

# sculpture

A PUBLICATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL SCULPTURE CENTER

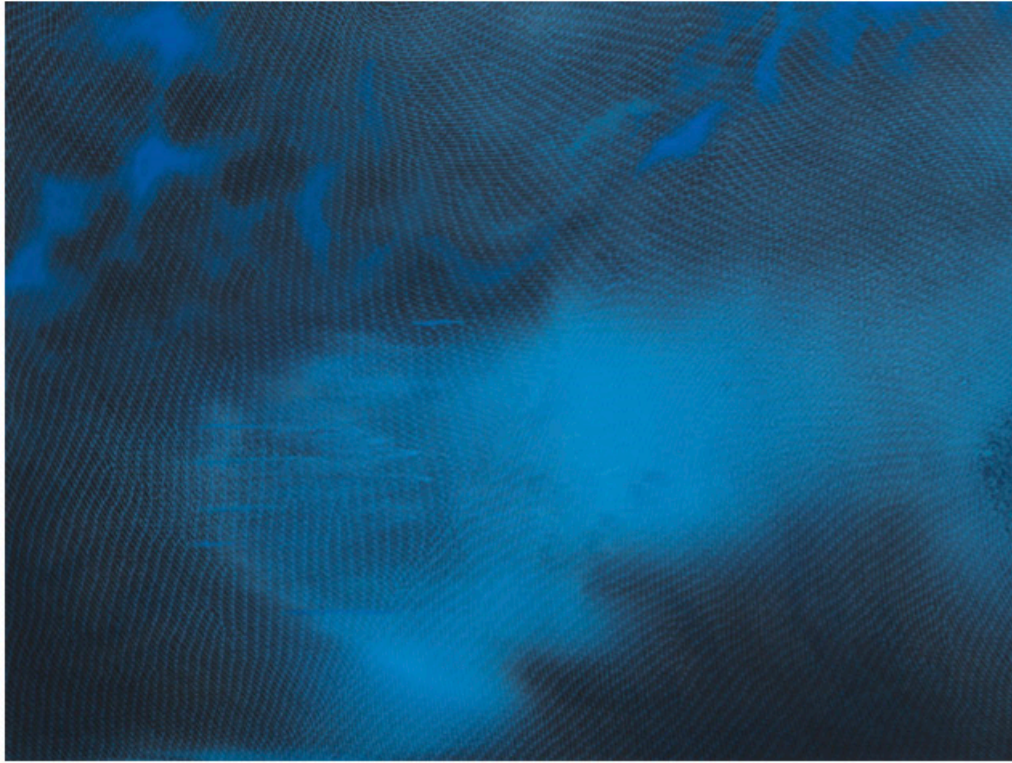


*Twilight* (detail), 2019. Cast glass and stainless steel, 140 x 67 x 31 cm. Photo: Dave Morgan, Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul

## A Conversation with Shirazeh Houshiary



In her paintings, sculptures, animations, and site-specific installations, Iranian-born artist Shirazeh Houshiary often employs a process of meticulous repetition in order to create forms reminiscent of webs or networks. While her paintings weave together minute lines of words in Arabic script, generating abstract waves in pictorial space, her newest sculptures, built from glass bricks, physically twist around themselves to create helix-like forms in space. The works, regardless of medium, experientially question the effects of movement and depth on our experiences of time and space. Houshiary's upcoming solo exhibition at [Lehmann Maupin](#) in New York, originally scheduled for May 2020, will be presented in 2021. Below, the artist discusses works in that show and her current daily studio practice in London.



*Gegenschein* (detail), 2018. Pigment, pencil, and black aquacryl on canvas and aluminum, 190 x 270 cm. Photo: Dave Morgan, Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul

***Sculpture* magazine: Your paintings and sculptures both employ a repetition of elements, evoking networks or webs. What is the value of repetition for you?**

**Shirazeh Houshiary:** In the last few decades, scientists have discovered that objects are not made of space-time or matter, energy, light, or anything else. There is no basic stuff of the universe—phenomena are ephemeral and mere rising waves in the stream of existence. So physical reality is insubstantial and ultimately composed of sets of fields. It is this repetition that seems to provide the threads for it. To create webs and networks is to interconnect everything, both living and non-living.

