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Bounds of perception

Iranian-born artist Shirazeh Houshiary speaks to Griselda Murray Brown about ways of seeing

Without speaking, Shirazeh Houshiary leads me down to her basement and turns on a projector. A grid of images – it's hard to say of what – shudders into view. After a while, I notice that some of them contain little flames. More appear until there is a flame in each, burning the same sooty shape around it. There is a moment where the images are identical – a flame in a black hollow – before one by one they fade poignantly into smoke and nothingness.

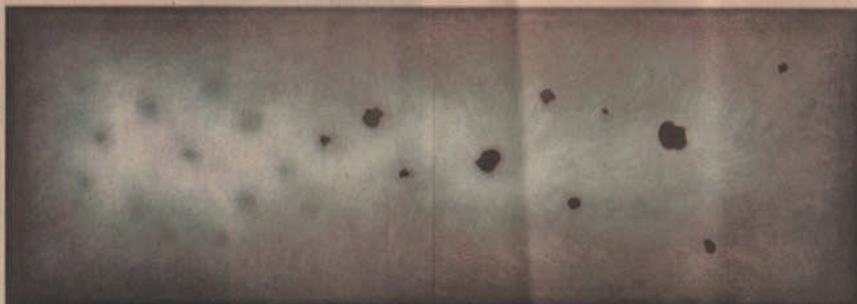
It is only once "Dust", her latest film work, is over and starts again on a loop that I realise Houshiary has been watching me. "It's the same with everyone," she smiles, "this frenzied movement of the eyes. They are only ever still twice: at the beginning and in the middle, when all the images are the same."

Houshiary was born in Shiraz, Iran, in 1955 and moved to London in 1976 to study sculpture at Chelsea College of Art. Nominated for the Turner Prize in 1994, she is well-known in the art world if not a household name. Film is relatively new to her practice – she made her first in 2006 – but through the medium she explores the same ideas that inform her sculpture and painting: how and how much we perceive.

Upstairs in the spacious, light-filled studio designed by her architect husband Pip Horne, Houshiary explains her artistic endeavour. "I have always been fascinated by the invisible. Our breath is invisible and that's what keeps us alive. We are not our bodies alone: life is something more elusive and intangible, and to penetrate that we need to go further than what we can see. Our perception is very limited."

She pulls out some drawings for a new sculpture, "String Quintet", which will be shown at London's Lisson Gallery in her latest exhibition – alongside "Dust" and other works. It is composed of five ascending ribbons of stainless steel, twisting and rising at different wavelengths; their surfaces are shiny yet they do not reflect surrounding objects – only light. The impression is of something pure and untainted, as if "revealing an invisible field of light" Houshiary suggests.

"But it's not really about meaning," she continues in her precise, gentle manner, "I dislike the word 'meaning'. I would like my work to be open and generous, different for every person who sees it." Her paintings are large, abstract meditations in colour. Starting always with a black or white base, she layers the canvas with pigments that seem to seep out from the centre, then inscribes a layer of text in graphite pencil on top, like a fine gauze. The text is composed of two Arabic words, "I am" and "I am not", merged into an unintelligible repeated symbol. "One is positive, one is



denser glowing white glass than Houshiary puts it, "doesn't go to sleep".

Houshiary and Horne will unveil their second commission for St Martin's Fields in November: an altar carved from a single block of bone-coloured travertine. They spent months in Italy searching for the right stone; the one they chose has layers of sediment punctuated with mineral inclusions "like wounds". They have installed a light inside so that it glows luminous. Like Houshiary's metal sculptures, which seem to stretch and flow organically, the altar transcends the boundaries of its material.

Houshiary's artistic influences are vast and surprising. A stack of books in her studio includes a glossy volume of a 17th-century Spanish master Zurbarán whose "The Veil of St Veronica" she admires for its ambiguous layering – a book of Buddhist cave paintings at Huang on the Silk Route. "I don't know about past and present. Art should transcend time and space; it's the unknowable universe."

Her attitude to art history is particularly wider vision. She called her new show "Boundary Condition" because "the notion of being an artist means you have limitations. You are allowing the opening of the universe to enter – the art, the past and present." And Houshiary has such boundaries in her own life. When she graduated in 1979, Iran was in the throes of a revolution so she stayed in England where she remained. "Am I Iranian? English?" she fixes me with a piercing look. "They want to understand you, they put a boundary around you. But you are a citizen of this earth."

'Shirazeh Houshiary: No Boundary Condition', Lisson Gallery, London, to November 12. www.lissongallery.com



'I don't think about past and present. Art should transcend time and space; it's the same unknowable universe'

negative," Houshiary explains, "and they are crushed together to create the vibration you feel on the surface of the painting. That tension is essential." Standing back from "Apogee", a new painting, its startling blue form seems to morph and spread – hovering, like the combustion process in "Dust", on the boundary of perception.

Houshiary's paintings have been dismissed as optical tricks, clever yet superficial. But talking to her on an unusually warm October afternoon, the odd leaf sailing through the open window of her studio, it strikes me that such criticism misses the point: her paintings' slipperiness is not merely stylistic but part of her vision. "I want the experience of looking at my painting to be like looking through water, so the edges of clarity shatter. I don't want you to feel it is fixed for you. It comes and goes: sometimes you see it, sometimes you don't. The universe is like that – everything is in a state of flux."

I ask Houshiary if her work is spiritual, and she replies that that word has been "abused" too much. "I'm not a religious artist," she adds, "my concerns are human." She refers to her best known work in London, the East Window of St-Martin-in-the-Fields, which she and Horne were commissioned to redesign for 2008. "That's the greatest challenge for an artist – to confront the public. You have to give something to every kind of person from the drunks to the homeless, from somebody praying to somebody attending a concert. You're touching humanity at its depth." Their window is made of clear not coloured glass so that, unlike traditional church windows, it works as well from outside as inside. Its simple curvilinear lattice cross is unobtrusive; at its centre is an ellipse of

Elusive Clockwise from top: 'Between' (2010-11), 'Apogee' (2010), 'Drawing 4' (2009), detail from 'Rupture' (2010) and 'The Echo' (2011). Above: Shirazeh Houshiary Thierry Bal