

Exhibitions

one examine 'lack' in an exhibition space structure? Surely, a film-director art-history enthusiast such as Peter Greenaway might have found a dramatic solution, perhaps a small, blackened space illuminated only by a collection of chattering voices – much like the imagined dialogue of wedding guests and servants that populated his digital reconstruction of Paolo Veronese's *The wedding at Cana* in 2009 – only to have those same voices slowly fade out to silence. Whose voices might we have heard? Finally getting their due could be the key female players rightly highlighted in the

25. *Christ and Mary Magdalene*, by Auguste Rodin. Original model 1894; this marble carved by Victor Peter, 1908. Marble, 109.2 by 85.1 by 78.7 cm. (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; exh. Clark Art Institute, Williamstown).

exhibition, such as Claire de Choiseul,² Seney Simpson, Fuller and Spreckels, alongside the voices of the collectors John Simpson, Thomas Fortune Ryan, Samuel Hill and Mastbaum, before we re-emerge from silent darkness to the triumphant Rodinian post-war era.

¹ *Catalogue: Rodin in the United States: Confronting the Modern*. Edited by Antoinette Le Normand-Romain. 260 pp. incl. 210 col. + b. & w. ills. (Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, 2022), £45. ISBN 978-0-300-26406-7. The exhibition will travel to the High Museum of Art, Atlanta (21st October 2022–15th January 2023).

² For information on de Choiseul's role in getting the artist to raise his prices for his American clients, see V. Mattiussi: 'Rodin's American circle', in *op. cit.* (note 1), pp.61–67.



Sheila Hicks: Off-Grid

The Hepworth Wakefield
7th April–25th September

by GREG THOMAS

The associations between text and textile are rooted in the most basic qualities of both media. The movement of eyes across the page, of the writing hand or of the blinking cursor across the screen, echoes the warp-and-weft rhythms of the woven grid. It is this link, perhaps, that leads us to talk of narrative as a thread. However, we rarely talk of thread as bearing a narrative. This retrospective of work by the American artist Sheila Hicks (b.1934) focuses attention on such a possibility. The exhibition, which confirms Hicks's status as one of the most important textile artists of the contemporary era, takes a broadly chronological approach. It opens with a collection of early works, documents and photographs, which indicate the sustenance that the artist drew from precolonial Central and South American textile traditions during the 1950s and 1960s. In the centre of this gallery space is a large hanging construction of fibres bound into thick ropes, resembling a huge ceremonial headdress. Titled *Cordes sauvages / Hidden blue* (2014; private collection), it is a taste of things to come.

Across three subsequent rooms, and most spectacularly in the final gallery space, we find the customary dimensions of Hicks's chosen medium overrun with thrilling abandon. Huge abstract wall hangings and tapestries are made from a wide range of materials, including synthetic raffia and metal, often achieving a surface effect completely at odds with typical expectations of textile art. There are vast works composed of raw fibre bound in netting or coiled up, whereas others are produced on a tiny scale, using a handheld loom. Running throughout the artist's practice is an acute feeling for, and love of, colour and colour contrast. The tonal range on display in Wakefield is mesmerising: from deep scarlets to bright azures.

Hicks's mid-century modernist credentials are impeccable. She



studied painting at Yale School of Art, New Haven, under Josef Albers during the 1950s, while he was reshaping the Design Department according to Bauhaus principles. There she also made the acquaintance of Albers's wife, Anni, although she downplayed their connection in a recent interview, stating that '[Anni] wasn't in the least bit impressed with [her] stuff'. The exhibition notes inform us that Louis Kahn inspired Hicks's interest in architecture. She was also a student of, and a field photographer for, the art historian George Kubler, who stoked her interest in precolonial textile traditions. In 1957 she travelled to Chile on a Fulbright scholarship, where she taught Josef Albers's ideas on colour and, according to the curators' exhibition notes, 'deepened her knowledge of textile traditions' by 'working alongside weavers, craftspeople and designers', learning a range of vernacular approaches.