***Sculpture*: You create sculptures using anodized aluminum, glass, and cast glass bricks. How did you first come to use bricks, and why?**

**SH:** Bricks are essentially the building blocks, or skin, of our civilization—we use them to assemble or weave shelter, an enclosure which protects us. Glass, by its transparency, it will enmesh both surface and depth, and glass bricks fuse inside and outside simultaneously.

The glass bricks are made at Studio Berengo in Murano, Venice. I design the shapes and sizes of the bricks and the studio casts them.

***Sculpture*: Can you tell us about some of your newest works, including the wall-hung sculptures?**

**SH:** For my upcoming exhibition at Lehmann Maupin, I am showing three new glass works, all made of glass bricks. *Twilight* and *Aura* are inspired by the shape of the seed pod as it spins and falls to the ground, fulfilling its becoming. These two works are various shades of white, while the other is in shades of black. They rotate to reveal their forms. It is as if they were in a perpetual dance around one another, a dialogue between inside and outside.





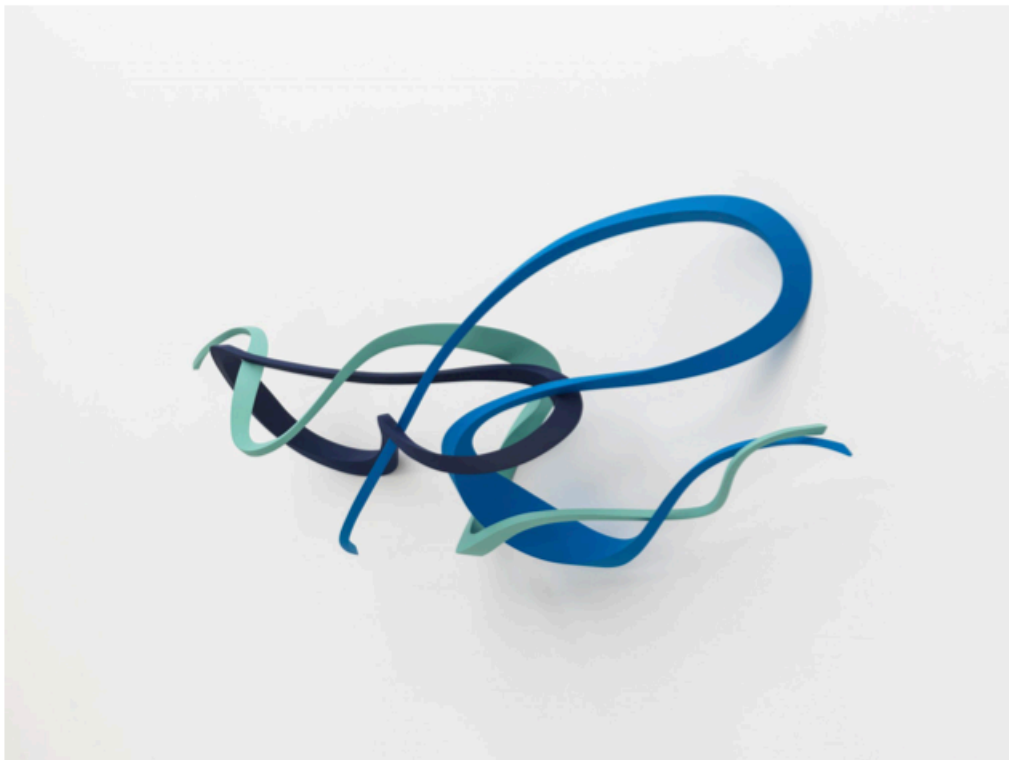
*Twilight*, 2019. Cast glass and stainless steel, 140 x 67 x 31 cm. Photo: Dave Morgan, Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul

I am also showing a glass tower, *Origin*, again made of glass bricks. It has an elliptical footprint that divides in two: on one side I arranged clear glass bricks, and on the other side I placed smoky-black and semi-opaque bricks. The layers of bricks rise and rotate to create two ribbons of transparent and opaque surfaces. At the fission of its form, the inside space and outside skin dissolve into one another, revealing both presence in absence and absence in presence.

