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Shirazeh Houshiary: Getting Metaphysical



'Like the Dark Senses Being Revealed'



Shirazeh Houshiary.
"I don't want to fit
into any category,"
she says. "I want to
be an individual."

Mystical and metaphysical,
Shirazeh Houshiary's sculptures,
paintings, and animations explore
the very nature of existence

BY ELIZABETH FULLERTON

With light streaming in through large skylights and classical music filling the space under the vaulted roof, the Iranian-born artist Shirazeh Houshiary's immaculate white London studio feels more like a chapel than an artist's workspace. Entering the building, the visitor has the sense of stepping out of time. It is a fitting setting for an artist whose paintings, sculptures, and animations are profoundly meditative and concerned with the metaphysical.

This ambience derives partly from Houshiary's own quiet composure and partly from the nature of her work. "I'm trying to really get beyond what we experience with the three-dimensional senses we have, because we see the world in a limited way. Much of reality is what we don't see," says the artist, who was born in Iran and came to Britain in 1974.

Houshiary, 58, does not practice any religion and dislikes



such labels as “transcendental,” yet her work has an undeniably spiritual quality, overtly so with installations such as *Breath*, a white glazed-brick tower emitting chants from four religions that was erected in Battery Park in Manhattan in 2004, and her 2008 *East Window* for St. Martin-in-the-Fields church in Trafalgar Square in London.

Despite these prominent projects and her participation in a steady stream of international exhibitions, Houshiary has a low public profile. This too may have to do with the nature of her output. “Shirazeh’s work has a quiet power to attract contemplation—it’s slow burn,” says Vivien Lovell, director of the art consultancy

***Chasm*, 2012,
expresses
“a quest to go
beyond the veil.”**

Modus Operandi, which organized the commission for *East Window* and the altar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, both awarded to Houshiary and her British architect husband, Pip Horne.

On the walls of the upper floor of the studio hang two recently completed canvases in mottled purples, radiant whites, blues, and black, destined for her solo show in November at Lehmann Maupin Gallery in New York. Poetic and primeval, these works at once suggest exploding galaxies in vast swirling cosmic

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spaces and the ribbed contours of minute cellular structures—like satellite pictures of tumultuous weather patterns or microscopic images of skin tissue.

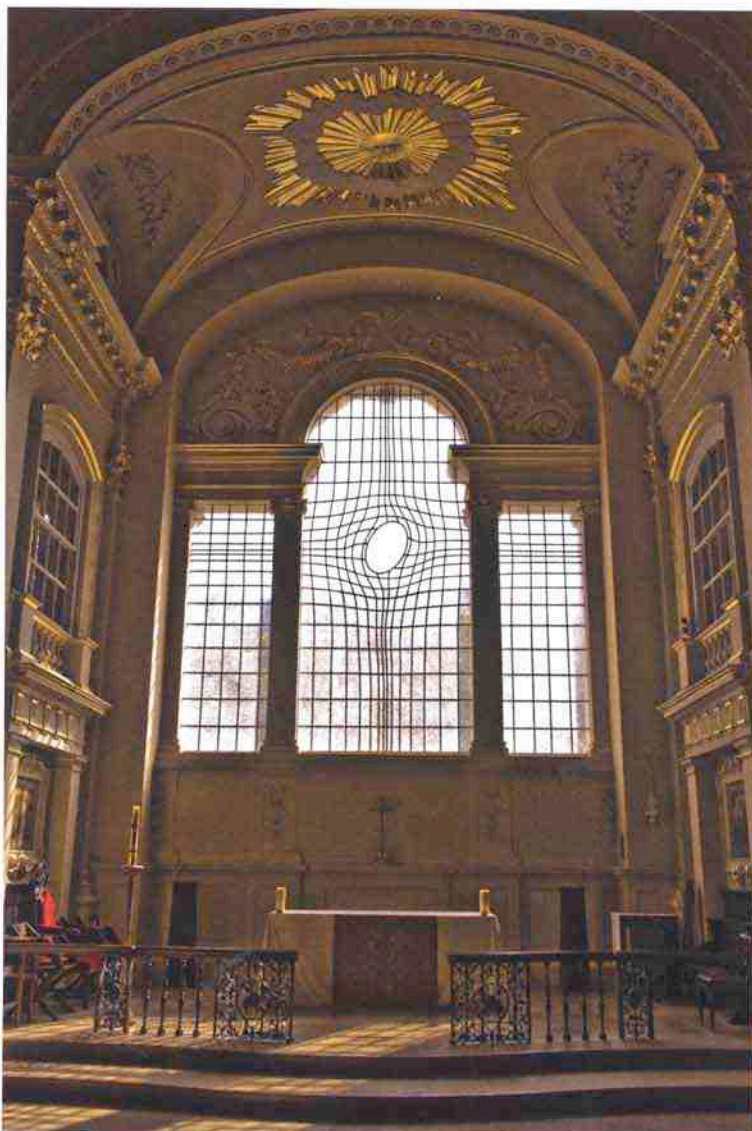
One canvas, titled *Dark Senses*, in dusty purple on black, is bisected by a vaporous trail of handprints, marking a departure for the artist—an attempt to capture the elusive quality of human presence through physical touch. “It is almost like some hand mark that is really touching something very distant like the universe, like the dark senses being revealed,” says Houshiary.

