

# FORUM: The Futures of Silk Arts?

by *Bunny Bowen and Nadja Lancelot*

With the dawning of a new decade, it seems timely to ask ourselves where we see silk arts heading in 2020 onwards. I've intentionally made this a plural, "silk arts," to point towards a horizon with many forms of silk art. What futures do you see emerging for silk arts in this new decade? How can silk arts remain alive and vibrant for younger generations of artists?

Silk painting has, historically, occupied a liminal space, somewhat marooned and isolated, on its own island between art and craft. But that liminal space need not work against silk art. Working from the

in-between space can be a potential strength, a site from which to challenge the criteria that "experts" may rely on in perpetuating the art and craft binary itself. Silk wearables, a significant part of silk art, have had an enduring and unique place in luxury and bohemian fashion, and for anybody who values hand-crafted clothing. Will the turn away from unsustainable practices of fast fashion open up new roles for silk wearables?

Here are the responses of two of our SPIN members: Bunny Bowen and Nadja Lancelot.

## BUNNY BOWEN

Apart from painting countless silk scarves to cover booth fees and commissions, my primary focus as a fiber artist has been on one-of-a-kind wall art. During decades of travels, I've acquired a "stash" of rolls of white kimono fabric, yardage of silk and silk-blends, and miscellaneous other silk fiber. Now, at 74, I've decided to stop saving it and as much as possible incorporate it into art with natural materials from our New Mexico desert land.

Recent projects have included images of threatened species such as polar bears and penguins, presented not under conservation clear glass but hung from juniper and aspen branches and roots. I've been peeling dead wood to reveal intricate galleries carved by beetle larvae and embellishing them with clay paint and linseed oil with pigments.

Revered for centuries, silk is a labor-intensive fiber, with origins in parts of the world which have cheap labor as a resource. I respect that, and I wonder how long artists can expect to purchase silk at a reasonable price.

Meanwhile, I will continue to use silk to express my concern about climate change, for our loss of species and ecosystems, and to try in a local way to encourage us all to be mindful in our choices. I believe we need to press government leaders to make drastic regulatory



*Gentoo Who* by Bunny Bowen  
Rozome on kimono silk  
Juniper root hanger by the artist  
28" x 24"

changes so that we can make better choices. As a fiber artist, I'd like to know exactly what is in the dyes I'm using and how this impacts the environment.

(<https://www.epa.gov/facts-and-figures-about-materials-waste-and-recycling/textiles-material-specific-data> — accessed March 13, 2020)

Regarding changing fashion choices, I read this from the US EPA: "The main source of textiles in municipal solid waste (MSW) is discarded clothing ..."

Thankfully, they don't give figures about discarded art!

## NADJA LANCELOT

### Art or Craft: A Fading Duality

Something magical happened to me in 2018. My friend, Aude, invited me to visit an exhibit at *The Centre Pompidou* in Paris. Sheila Hicks (born 1934), a renowned American textile artist was being celebrated with a show of her work entitled *Lignes de Vie* or *Life Lines*. As I walked through the famed exhibit hall surrounded by glass with curious observers peering in from the streets outside, I realized that this exhibition marked an important moment. Here was a woman who had dedicated her life's work to exploring, studying, manipulating, and forming fiber. Her art was completely engaging. Aude and I spent hours winding our way through the huge, spaghetti-like, installations. We curved through the mountains of colorful yarn balls, and pondered over the teeniest woven threads carefully sandwiched in glass frames. The exhibition was breathtaking but that is not what made it so meaningful to me.

What made it so important was that Hicks was being celebrated in the grandest of styles for her work with dyes and textiles, including silk. She was sharing exhibit space with Jackson Pollock, Francis Bacon, Jeff Koons, Frank Stella and Mark Rothko. Now this was something new, something to prompt jubilation! Sheila Hicks' work had jumped over from the craft circle sidelines of womanly pastimes and had emerged as an influential voice in the history of contemporary art alongside the male Titans.



**Sheila Hicks Exhibit at *Life Lines*  
*The Centre Pompidou*  
Photo by Nadja Lancelot**

Most of my training as an artist came from my studies as a designer for theatre. I originally entered my graduate program as a scenic design student. Once there, I felt pressure to turn my attention towards costume, and I eventually graduated with a dual degree in both disciplines. While costume design was a gift, in that it ignited my passion for dyes and silk, I also remember feeling sidelined. I was a woman, aspiring to take on the more traditionally masculine role of set design; and yet, I was being encouraged (consciously or unconsciously) by my professors and colleagues to take on the more traditionally female role of costume designer. It's no coincidence, in my mind, that the scenic designer usually has a stronger, more leading, role in the evolution of the production than the costume designer.

Now I see the similarities between that dramatic arts context and the reductive crafter versus artist binary in silk arts. The former is a hobbyist who shops at *Michael's* and has fun with glue and glitter in their spare time, usually when the kids are napping or at school. The latter is the serious artist who dedicates their life to their passion and shops for supplies in respectable art establishments. One is homey and feminine, the other is ambitious and masculine. So, the terminology of crafter versus artist takes on pejorative connotations that are specifically gender biased.



But I also see that things are changing. The Sheila Hicks exhibition is a great example of that. Our world is becoming more gender neutral. We are embracing the rainbow shades of who we are. The man who joins the knitting circle and the woman whose art makes its way into the exhibit halls of *The Centre Pompidou* blur the boundaries of what it means to be a crafter versus an artist. Craft is becoming less of a derogatory term. My experience in theatre has informed my understanding of this.

Actors define their work as “craft” yet no one argues that their mode of expression is in any way not art. There are degrees of accomplishment, skill, and innate gifts. Some are better than others but actors practice their craft as artists. The boundary separating the end of one process and the other’s beginning is not defined. Indeed it should not be specified because it would be confining for the actor to even identify that false duality. The craft of acting is in no way less than the art of acting. Craft requires practice and discipline, working with the larger team, the community. Art evolves as the product, the part that the audience sees after all of the hard work and training. So, just as the actor proudly speaks of their craft, so too should we, as silk artists, as textile artists, as painters and sculptors of silk, own our identities as artists who practice our Craft, with a capital “C”.

The future that I see for us as a community is to embrace all of the different facets of our work modalities. When the observer looks at a Sheila Hicks installation, the craft is abundantly obvious: the years and years of learning, practice, perfecting and applying; the hours and hours of toil and backbreaking work embedded in each piece. What is also glaringly clear is that Hicks’ sculptures are brilliant works of art. Here they hang, unapologetically in one of the most renowned museums of the world, *The Centre Pompidou*, in the middle of Paris! There is no judgement about whether this work is craft or art, no speculation about whether it deserves to be here, or whether the work is crafty lady stuff or in the ranks of Rothko and De Kooning. It is just a pure blending of craft and art, ego and id, instinct and intellect, yin and yang, community and individuality. And that is the future of our craft as silk artists. We can ride the wave of blurred boundaries. Just as society as a whole is coming to understand the notion that people are not binary (we are not either/or) so too are we as silk textile artists, as painters of silk, as sculptors of silk fibers, not crafters or artists. We are joyously and proudly both at the same time! That is why our particular form of expression is so exciting at this point in time. I can’t think of a more opportune era for us to be exploring the magical medium of silk and dyes.



**Sheila Hicks Exhibit at *Life Lines*  
*The Centre Pompidou*  
Photos by Nadja Lancelot**