Hicks's engagement with Albers's colour theory perhaps reflected a search for compositional principles

divorced from worldly context: an ideal of self-sufficient aesthetic relationships that was typical of the 'concrete' ethos of the period. By contrast, her attachment to non-Eurocentric methods of craftsmanship arguably taps into an older modernist tradition – the atavistic impulse evident in Post-Impressionism and Cubism for example – and comparable to the Albers' borrowing of Central American motifs. This tendency has not necessarily aged well. The cultures in question are objectified and their complexities rounded off by their appropriation as a metaphor for some relatively pure creative instinct. That said, we are assured by the Hepworth's curators of the depth of connection that Hicks established with the historic weaving techniques she encountered, first at Yale then in Chile and, from 1959, in Mexico, where she lived for five years. Certainly, there is no denying their foundational significance to the work laid out here. In particular, the backstrap loom allowed Hicks to

develop a mode of weaving that was spontaneous, diaristic and unbound from ceremonial function and laborious static composition.

Among the results of this shift in emphasis are the thousand-or-so works that comprise the artist's *Minimes* series, a sequence of miniatures created from the late 1950s onwards. At their most lyrical, these mostly hand-sized pieces use colour and shape to evoke personal memory, often with charming narrative or diagrammatic flourishes, such as the use of weft-lines zig-zagging upwards to record a bus journey through the Atacama Desert in *Tacna-Arica* (c.1957; Tate). Works indebted to Central and South American techniques also anticipate the movement of Hicks's practice into three-dimensional space, through the use of vertical slits that rupture the picture plane. Evident in *Amarillo* (1961; private collection), this is achieved through a Mexican kilim weaving technique, using closely packed weft threads and a more widely dispersed vertical warp.

26. Installation view of *Sheila Hicks: Off-Grid* at the Hepworth Wakefield, 2022, showing in the foreground *La mer (the sea)*. 1976/2022. Linen and synthetic rafia, 470 cm. (Private collection; courtesy Hepworth Wakefield; photograph Tom Bird).

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27. Installation view of *Sheila Hicks: Off-Grid* at the Hepworth Wakefield, 2022, showing on the right *Nowhere to Go*, 2022. Pigmented acrylic fibre, dimensions variable; and on the wall *Peace Barrier*, 2018. Linen and wood, 150 by 300 cm.; and *Ripe rip*, 2019. Linen, wood and aluminium, 130 by 170 cm. (All private collection; courtesy Hepworth Wakefield; photograph Tom Bird).

The artist's elevation of her connection with Josef Albers over that with Anni hints at the importance of tonal range to her practice. However, colour only ever exists in a mutually determining relationship with texture, shape, size and other formal traits. As Albers put it: 'a visual realization of the interaction between color and color [leads] to an awareness of the interdependence of color with form and placement'.² Indeed, in Hicks's works, colour combines with texture, shape and spatial orientation in extraordinary ways, granting some of the work in this exhibition an almost seductive power – mysterious to language, but that extends far beyond ocular appeal. Larger works, such as *Grand boules* (2009; Tate), a pile of soft boulders composed from coloured fibres bound in netting, seem to demand to be touched, tasted, smelt or even jumped onto. At other points, richness of colour and softness or granularity of surface are offset by an uncanny metallic sheen, achieved through the use of copper-coloured synthetic raffia, as in *La mer (The sea)* (Fig.26).

Hicks's lexicon of shapes is as striking as her textural range.

One of the most groundbreaking aspects of her practice during the 1960s was her conception of 'open compositions', which could fill up space in a range of ways depending on the architectural setting. This idea of modular construction is apparent in *Banisteriopsis II* (1965–66/2022; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston) a stacked mound of wrapped linen 'ponytails' that can be variously assembled, inspired by the appearance of an Amazonian rainforest vine used to make the psychoactive drink ayahuasca.

A key, and related, contention regarding Hicks's practice, as referenced by the curators, is that qualities of 'colour and fibre can shape an experience of architecture and space'. Indeed, the chance to create a show for David Chipperfield's light-drenched, neo-Brutalist building was surely a factor in convincing the artist to bring this selection of works to Wakefield. The promise of this interaction is borne out in the selection of larger works encountered in the final gallery space (Fig.27). *Nowhere to go* is a huge pile of blue-green squashy fabric orbs, piled

up high in a corner bathed in light from an opposing window. In the space between, the wide, vertically wrapped wall-panel *Peace barrier* appears to translate the sun's rays into a turquoise spectrum, which morphs into the reds and blacks of *Ripe rip*. In a previous room, a number of vast, plume-like hangings, such as *Lianes nantaises* (1973; Musée d'arts de Nantes) as well as *La mer*, dramatise the distance from floor to ceiling.