Creating the paintings is an act that involves the artist’s whole body, as she moves around within the reinforced canvas on the floor, overlaying several coats of pigment, on top of which she traces an intricate filigree in pencil. The combination produces a smoky, layered effect that gives the illusion of dimensions beyond the flat picture plane.

For the past 20 years, she has been weaving a silvery web across all her paintings. It is made up of two words in Arabic repeated thousands of times: “I am” and “I am not.” Crushed together, so minuscule as to be indecipherable, the words embody the duality of existence in the same way as the yin and the yang. “It’s the overlapping of the two words, being and not being, life and death,” explains Houshiary. “It’s not about meaning. The relationship between the absence and presence is unknowable and leads to infinite possibility.”

The paintings take two to six months to create—perhaps another reason for Houshiary’s low public profile. “You’re aware when you see the work of the amount of time that’s put into each one and that’s given back to you when you’re looking at it; the mark making almost denotes time,” says Jenni Lomax, director of the Camden Arts Centre, which gave Houshiary a solo show in 1993.

Finished paintings are shipped only at the last possible moment, because Houshiary likes to live with them and



Houshiary and Horne's window for St. Martin-in-the-Fields, London, 2008.

\$50,000 to \$250,000. But she has yet to have a retrospective at a big-name institution.

Despite the fashion for identity politics among some curators, Houshiary refuses to ally herself with any ethnic group. While her textual patterns have been compared to Arabic calligraphy and her ritualistic creative process has been seen as an embodiment of Sufism, the mystical strand of Islam, she is fiercely resistant to attempts to classify her art and is careful about the shows in which she takes part.

Indeed, the only time a flash of anger ruffles her calm demeanor during several hours in the studio is when she talks about Tate’s interpretation of her work *Veil* (which the museum owns) as a reference to the *chador*, the all-enveloping black robe worn by many Muslim women. “That’s all they can see of the people who come from the Middle East—they have to be oppressed,” she says. “I don’t want to fit into any category. I want to be an individual, with a mind and ideas, who can connect to the bigger picture of who we are as human beings.”

learn from them. “They have their own presence and they teach me a lot,” she says.

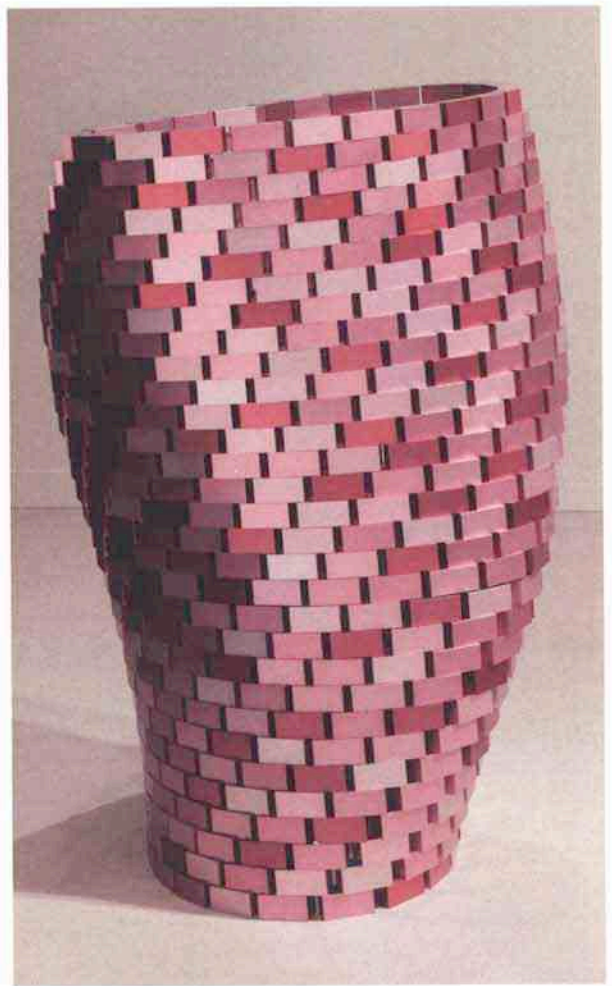
Nominated for the Turner Prize in 1994, Houshiary began her career as a sculptor and came later to painting and multimedia installation. In the 1980s, she was linked to the so-called New British Sculptors such as Anish Kapoor, Richard Deacon, and Tony Cragg, but unlike many of them, Houshiary has eschewed the limelight.