The exhibition will also include two wall sculptures in painted cast aluminum and bronze. These works will merge both sculptural and pictorial spaces in their composition. Their ribbons and loops use the wall as stage to challenge the viewers' physical and psychological space and to reveal how we inhabit time, in *Order of Time*, and space, in *Strange Loop*.

**Sculpture:** You've noted your interest in Islamic architecture "and its use of light and color, reflection and water, which conspire to dematerialize the shape of a building, allowing it to dissolve into its surroundings." How do you understand your sculptures in relationship to the space they occupy?

**SH:** The sculptures are marked by a chiasmus of visibility and invisibility and by the use of nuance in transparency and opacity. By projecting a combination of order and disorder in the space they occupy, they encourage the experience of illusion and dreams through reflection and fusion, and suggest forms that dematerialize and dissolve into their surroundings.



*The Order of Time*, 2019. Powder-coated cast aluminum, 72.405 x 170.407 cm. Photo: Dave Morgan, Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul

**Sculpture:** What natural forms or phenomena inspire you?

**SH:** Water and light have inspired me. Both phenomena help us to understand the world around us by their interference.

Right now in London, we have no pollution—I see blue sky every day. That's quite unusual for us. Nature has an extraordinary ability to heal itself very quickly.

**Sculpture:** What is a typical studio day like for you?

**SH:** I start very early, as I like to read for one hour before working either on my paintings or developing new ideas for the sculptures. My days are usually full of events and experimentation, and I have found play very helpful in developing new methods.

It's not a very good time because a lot of people are suffering, and you can't help but be affected by it. But as artists, we have always been working in the studio on our own—that's not new. At the moment, I wake up in the morning and have nothing in my diary, which is amazing. It's quite beautiful in some ways because it has given me a lot of time to read and to think, which we don't usually have because we are running around too much.



# L I S S O N G A L L E R Y

*The New York Times*  
8 March 2020

**The New York Times**

## As Tensions Rise With Iran, So Does Interest in Art It Inspired

This year, several museums in the United States will feature works by Iranian artists in exile.



Shirazeh Houshiary at her studio in London. Ana Cuba for The New York Times

By Farah Nayeri

Published March 8, 2020 Updated March 12, 2020



*This article is part of our latest [special report on Museums](#), which focuses on the intersection of art and politics.*

LONDON — The Iranian artist Shirazeh Houshiary works out of a luminous studio in a leafy corner of southwest London. Her misty abstract paintings evoke the galaxy, the cosmos, the afterlife. To make them, she floods the canvas with water, pours pigment over it and draws tiny marks over the dried surface.