Poetics of space aside, the connection between text and textile is what holds sway most effectively. It is rooted, of course, in the connotations of the grid that Hicks has made it her business to break away from. However, allusions to linguistic or proto-linguistic form do not necessarily depend on the left-to-right, top-to-bottom visual rhythms of Western writing systems. In Hicks's work, it is partly a matter of repetition and permutation, of expressing variations on a set of elementary compositional features to imply an alphabet, syllabary or grammatical framework. In *Medallions* (1967; private collection), a wall-based piece of circular plaques with thick threads





28. Calligraphy sauvages, by Sheila Hicks. Cotton, wool, linen, silk, bamboo and synthetic fibre, 231 by 162 by 34 cm. (Courtesy Alison Jacques, London; exh. Hepworth Wakefield).

arranged in radial lines, the effects of layering and shadow suggest a diameter line stretching across each shape at a different angle, as though the whole piece were a sequence of code or script. In other cases, the suggestion emerges from a certain cursive quality to line and shape. *Calligraphy sauvages* (Fig.28) consists of thick, contorted cords of tightly bound fabric, resembling a kind of three-dimensional asemic script hanging in space.

It is also a matter of illustrative suggestion. Quipu are ancient recording devices used by Andean peoples, which convey precise and shared values through the sequencing and positioning of knots along ropes. Their form is evoked on a grand scale in several works from *Textile fresco* (c.1969; Art Institute of Chicago) onwards. Notches of colour, textural variation or striated fabric catch the eye and draw one's vision into skittish linear patterns – the saccades of the eye across the work's surface recall the action of parsing text to pick out a half-remembered phrase. 'Knots and loops recur frequently in Hicks's work', we learn from the exhibition notes, 'for her, these poetic notations, embedded reliefs, inscriptions and place markers are secret messages'. Narrative thread indeed.

- 1 See C. Higgins: "Colour is in my blood!": the vivid life of artist Sheila Hicks' *The Guardian* (5th April 2022), available at <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/apr/05/textile-artist-sheila-hicks-colour-blood-vivid-life>, accessed 8th August 2022.
- 2 J. Albers: *Interaction of Color*, New Haven and London 1963, p.2.

Cornelia Parker

Tate Britain, London
19th May–16th October

by KATHRYN LLOYD

From 1912 until his death in 1968, Marcel Duchamp attempted to define a word that he had invented. Over the course of fifty years, Duchamp outlined his concept of the *inframince* (often translated as 'infrathin') on forty-six scraps of paper – corners torn from notepads, used envelopes and hotel stationary – that evoke the transience he was trying to capture.¹ His jottings range from the certainty of a few words to longer musings replete with annotations, question marks and deletions. What unites them is the observation of a difference, often minute, between two states: the warmth of a seat that has just been vacated, two objects cast from the same mould, a painting on a pane of glass seen from the reverse side. Despite

Duchamp's insistence that the concept could not be defined, and indeed was not a concept, he nonetheless offered a clear definition: the *inframince* is when 'in time the same object is not the same after a one-second interval'.² Duchamp has long been a key reference point for the British artist Cornelia Parker (b.1956), most overtly in her work *The distance (a kiss with string attached)* (2003), in which she wrapped Rodin's sculpture *The kiss* (1901–04; Tate) with a mile of string – a reference to Duchamp's own intervention when he created a vast web of string throughout the exhibition *First Papers of Surrealism*, held at the Whitelaw Reid House on Madison Avenue in New York in 1942. Beyond this homage, Parker's entire practice can be seen through the lens of the *inframince*; she not only locates the smallest of intervals between states or objects, she makes them the work itself.

The retrospective at Tate Britain spans the last thirty-five years of Parker's practice. It fills nine rooms, which are organised around either a single large-scale work or a process or subject-matter to which the artist often returns. Although it is not chronological, the exhibition begins with the earliest installation, *Thirty pieces of silver* (1988–89; Tate), a collection of over a thousand flattened silver objects suspended in clusters from thin wires a few inches above the ground. In the accompanying

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