Collected by museums ranging from Tate, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Guggenheim, she has taken part in major group shows worldwide and had numerous solo exhibitions at the Lisson Gallery in London and Lehmann Maupin in New York, which both represent her, and where her paintings go for \$30,000 to \$300,000, sculptures \$150,000 to \$500,000, and animations

Born in Shiraz in 1955, Houshiary went to school and university in Iran. Even in her native country, she says, she felt like an outsider, wanting no part of the brewing revolution that erupted in 1979, five years after she moved to England to study at the Chelsea School of Art. She has returned to Iran only twice; the lack of democracy, in politics and in the home, depresses her.

"I don't want to deny my roots. My Persian heritage is definitely there," she says. "It's not something I need to defend or fight for. It's just there." But she feels more connection with her adopted country than with her homeland.

She has been with her English husband since they met as students in the 1970s. They share the studio in



LEFT *Breath II*, Houshiary and Horne's installation in Battery Park, New York, 2004. **ABOVE** *Sheer*, 2012, suggests a veil twisting in the wind.

the leafy West London suburb of Barnes, walking there from home every day along the Thames, far from the industrial east where most of London's artists live.

The studio, designed by Horne, reflects the scope of Houshiary's activities, with the upper loft space dedicated to painting, the ground floor to sculpture, and the basement to animation. In the entire building, virtually the only traces of her roots are a pair of Persian slippers and a book on the Sufi mystic poet Rumi, nestled in her crowded shelves among scientific tomes by Stephen Hawking, poetry by Keats and Rilke, and numerous books on art, with subjects ranging from Kazimir Malevich and Barnett Newman to Velázquez. On the floor of the studio, more books—on Leonardo da Vinci, Piero della Francesca, and Francisco de Zurbarán—lie open or in piles alongside computerized sketches for sculptures in coral, rust, and turquoise.

The art historian Mel Gooding sees a strong resonance in Houshiary's abstract painting and sculpture in terms of rhythm, structure, and color with the works of many Renaissance masters, despite their predominantly religious



subject matter.

"I was aware with Antonello da Messina and Fra Angelico especially that she was clearly looking, as she does all the time, at the Western European tradition of painting," Gooding says. "We are not talking about any kind of Christian imagery, we're talking about a set of formal ideas that has to do with an art that seeks revelation rather than description."

The concept of the veil is in fact fundamental to Houshiary's work, but it has nothing to do with Islam, women, oppression, or Christian marriage ceremonies. Veils, shrouds, and

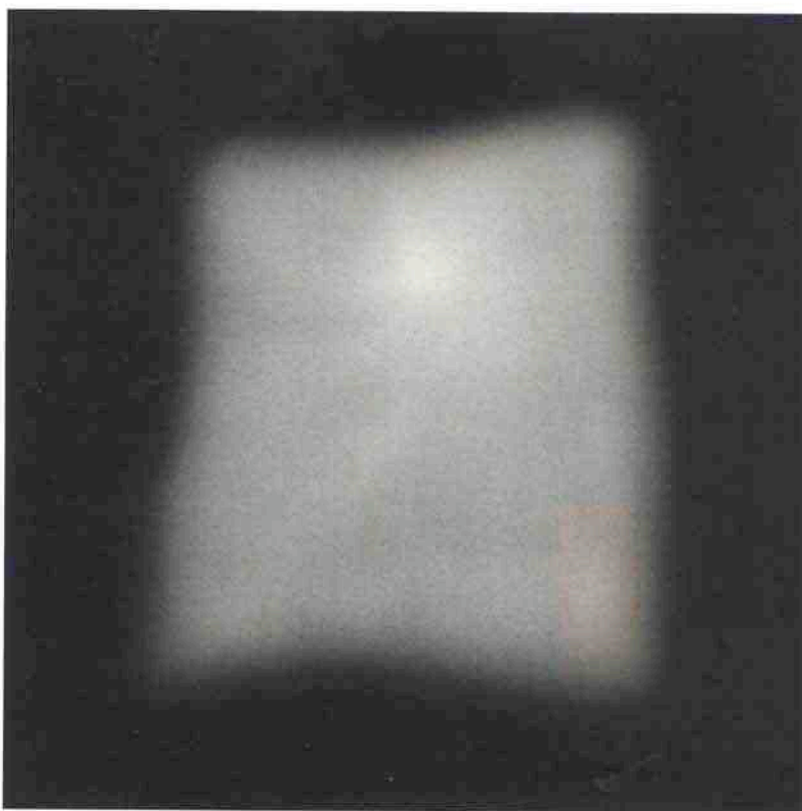
membranes are a recurring motif; for her, the veil is the skin separating the human interior and exterior, and it is also a metaphor for perception, representing a barrier that needs to be broken through for us to achieve awareness of our being.

