

Sculpture

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From Form to Formlessness

A Conversation with Shirazeh Houshiary

By Anne Barclay Morgan

Born in Shiraz, Persia, in 1955, Shirazeh Houshiary moved to London in 1973, pursuing her studies at the Chelsea School of Art. She became well known in Europe for her sculptures and was included in the 1989 Paris exhibition of world art "Magiciens de la Terre." In her artwork, Houshiary seeks to embody spiritual principles in order to manifest invisible processes or the dematerialization of form. Her earlier sculptures, with titles such as *The Angel with Ten Thousand Wings* or *The Earth is an Angel*, of the late 1980s, were made predominantly of copper, at times combined with brass. These floor sculptures contain curves in abstract shapes that suggest calligraphy. In the 1990s, her sculptures became more geometric. For example, her four-part piece *Turning Around the Centre* is composed of cubes of lead with recessed sections lined with gold leaf. Exhibitions of the work included works of graphite and acrylic on paper accompanied by quotations from the 13th-century Sufi poet, Rumi. Her sculptures have been included in numerous indoor and outdoor exhibitions, and she was nominated by the Tate Gallery for the Turner Prize in 1994. In September of 1999, she exhibited a new body of work at Lehmann Maupin Gallery in New York, in which she wanted to break through notions of specific media and specific nomenclature. Although her new work could be considered two dimensional, she advocates for it to be considered neither two-dimensional nor three-dimensional.

Anne Barclay Morgan: What is the evolution of your new work?

Shirazeh Houshiary: I began this body of work five years ago. Few people are aware of this because they only see my sculpture. My evolution has been from form to formlessness. I have tried to capture the substance or the essence of things rather than the thing itself.

ABM: Do you feel that the process of revelation is for the viewer to discover as well as for you the artist?

SH: When you see the pieces from afar, they are very often like ethereal mist, or a ghost, or smoke, or something intangible. They pull you to their center. As you get closer, what they reveal is, very often, you. I think that this is the closest one can get to the formless. You are drawn into something that is part of every one of us.

ABM: What would you like the viewer to experience?

SH: This work is about presence. Presence is like light—how can you describe light? Light can be only experienced, it has a presence. This work also has a presence and has only to be experienced. There is no way you can tell somebody else your experience, it's incredibly private and intimate. There is no way you can intellectualize or describe this work. There is no way you can even photograph it.

ABM: As a frame, you start with a square.

SH: The square has always been very important to me because of its simplicity. When you are confronted with a square, it is the most uncomplicated experience. It has a perfection that you don't question. Everything else you want to question, to intellectualize, to understand its proportion and relationship. I have made many different squares and rejected them. Not every square works. I finally discovered that I can only work with three different sizes. The largest square relates to my own space, the smallest square to my own face and breath. These two sizes are the best for me, one being very intimate and the other enveloping your whole existence. The middle square is like the upper part of my body, which allows me to concentrate deeper. When you see these squares, you think, "How beautiful," and you don't question how they came to existence because they are "real." When something is not real, you start questioning, because you want to know why it exists. When something is real, when something has a presence, you don't ask questions, because it is perfect.

ABM: Do you start with the smallest square first and then go on to the middle one?

SH: At times I need to work in the small, intimate scale because it's like something from within. The titles, such as *Touch*, are about touch from within. One small piece, called *Presence*, resembles an elusive mist. You cannot get closer to yourself than that. Then I do a big one that has to do with my whole body. I exist within these parameters.

ABM: In your smallest piece called *Presence*, the hovering form is two-thirds of the way down, and in the other, larger *Presence No 2*, this is reversed. It is as if your eye was speaking to you at different levels.

SH: Yes, absolutely. These two are very important pieces for me because my work is getting closer to this sense of something that moves but cannot be captured. It just evaporates in front of your very eyes.

ABM: In this body of work, you began using a white ground rather than just black.