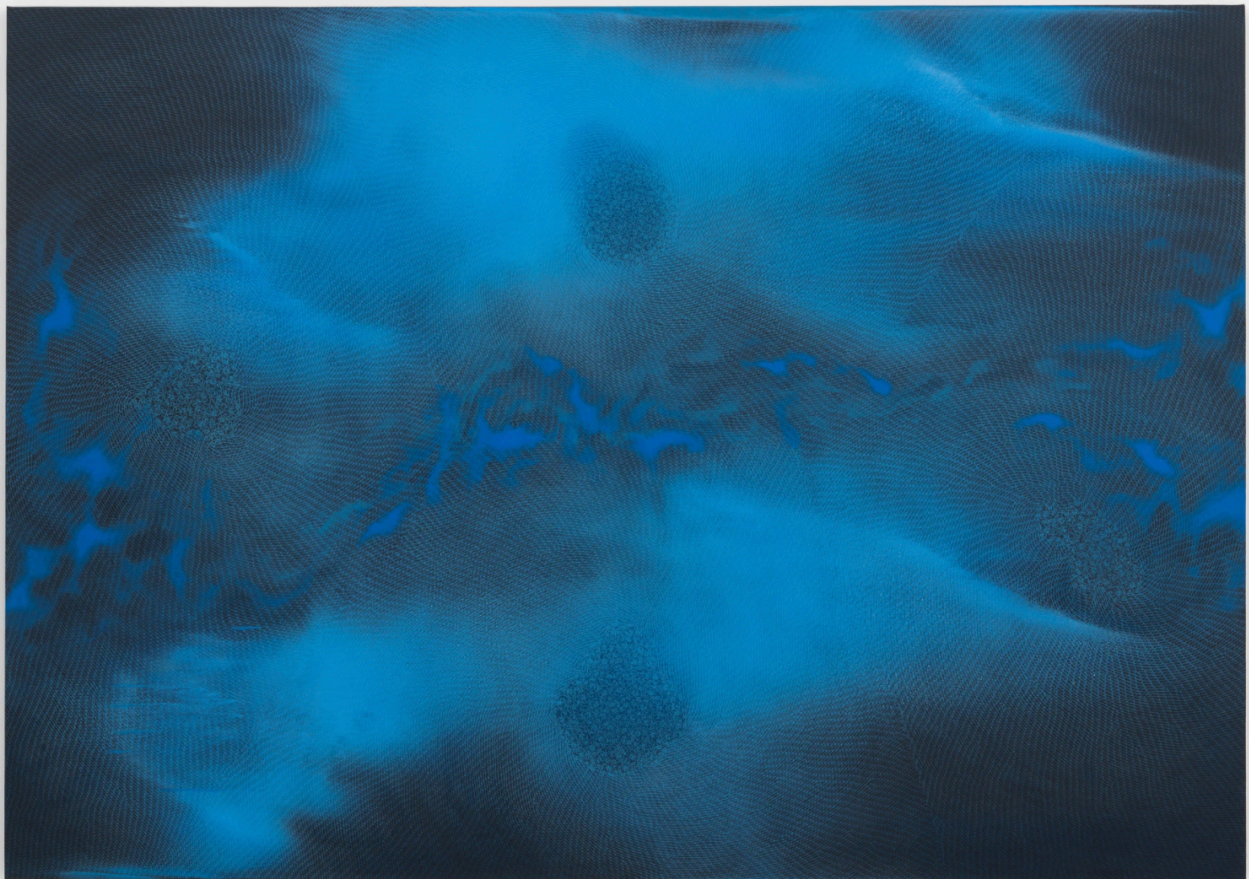
“Abstraction is one of the most sophisticated ways of coming to feeling, like a piece of music: You have tone, color, rhythm, so many things that touch you right inside,” she said in a recent interview at her studio, where she tiptoed around in striped socks. “I really want to get to the core of what I don’t know. And what I don’t know fascinates me more than what I know, even about myself.”

Ms. Houshiary, who moved to London in 1975, is one of a number of Iranian-born artists to have solo exhibitions in the United States this year. Her show, titled “A Thousand Folds,” at the Lehmann Maupin gallery in New York opens April 30.

Like many of her peers, she left the country around the time of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and settled in the West, as political conditions in Iran made it hard for artists to live and work there. While she steered clear of figuration, other artists in exile have tackled political themes by representing veiled women and religious fervor in their work. Among them is the video artist and photographer [Shirin Neshat](#), who is based in the United States and whose retrospective just ended at the Broad in Los Angeles and opens in February 2021 at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. With the animosity between the governments of the United States and Iran now at a peak, these representations are finding a bigger platform in American museums and galleries.



