amazing sense of color and by intense engagement with architecture and photography. Inspired by the concepts of the Wiener Werkstätte and the Bauhaus, Hicks transcends media, national, and gender boundaries – emphasizing the vast sociopolitical connotations of textiles. Her immensely rich knowledge of indigenous weaving practices—gleaned from working in North and Latin America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, India, and Asia—is integral to her multifaceted work.

In the monographic exhibition *SHEILA HICKS: Thread, Trees, River*, the artist presents four thematic sceneries that highlight different aspects of her wide-ranging oeuvre. A series of monumental *Prayer Rugs* (1970–1974) created in Morocco, interacts with the *Tor zum Garten* [Door to the Garden] (1990) by Walter Pichler (1936–2012), symbolizing the transition between inner and outer space. Her works, executed in a variety of knotting and weaving techniques, explore the theme of cultural appropriation. The bas-relief panels or rugs—embedded in a secular context—hung on the walls, inspire and direct the occidental gaze to hidden perspectives. The uplifting arched forms symbolize the ambivalence of ties

whose tension is created by the simplest of means, juxtaposing the closing and drawing of borders, an ideal of all-encompassing openness.

At the heart of the exhibition, Sheila Hicks composes *La Sentinelle de Safran* (2018), comprised of immense bundles of pure pigmented fibers, which energetically interplays fibers, texture, and intense shades of yellow, red, and orange. By exploring the entire color spectrum, Hicks unleashes a frenzy of hues that also alludes to the use of traditional natural pigments in textile production as well as new sophisticated scientific technology.

Apprentissages de la Victoire, consisting of voluminous masses of colored cords of coconut fiber enrobed in hand spun wool, emphasizes the verticality and dimension of the MAK Exhibition Hall, the flowing form of the sculpture symbolizing the power of nature. As the title of the exhibition *Thread, Trees, River* suggests, nature and the spirit of place—linking the museum to the adjoining City Park and Vienna River—play important roles as gateways to exploring the exhibition. Fragments of nature such as shells, slate, and twigs are woven into works dating from the 1960s onwards. A work into which corn husks are entwined is part of the *Badagara* series (1966), whose icon-like weave echoes the ribbed patterns on window shutters, subtly alluding to ruptures in the social fabric.

In the exhibition, Sheila Hicks devotes special attention to extending the material of fiber into the third dimension. Room-filling reversible bas reliefs, such as *Lianes Ivoires* (2019/20), specially created for the site, reveal complex color systems, while the soft sculpture *Racines de la Culture* (2018), consisting of a variety of textile materials, snakes through an imaginary space. The woven tapestry *Color Alphabet* (1988) evokes patterns of speech. Hicks thus creates a dialogue between weaving and writing, tradition and culture, knowledge and the unknown. From the MAK Collection, Hicks has chosen an abstract woven piece (700–800 AD) from Nazca in Peru, a civilization known for its impressive system of underground aqueducts. Starting from the textile fragment with its symbolic, geometric pattern, the artist draws a line from pre-Columbian culture as the root to the present and the future.

In this concentration of fine woven pieces and large-scale works, many of which are being exhibited for the first time, Sheila Hicks creates an imaginary painter's studio. Her *Minimes*—miniature constructs in thread—demonstrate her intense preoccupation with painting, with colors and abstract forms. A contrasting work is the installation *Monumental* (2018–2020) consisting of several wrapped panels—in her attempt to build and expand on the potential of painting concepts.

Sheila Hicks's approach to textile art has always been influenced by painting, photography, sculpture, and architecture. Her visionary artistic practice is determined by the processes and parameters of studio production. She studied at Yale University under Josef Albers (1888–1976) and learnt auto didactically weaving techniques from archeologist

Junius Bird (1907–1982), the art historian George Kubler (1912–1996), and Anni Albers (1899–1994). Hicks immersed herself in the stimulating worlds of the Bauhaus and Modernism. Raoul d'Harcourt's book *Les textiles anciens du Pérou et leurs techniques* [Textiles of Ancient Peru and Their Techniques] (1934) inspired her to explore issues of cultural appropriation and to turn to the astonishing pre-Incaic textiles as a strong basis of reference.

In 1957/58, a Fulbright scholarship to paint enabled her to travel and photograph extensively in Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile, an experience that influenced the development of her intercultural approach to art. Living in Mexico 1959–1964, she benefited from a close relationship with the artist Mathias Goeritz (1915–1990) and the architects Luis Barragán (1902–1988), Ricardo Legoretta (1931–2011), and Félix Candela (1910–1997). To this day, Hicks considers textiles an integral part of architecture, similar to the practice-oriented approach of architect and theoretician Gottfried Semper (1803–1879), who explored the relationship between nature, textile, architecture, and space.

The exhibition is accompanied by the catalog *SHEILA HICKS. Thread, Trees, River*, edited by Christoph Thun-Hohenstein and Bärbel Vischer. With contributions by Christoph Thun-Hohenstein and Bärbel Vischer as well as an interview by Itai Margula with the artist. German/English, 72 pages with numerous color illustrations. MAK, Vienna/arnoldsche Art Publishers, Stuttgart 2021. Available at the MAK Design Shop and online at MAKdesignshop.at for € 35.

Press photos are available for download at MAK.at/en/press.

Press Data

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Exhibition Dates	9 December 2020 – 18 April 2021
Opening Hours	Tue 10 a.m.–6 p.m. (until further notice), Wed–Sun 10 a.m.–6 p.m.
Curator	Bärbel Vischer, Curator, MAK Contemporary Art Collection
Publication	<i>SHEILA HICKS. Thread, Trees, River</i> , edited by Christoph Thun-Hohenstein and Bärbel Vischer. With contributions by Christoph Thun-Hohenstein and Bärbel Vischer as well as an interview by Itai Margula with the artist. German/English, 72 pages with numerous color illustrations. MAK, Vienna/arnoldsche Art Publishers, Stuttgart 2021. Available at the MAK Design Shop and online at MAKdesignshop.at for € 35.
MAK Admission	€ 14 / reduced € 11 / family ticket € 15 Every Tuesday from 6 to 9 p.m.: admission € 6 Free admission for children and teens under 19
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