SH: Yes, I have actually been using white for a long time. To look into black is one experience, to look into white is another. Yet these two extremes are very complementary, they're of the same nature. That is why I find it very difficult to use color. The only other color that I have ever used is yellow, because it is the closest I can get to light. White is an experience of boundlessness, it opens in front of you. Whereas the black closes, or collapses like the experience of falling, which is another kind of infinity, but in reverse. They are actually one, ultimately.

ABM: Your comparison defines black as the infinite going within and white as infinite going without.

SH: Yes, absolutely. To stare into white or to stare into black teaches you so much about you. White is opening right in front of your eyes and black is closing constantly, but they are both of the same nature. They are both showing the infinite. It is like the beginning and end of a circle, they join together so beautifully.

ABM: You hung a large black square opposite a large white one, so that they seem to speak to each other.

SH: The title of one work is *Black Light*, and the other is called *White Shadow*, so you can see the contradiction. In fact, we are constantly dealing with two different manifestations of something whose nature is one.

ABM: *White Shadow* reminded me of your sculpture with water for the 1989 exhibition "Magiciens de la terre" in Paris, with those symmetrical ripples radiating from the center. In *White Shadow*, the ripples are coming from an oval shape, and they're not symmetrical.

SH: The irregularity of ripples is just the nature of breathing. Your breathing is constant expansion and contraction, but at the same time the breath is incredibly mysterious; it has no symmetry, no regularity, nothing. The reason I am doing this work is that I set out to capture my breath. Breath is equated to life, it is energy, it is life force. Yet how can you describe breath? I have set out to find the essence of my own existence, transcending name, nationality, cultures. The breath transcends everything there is in this world, every kind of invention of the human mind. That's why one should not even try to describe this work intellectually, because the experience is of the breath, not of the mind.

ABM: In your desire to capture the breath did you make a conscious decision to move away from creating floor sculptures?

SH: No. I was trying to do the same with sculpture; in fact, I am still trying to, but the concreteness of the form has stopped me from going very far. It was a natural progression from my sculpture to these pieces, which are very physical and not painterly, they just happen to be two dimensional. It's very dangerous to define this work as a painting or a sculpture. This work has nothing to do with either of those definitions, rather it transcends all of these limitations because it exists on another level. To set out, I simply use graphite to write text. The text becomes the breath or the vibration I was trying to say with the word. So the meaning of the word disappears, all that is left is vibration or energy. I asked myself, what was it about creation that is so mysterious and so majestic? It is the word that creates the universe, there is no hand involved. The material came into existence because the breath was there to make that substance move. When scientists break matter into the smallest bits, the atom itself is empty. What gives the solidity to matter is movement. The movement is just like breathing, the movement creates the appearance. So, even in science, you have the same idea. Physics fascinates me because movement gives the appearance of solidity to the object. In its essence, an object is actually a void. Our vision is so small, because we relate to something which is an illusion. This particular body of work began with the idea of the word being the manifestation of breath.

ABM: So it's not important for the viewer to know the word?

SH: No, the word is the beginning, it's like my breath. Breath is the movement, the vibration, the energy, it's not the form. Because we live in form, we are still dependent on expressing ourselves through some kind of structure. So, I start with structure, but move toward formlessness, toward placelessness, toward nothingness, toward

something that is like a ghost. It evaporates right in front of you. Ultimately, I don't want people to think about this, because this is about direct cognition. Without that experience, there is absolutely nothing, and there's no point to even think.

ABM: Do you think someone who is fluent in Arabic can actually read your word?

SH: No, they cannot. First of all, the word has been woven in such intricate patterns, it's like a cloth. I'm weaving breath. Once you weave, the thread is no longer visible, what you see is the cloth. I used the word, because I wanted to capture what is the manifestation of breath, and I needed something to begin. It is very difficult to suddenly jump into this ocean of formlessness and nothingness, you have nowhere to go, you just drown. You need to begin somewhere, but it's not the goal.

ABM: Do you work in silence?

SH: I work most of the time in silence. I do listen to music a lot but usually when I am finishing a piece. When I'm beginning a piece, I have to work in silence.

ABM: Music also can be a form of the breath.