Joanne Heyler, founding director of the Broad, said in an email that when Ms. Neshat's retrospective was in the planning stages, she hoped it would "lead to a wider reflection on the history of the United States and Iran as well as on the contemporary immigrant experience." She noted that Ms. Neshat, who now works in New York, was initially based in Los Angeles, a city with the largest population of Iranians outside Iran (half a million Iranians live across the United States), and many shared the artist's experience of leaving their country around the time of the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. "The events of that time were seismic and continue to impact global events, yet it is a story not well known by Americans, especially younger Americans."



"Gegenschein" (2018) by Ms. Houshiary. Shirazeh Houshiary, Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong and Seoul

Ms. Houshiary, who was nominated for the prestigious Turner Prize in 1994, moved to London to escape Tehran — the "colorless" capital that her family had moved to — and school, where teenage classmates displayed a sudden thirst for revolution that she did not



share. She enrolled in art school and became drawn to minimalist sculpture, and in her degree show, she exhibited an enclosure of darkness and light that drew coverage from The Financial Times. Soon afterward, she signed on with London's [Lisson Gallery](#). Her best-known work to date is a stained-glass window inside a London landmark: the church of [St.-Martin-in-the-Fields, off Trafalgar Square](#).

The year of the revolution, another future member of Iran's artistic diaspora was born in Tehran: Amir H. Fallah, a figurative painter now based in Los Angeles. Because of the political turmoil in Iran, Mr. Fallah had a much more unstable childhood. He grew up at the height of the Iran-Iraq war, when aerial bombings often forced families to take refuge in bunkers stocked with cans of food.

When the family decided to move to Austria, they entrusted their savings to a distant relative who ran off with the money, leaving them stranded for two years in Turkey. "We went from middle class to abject poverty overnight," he recalled in a telephone interview.

Settling in Virginia, the family eventually regained its former status. After graduating from the University of California, Los Angeles, Mr. Fallah started exhibiting in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates in 2005. His first large-scale exhibition is at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tucson, Ariz., through May 3.



An installation view of "A Path Set In Stone" (2017) by Amir H. Fallah. Amir H. Fallah, via MOCA Tucson



"I don't feel 100 percent anything, really, and I feel like I'm in a state of limbo, which is fine with me: I think that's where richness lies," he said of his multiple cultural identities. As a dark-skinned Iranian, he said, he suffered racism. "A lot of Iranians get a cultural pass because they can pass off as white, but I never had that experience," he said.

His acrylic paintings are decorative and ornate, a bridge between two worlds. "For me, it's interesting to mash up a detail from a Persian miniature or a Persian rug with a 1980s skateboard graphic, or references to graffiti art or graphic design and pop culture, because that's kind of what I am," he explained.

In his earlier body of work, faces are concealed with a bandanna or a scarf. "When you can't see somebody's physical features, then you have to focus on the other things around them," he said. "It goes back to my own identity. People are always misreading me because I'm dark-skinned. That's kind of where this comes out of."

Mr. Fallah said the art world was focused on "areas it's been neglecting," such as African-American and Latino artists, and "some of that does trickle down to Iranian artists. But honestly, I haven't seen a big boom."

In the international auction world, prices of Iranian modern and contemporary art are not comparable to their Western counterparts. The most expensive work by a living Iranian artist is Parviz Tanavoli's bronze sculpture "The Wall (Oh Persepolis)" (1975), which sold in 2008 for \$2.84 million. Other modern artists popular with collectors include Monir Farmanfarmaian, Siah Armajani (who had a show at the Met Breuer last year) and modern masters such as Bahman Mohassess and Leyly Matine-Daftary.

Roxane Zand, Sotheby's deputy chairman of the Middle East and Gulf region, said that the early 2000s brought "a sudden attention" toward Iranian art but that the 2008 global financial crisis led to a market correction. The situation today is more normalized, she said.

She noted a growing gap between artists of the diaspora and those living in Iran, where economic hardship, sanctions and a collapsing currency mean that artists are unable to buy colors or canvases, or to have their work exhibited by Tehran-based gallerists at international fairs.

