

Fereshteh Daftari, "Beyond Islamic Roots – Beyond Modernism", *Res 43, Spring 2003*. Copyright by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Reprinted by Permission of the Peabody Museum Press, Harvard University.

Shirazeh Houshiary buries every point of departure that might define an origin. "I set out to capture my breath," she says, "to find the essence of my own existence, transcending name, nationality, cultures."<sup>1</sup> Born in Shiraz, Iran, Houshiary enrolled at the Chelsea School of Art in 1976 and has lived in London ever since. Presented as a figurehead for new British art in the 1980s and then pressured to do the same for Iranian art in the identity-driven exhibitions of the 1990s, she shunned categorizations and withdrew from events that would have cast her in their light. Unconcerned with gender or ethnicity, perpetually trying to move beyond, she seeks a passage to a condition free of divisions, a space shared by all humanity. Yet she is profoundly sustained in this quest by Eastern mysticism, and specifically Sufism, which has allowed her to propose paradoxes and conquer them, dismantle binary thoughts, merge the spiritual with the scientific, and test and overcome easy categorizations and conceptual ghettos.<sup>2</sup>

The process of taming polarities, paradoxically, begins with polarities. For instance, in *Licit Shadow* (1992-93), a series of sculptures in six parts, Houshiary draws formal vocabularies from diverse and specific origins, then lets them flow into a common geometry. The grid structures and serial productions of Minimalism come to mind, but only to provide a nest for honeycomb patterns that may hark back to the *muqarnas* of Islamic architecture. The materials, ranging from lead to gold, carry their own hierarchical symbolism, referring to the alchemic struggle to overcome base matter. The juxtaposition of the cold, dead weight of the cube with flickers of bright copper and gold create further antagonisms within a cohabitation in which Houshiary above all attempts to

breathe life into the rigid will of the geometry. By stretching outward and compressing inward the cores of her structures, she hints at the pulmonary rhythms of expansion and contraction. The sense of breathing remains central to Houshiary's iconography.

With time, the dualities in her work have blended into more seamless wholes. Site-specific brick sculptures such as *Loom* (2000), for example, once again point to both an icon of modernism—Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column* (1937-38)—and Islamic architecture, with its earthbound tomb towers or soaring minarets. Among the latter, the Malwiya (848/49-852), the “snail shell” or ramped minaret tower of the Great Mosque of al-Mutawakkil, in Samarra, stands out as a possible antecedent.<sup>3</sup> The feeling of simultaneous lightness and weight, previously conveyed through materials, here emanates from the sense of corkscrew rotation, which seems at once to be tightening its grip on the earth and whirling to be released from it.

A gyrating, spiral movement like this one reverberates in Sufi rituals such as the dance of the whirling Dervishes, in which the dance is intended to lead to a state of altered consciousness, a surpassing of the self. The movement in Houshiary's *Loom*, then, is simultaneously downward and inward, upward or outward. In visual terms it also relates directly to the double helix, the twinned spirals of genetic material encapsulated in DNA. Fusing the artistic vocabularies of East and West, *Loom* also weaves spirituality and science into a tightly unified expression.

Houshiary's monochrome paintings go still farther in communicating the meeting of opposites, the commingling of cultures, the acceptance of not just all but of none in particular—a process leading to a new order which is neither Islamic nor modernist but something new to both. The imagery of the paintings may be traced back to the works in

graphite on paper, mounted on aluminum, that she executed in the early 1990s.<sup>4</sup> Soon after, in 1993, she moved from paper to canvas, working on top of a canvas she laid on the floor, a position loaded with history in that it recalls the balletic choreographies of gestures performed by the New York School artist Jackson Pollock. Houshiary, on the other hand, moves with the meticulousness and intimacy of a miniature painter.

The earlier drawings show the marks of Arabic calligraphy. In the paintings too, Houshiary begins by tracing a word whose identity she does not divulge, preferring to keep the mystery of its origin. Then in a process of detachment she dissolves form and meaning through repetition—a device central to both Western Minimalist practice and to *zikr*, a Sufi method of meditation. Alternating writing with erasure, or veiling the writing with color, Houshiary moves from form to formlessness, from the word to the unutterable, from legibility to invisibility, from text to an abstraction bearing an activity's generalized trace. *Presence* (2000)—a painting in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art—at first sight resembles a blank canvas painted a monochrome white, then intimates a horizontal shadow when viewed from a distance, a web of barely visible cracks when scrutinized right up close. The form looks like an accident of nature more than the product of intense manual labor. Houshiary's paintings are elusive, barely visible, and they change in our vision over time—they refuse to be frozen into a finite moment, of the kind that could be captured by a camera. They intentionally stand at the very edge of perception, the signs both emerging from nothingness and simultaneously melting back into it. Yet these paintings painstakingly record a process of obstinate mark-making, of personal gestures inscribing time, of checking the pressure of one's presence, the precision of one's vision, against the resistant surface. It is as if Houshiary were

trying to capture the self in its least material form, as force, breath or energy. What remains is the ghost of the activity.

Ideas of the transcendence of the self appear in Sufism, which also deals with its annihilation, and reemergence transformed, through the twin concepts of *fanā* and *baqā*.<sup>5</sup> Like a Sufi's quest for the divine, Houshiary's apparent self-effacement is founded on grand ambition. It encompasses the sublime while engaging the material. It is within this circular spectrum that the works reveal their mystical foundations, while also pointing to the Western monochrome tradition. Restricted mostly to the colors of night and day—another opposition Houshiary complicates by drawing light into darkness and casting shadows on the pristine whiteness of her canvases—the paintings set up a zigzagging sequence of references, from the white monochromes of Robert Rauschenberg which do not demand attention as precious objects, to those of Robert Ryman, which relish their materiality, to the spiritual dimension of modernist abstraction, beginning with Kandinsky and Kasimir Malevich and moving on to Mark Rothko and Ad Reinhardt. Silencing the calligraphic element of the text, Houshiary veils its Islamic origin but turns up the volume of a transcendental message. And to the roster of modernist abstraction she adds a visual conundrum whose building blocks are words.

Houshiary refuses to inhabit a ghetto either Western or Islamic and instead invents a new order alien to both. Her work suggests a stage prior to and beyond differences, in which everyone can find something they recognize—the pulse of life, the trace of a self, something akin to the visualization of human presence. The signposts leading Houshiary to new territories and destinations are both Eastern (and not only Islamic) and Western

(modernist). It may well be her nomadic condition —premised on both intimacy and distance, from the self and from others—that has given Houshiary the wisdom and the ability to step beyond the cocoons of both her native culture and her host country.

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<sup>1</sup> Shirazeh Houshiary, quoted in Ann Barclay Morgan, “From Form to Formlessness: A conversation with Shirazeh Houshiary,” *Sculpture*, 19, no. 6 (July-August 2000), pp. 26-27.

<sup>2</sup> On Houshiary and Islamic and Sufi thought and symbolism, see Jeremy Lewison, “Light of Darkness,” in *Isthmus: Shirazeh Houshiary* (Grenoble, Munich, Maastricht: The British Council, 1995), pp. 65-92.

<sup>3</sup> For illustrations of both the Great Mosque and *muqarnas*, see John D. Hoag, *Islamic Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1977), pp. 54-55, 108, 157, 257.

<sup>4</sup> For ill see *Dancing around my ghost: Shirazeh Houshiary* (London: Camden Arts Center; Dublin: The Douglas Hyde Gallery, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> See Annemarie Schimmel. *Mystical Ddimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975).