SH: Yes, it is. My work deals ultimately with vibration, a vibration of ether, hopefully. That kind of vibration is close to some kinds of music.

ABM: So your work is like a manifestation of the chant.

SH: Yes, that's a good way to explain it. Like the universe just is, I hope that is what it feels like when you see the pieces. They just are. The works don't want to dominate the viewer. The viewer becomes part of the experience.

ABM: The Sufi thinker Martin Lings views the plurality of spiritual and religious experience as a positive development in our society. When you want each person to have their own experience, you are also offering a plurality.

SH: Yes, in some ways this is true. It's like becoming conscious of the universe: when you are conscious of the universe, you cannot focus on your own position, because it is no longer as important. You are one little notch woven into this fabric of infinite existence. That notch is important, because it keeps the cloth together, but at the same time, it is part of the cloth. It's not separate.

ABM: As you bring the breath to life in your work, where is death?

SH: I have come to see that death is pure illusion. Death only exists for us because we feel that we are dependent on our form. Yet the formless has no death, only form has death. Form is an illusion, that is why it evolves, it degenerates, it gets corrupted, and it disappears. But this is not true of formlessness, of presence. That presence is there forever. This presence is very elusive, it's not even physically in the breath, even though in that form we have some consciousness of it. For that reason, the experience of presence has to take the form of the formless. It is the most beautiful thing I have ever come into contact with.

ABM: I'm glad you continue to make work even though your own experience of that presence is more powerful.

SH: I feel that my work captures some very sublime moments of those experiences. I cannot stop falling into sublime experiences when I can capture even a moment. That in itself is so powerful that it cuts right through me.

ABM: You have captured that one moment, but you work on it for weeks and months, so creating your work becomes a practice of time.

SH: Yes, it is, because time is an invention of our minds. Time does not exist in the space that I'm talking about. Time can only be described in relation to material. In the presence of a moment there is no time, and it doesn't matter if it is a million years or a second, it's all the same.

ABM: Will you be continuing this body of work?

SH: Yes. One of my most recent white pieces, *Warp and Weft*, is out of this world for me. That work is just the beginning of a new exploration in which paint covers the cloth of the canvas, and then I make a weft on the surface. The weft itself is the cloth, as if to say the warp and weft are the essence. We are the veil, but we are also the essence. This contradiction exists simultaneously: the warp and weft represent something that doesn't allow you to see beyond them; but at the same time, they allow you to see the beyond.

ABM: Do you think you would find the same experience in using a black ground?

SH: The large black *Veil* represents a similar idea. It resembles a mist, a cloth, or a kind of hovering light. The woven words are all chants but it doesn't matter what they are, because you can't read them. This woven quality is also the origin of the canvas. At the same time, it is the veil that doesn't allow you to see beyond. So there are many layers of meaning. I understand why physicists become so obsessed. The journey to find out the nature of matter takes you to amazing places, because it is about going deep within your own being and trying to know what you are composed of. I'm not trying to understand who I am in relation to name, culture, and all that. Those things I can describe and understand and finish with, but I cannot understand the magic, the mystery of existence. I can feel it. The nature of being, of existence, is more powerful than anything I know.

ABM: In your choice of word, or chant, or even formlessness that you seek, does intuition play an important role?

SH: Yes, this is very interesting, because there are many kinds of intuition. One is below our intellectual ability, which many people have and which is there all the time. There is another intuition which is above or beyond our intellect, that is also there all the time. The second form of intuition allows you to have the glimpse of the presence itself, of the spark of that moment, which is like a channel, a link to the present.

ABM: You mentioned how difficult it is to photograph your work.

SH: I like that, because it confirms that it can only be experienced. The most successful thing about this work is that it is so elusive and intangible. You can't physically document it. It's like trying to document life. Life itself has to be experienced, just as light can only be experienced. When you stand in front of the work, sometimes you don't even see anything. It reveals itself to you slowly. Viewers understand this; they want to see this work in different light conditions or different moods, because they can't have that experience for one moment and understand it.

Anne Barclay Morgan is a Florida-based writer and a frequent contributor to Sculpture.