The Iranian-born collector Mohammed Afkhami — who will exhibit works from his collection of contemporary Iranian art at New York's Asia Society in October — said that when he started making acquisitions in 2005, "Iranian art collecting was an exclusively Iranian affair among Iranians."

Today, Iranian artists are represented by top international galleries, and they are in the collections of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, the British Museum and the Pompidou Center, he said. Yet, "we are still in the early stages of that diversification away from purely Iranian patronage," he added.



L I S S O N   G A L L E R Y

*Art Review Asia*  
Spring 2019

## ArtReview Asia

Artist Project by Shirazeh Houshiary

Shirazeh Houshiary is presenting work  
in *Love is Metaphysical Gravity*, Lisson Gallery,  
Shanghai, 22 March – 11 May

# Textures on the Edge of the Gobi

*Text and images by Shirazeh Houshiary*

We are born from this rocky earth and our arts are born from the landscape we inherit and inhabit.

Between the deserts of the Gobi and Taklamakan in northwest China lies Dunhuang, or 'City of Sand'. The city was a vital resting point for merchants and pilgrims travelling through the region and played a key role in the passage of Silk Road trade to and from China. An ancient site of Buddhist activity and learning, Dunhuang is surrounded by numerous grottoes and caves, including those at Mogao and Yulin. The most famous is the small oasis at Mogao, where east-facing cliffs overlook a flowing river and rolling sand dunes that extend beyond like ocean waves.

Between the fourth and fourteenth centuries several hundred hand-carved caves and grottoes were created at Mogao. Many reveal exquisite wall paintings and sculptures that depict the multiculturalism and multiethnicity of the Silk Road during the 1,000 years that Dunhuang remained a vibrant hub of exchange. The location would eventually become known in China and beyond as a place of unrivalled beauty, sanctity and knowledge. It is a most magnificent experience to encounter these frescoes where one can transcend time and space.

The subtle colours and shifting textures of desert sands, the glacial waters flowing from the surrounding mountains and the flora of the oasis intensify the experience that is Mogao. Water becomes liquid light at midday and blue to turquoise by dusk, and the vegetation of the oasis oscillates between jade and malachite. These colours had a significant impact on the artists who painted the frescoes.

The Mogao caves also contained thousands of scrolls and religious texts, including the jewel that is the Diamond Sutra, the world's first printed book. One of its poetic verses reveals the experience of the desert landscape poignantly.

*Thus shall you think of this fleeting world:*

*A star at dawn, A bubble in a stream,  
A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,  
A flickering lamp, a phantom and a dream.*

一切有为法，  
如梦、幻、泡、影；  
如露，亦如电，  
应作如是观。

Translated by Kumārajīva from Sanskrit to Chinese in the fourth century



Yulin Grottoes



Yağan landform



Gobi Desert



Mogao Grottoes (Dunhuang Cave 220)