"My recent work has had a lot of quality of rupture and piercing and chasm, so it's like a quest to go beyond the veil that stops us seeing through," Houshiary says, pointing to her painting *Chasm*, due to appear in November at Lehmann Maupin, with a milky spatial mist over a black background punctured with intense blue gashes that draw in the viewer.

If her work prompts analogies with science as well as metaphysics, it's no accident; she is deeply interested in quantum physics and intrigued by the uncertain nature of existence. "The universe is in a process of disintegration, everything is in a state of erosion, and yet we try to stabilize it," she says. "This tension fascinates me and it's at the core of my work."

Moving from her painting area down to the ground floor, Houshiary points to a pink tower sculpture of anodized aluminium bricks titled *Sheer*, whose hard, spiraling surface shimmers and ripples, suggesting—in an apparent trick of alchemy—a soft veil twisting in the wind. Whereas her early towers were grand symmetrical columns, these latest versions have been distorted and shrunk down to chest height as a way of exploring her other central theme, life's intrinsic polarity.

"It is as if the same object is constructed and collapsed simultaneously, and actually these works are



Veil (still frame from animation), 2005. The concept of the veil for Houshiary has nothing to do with Islam or women.

who helps with architectural quandaries, still have to find a way to make that work.

The themes of the duality of existence and its ephemeral nature have found a powerful expression in Houshiary's animations. Passing downstairs to the studio basement, she dims the lights and plays her piece *Breath*, a variation on her Battery Park installation, which is owned by both the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim. Four vocalists simultaneously chant Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, and Islamic prayers while their breath is visualized on four video screens. Encapsulating the essence of being in the idea of exhalation and inhalation, the faint imprint expands and contracts on the screens like breath on glass with the ebb and flow of the voices.

Houshiary points out the harmonious flow between the different cadences, almost like an audio version of what peaceful coexistence among races and religions could be. "I think it's a very important work for me; it really says a lot about who we are," she says as the chants fill the surrounding darkness.

Houshiary has made several variations of the work, one of which was for her Battery Park installation, commissioned by the nonprofit Creative Time. Another is being shown at the Venice Biennale in a 22-foot-high tower, aimed at immersing the viewer in the multisensory experience.

David Toop, a musician, sound curator, and author of several books on the history of sound, draws parallels

really about the space inside," Houshiary says, her hands running over the smooth bricks. "By stretching, by pulling, just like a veil, you're trying to transcend the three-dimensional space, similar to what I do in my painting." Three of these sculptures are being made in colored glass bricks for the exhibition "Glasstress" at the Venice Biennale this year, a further step in her desire to transform concrete matter into something floating and fragile.

The next stage will be to stretch the sculptures so that they eventually tear, but she and Horne,



between Houshiary's "desire to capture what is not tangible, what is invisible" and the music of John Cage, in which silence, or lack of music, is as important as the notes.

"There's a kind of field there of almost nothingness seething with life," Toop says. "That's what I feel about silence. It's not a blankness; there's a different level of perception, so it demands a certain kind of attunement to fully engage with it."

Back in her upper loft, where music vibrates through the space eclipsing the drone of airplanes from nearby Heathrow, the only sign of time passing is the changing

The web of indecipherable calligraphy covering the surface of *Haze*, 2011, is composed of the words "I am" and "I am not" in Arabic.

light on Houshiary's canvases.

"I love this light in England; it's very bleary and hazy. There's no edge to things," she says. "I don't like a harsh, definable light like they have where I come from." Unsurprisingly for an artist who is unconfined by boundaries, she finds Turner and Monet

liberating in the way they make objects dissolve into the atmosphere.

"It's somewhere between seeing and not seeing. The perception is free to move between the two rather than to be fixed," she says. "Perhaps that's why I like this veiled light." ■