

APR 13 - SEP 29, 2019

S H E I L A

H I C K S :

C A M P O

A B I E R T O

(O P E N F I E L D)

Sheila Hicks (b. 1934, Hastings, Nebraska) is widely regarded as one of the most innovative artists to have made fiber their material of choice. Throughout the course of her career, beginning in the mid-1950s, she has developed a highly unique approach and formal language, combining sculptural, pictorial and spatial concerns. *Campo Abierto (Open Field)* assembles works produced over the past six decades, focusing on questions of landscape, construction and the environment, which, although rarely presented in this context, have traversed her entire career.



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The exhibition begins with the monumental *Moroccan Prayer Rug/Nejjai* (1972), a symbolic gateway suggesting interiority and introspection, while remaining an open form. Emblematic of her work from the late 1960s to the 1970s, the Prayer Rugs combine a metaphorical dimension with perfectly definable, but impractical architectural forms, eliciting a combination of physical, spiritual and symbolic considerations. At the same time, they subtly introduce notions of confluence, discussion and dialogue, which characterize *Campo Abierto* (*Open Field*).

The ensemble of artworks in the next room reflect Hicks' interest in space and construction. The precision and consistency inherent to these conceptions reveal her intense attention to physical and implied structures, which give these works shape and substance. Beyond the deliberate contrast between white and color, all of the works here share a mastery and marked interest in geometry, but this is a mischievous, if not rebellious geometry, taking liberties with orthodoxy to break away from the commonly established rules. In other words, the artist disrupts

universal patterns, accentuating the intricacies and irregularities of a labyrinth.

Such concepts are evident in *Badagara White* (1966), a cotton, monochromic work woven by the artist in India's Malabar Coast region. The intricate weaving has the effect of freeing the material from a traditional structure and turning the straight lines into undulating waves of an infinite journey. The result is an endless, tiny vibration of the surface, perceptible only from afar, changing into an unexpected relief upon closer inspection.

In the large, double-sided panel, *Struggle to Surface* (2016), the compartmentalization of the surface into zones of distinct colors and clearly delimited slits is challenged by the texture of the elongated linen yarns, which seem to dance on the surface, calling into question the strict order of the whole. The subtle chromatic vibration created by the fiber is also evident in a series of panels *Voltaire, Minerve de la Sagesse, and Ancienne Comédie* (2018), where the artist wrapped linen threads around a frame. Influenced by Color Field painting and the delicate



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juxtaposition of chromatic areas, the fusion of several hues thwarts the picture plane's rigid structure, where the yarn becomes both material and color.

Campo Abierto (Open Field) demonstrates Hicks' interest in capturing, occupying and even inhabiting surface and space. Expressed through the dynamic and rhythmic aspects of her oeuvre, this is also evident in works of a more monumental nature. Marking its debut in the United States, *Escalade Beyond Chromatic Lands* (2016-17), originally designed for the Arsenale building at the 2017 Venice Biennale, spectacularly synthesizes one of the artist's dominant concerns - creating colorful, inextricably linked forms and giving expression

to textures. With its ambiguous character, this vast installation, virtually all-encompassing in its scope, oscillates between spatial construction, monumental sculpture and painting, like a picture that comes to life, escaping the frame to become a concrete environment, almost as if a landscape itself.

One can also encounter landscape in the radiant, intricately woven *Palm* (1984-85) and an exceptional bas-relief titled *The Silk Rain Forest* (1975), made in luscious colors of silk, linen and cotton, inspired by the vegetation of the tropical forest. The vast composition *Untitled* (1980) seems to unfold a large landscape, animated by an atmospheric breath, further emphasized by the fact that, due to its length and the formal differentiation of the panels, one

can only gradually perceive the ensemble. Evoking an earthy character, the dominant tonalities that run through the panels serve as a perfect background for highlighting combinations of hues that suggest an almost rural atmosphere, with rose and white, red and orange, or green and yellow.

The largest space of the exhibition is animated by its panoramic dimension presenting works that are connected to natural or environmental concerns. The singular architectural element within the group of works is a gigantic column titled *Questioning Column* (2016), first installed at the entrance to the Art Gallery of New South Wales for the 2016 Sydney Biennale.

If *Seal Beach* (2009) evokes the nuances and warm morning light



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of the eponymous beach near Los Angeles, *Blue Gros Point* (ca. 1990) is a subtle but strong expression of texture composed of diagonal strokes and its compartmentalization into varying, slightly wide areas connoting a surface made of large splashes of color, resulting in a sparkling whole, borne from speed and breath. Nearby, one finds 18th century harpoons planted in rippling flaxen skeins, reminiscent of a river in *Pêcher dans La Rivière* (1989-2013), while a subtle linen *Menhir* (1998-2004), wrapped with glistening stainless steel fibers, stands majestically as a serene guardian.

Navigating through the fibrous spectrum of emotive colors and forms, *Campo Abierto (Open Field)* transports the viewer through an open field landscape, populated by nature, encompassing a multitude of impressions, sensations, and distinct points of view.

Images

- 1 *Escalade Beyond Chromatic Lands*, 2016-2017
Natural and synthetic fibers
236 ¼ x 629 ⅞ x 157 ½ in.
- 2 *Reprisage Répertoire*, 1977
Linen, 3 panels
334 ⅝ x 196 13/16 in.
Le Démêloir, 1977
Linen, 3 panels
137 ¾ x 196 ⅞ (1/8), 137 ¾ x 196 ⅞ (2/8), 137 ¾ x 315 (3/8) in.
- 3 *Untitled*, 1980
Linen, cotton and synthetic yarn,
in seven parts
63 x 340 in

Moroccan Prayer Rug/Nejjai, 1972
Natural hand-spun wool
220 x 185 in

The Silk Rainforest, 1975
Silk, linen, cotton
96 x 270 x 3 in.

- 4 *Blue Gros Point*, ca. 1990
Linen
39 x 67 in.

Questioning Column, 2016
Pure pigment, acrylic
295 ¼ x 39 in.

- 5 *Menhir*, 1998-2004
Linen, cotton, stainless steel
43 ⅞ x 15 ¾ in.

Photography by Zachary Balber

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Miami Beach, FL 33139
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