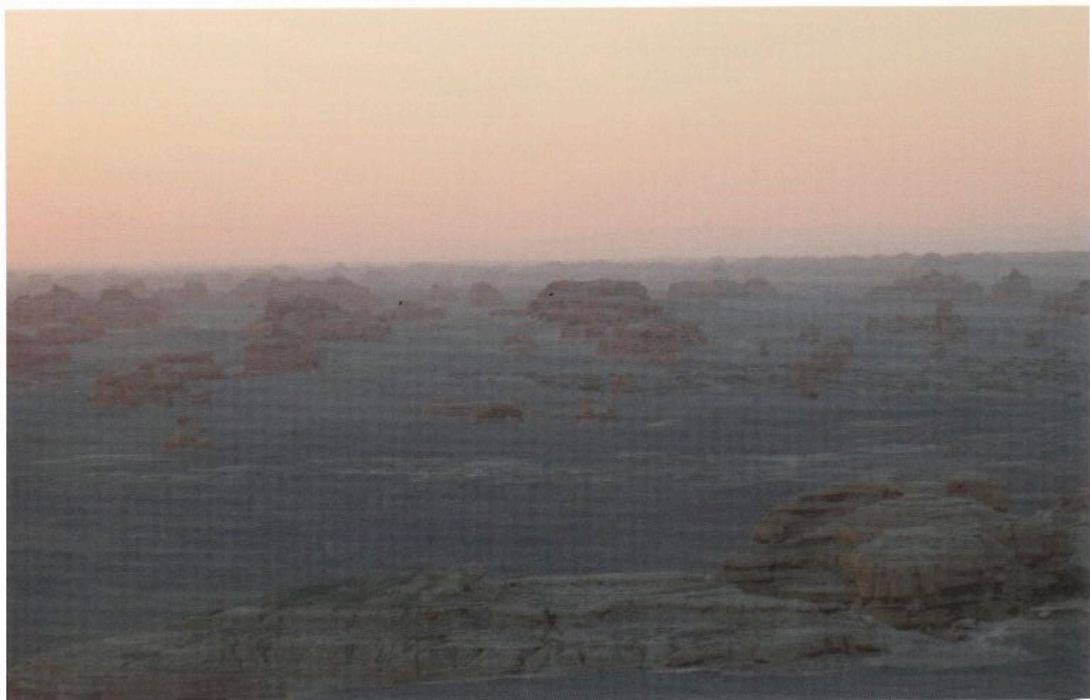


Fragment of great wall (Western Han Dynasty)



The Mingsha Temple

Brick with dragon design (Five Dynasties)



Taklamakan Desert



Yadan landform



Mogao Grottoes (Dunhuang Meditation Cave 285)

# L I S S O N G A L L E R Y

*Financial Times*  
8 February 2019

## FINANCIAL TIMES

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### Iranian-born artist Shirazeh Houshiary: 'Numbers are beautiful to me'

Ahead of a solo presentation at Frieze LA, the artist talks about maths, art and what links the two

Rachel Spence



© Jasper Fry



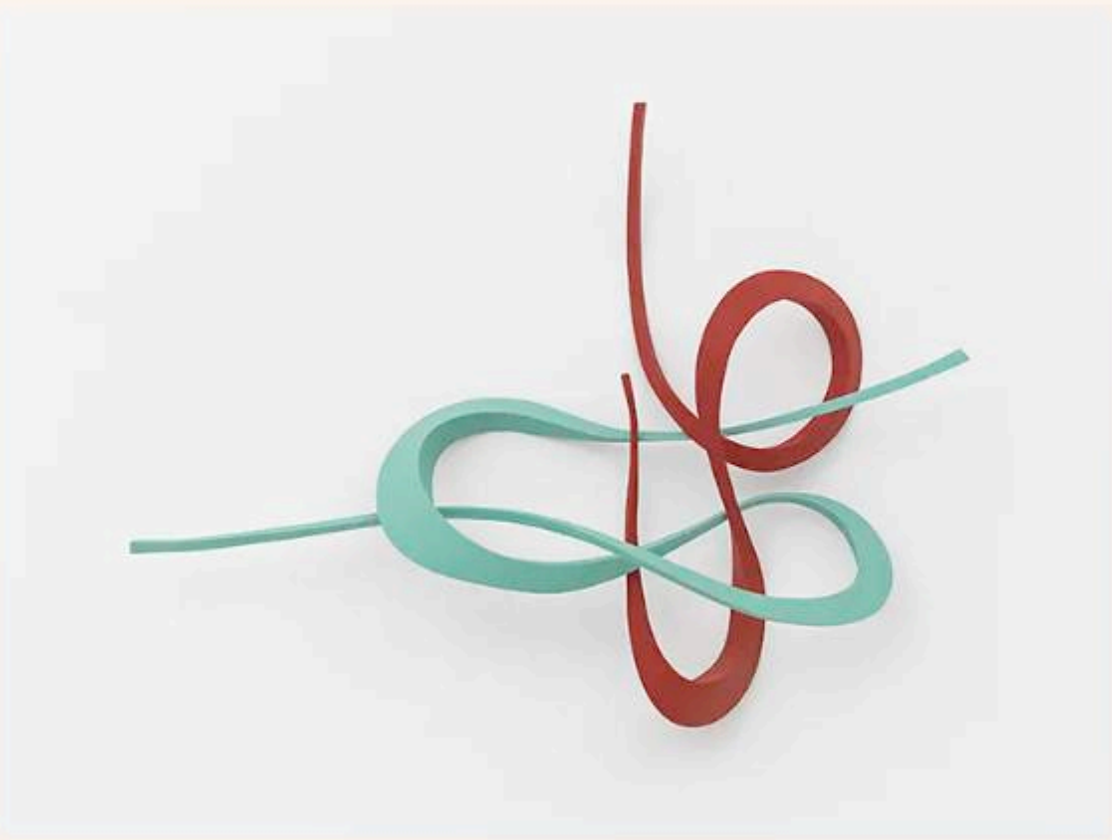
The secluded London studio of Shirazeh Houshiary foxes my Uber driver entirely. But I shouldn't be surprised that the Iranian-born artist is off-grid. Among a heap of volumes that litter her studio floor is *Reality is Not What it Seems* by [Carlo Rovelli](#), the quantum physicist whose luminous texts explain why Newtonian laws of space and time can only take us so far.

With her bright, bespectacled eyes framed by a halo of auburn curls, Houshiary emits her own radiance. After a flurry of mutual sorries — me for lateness, her for elusiveness — we plunge into a three-hour discussion of remarkable intensity. Yet even as we peregrinate through art, science, philosophy and politics with detours through Rovelli, Shakespeare, Derrida, Chaim Soutine and cave painting, Houshiary's innate sweetness remains undimmed.

"I'm going to make you something called Happy tea," she exclaims once we have settled in her large, white-walled studio. She returns bearing not only the beverage but also a box of strikingly luxurious vegan chocolates, then describes herself as a "vegetarian who sometimes eats fish".

In truth, her real appetite is for ideas. "My desire is to bring the laws of nature, the laws of physics, into my work, because I feel it can't be just me. It's not enough; I need something else," she says, gesturing at a painting on the wall. Entitled "Blurring", from a distance it looks like a gauzy lapis-hued chimera emanating out of a black void. But on closer scrutiny, the smoky apparition resolves into delicate strands of blue pigment that entwine and separate as if spelling out an indecipherable code.

"Blurring" is one of four new paintings and two sculptures she has made for her solo presentation at the stand of Lehmann Maupin at Frieze LA this week. It is the first time she has made work expressly for an art fair. Such a commercial destination seems at cross purposes with her ethereal character. "I am fed up with art fairs. They are so ubiquitous," she admits, echoing the sentiments of many contemporary artists.



Houshiary's 'The Oracle' (2018)

But the monograph presentation, which was suggested by Lehmann Maupin, suits her better than having “one sculpture or painting in a fair so that people only get a taste” of her work. With no restriction on theme or style, her show will allow people to experience the “whole vocabulary” of her work. “It’s only for three days but that’s not much different from theatre or dance,” she muses, suggesting that the pop-up nature of a fair gives the art a performative quality.

One hopes visitors pause long enough to give paintings such as “Blurring” serious contemplation. It was created using her signature method of pouring mineral pigment mixed with water on to canvas before “working” the pigment into patterns of her own devising, first in pencil and then with silk, cotton wool and brushes.

In keeping with others in the same series, “Blurring” hides a clandestine inscription of two words in Arabic. “One says ‘I am’ and the other says ‘I am not’,” Houshiary reveals.



“Only the laws of mathematics can explain it,” she admits when I ask her if she can elucidate why she has chosen the two opposing statements. “Think of one as ‘I am being’ and minus one as ‘I am not being’. What links them? Zero. Only zero has the potentiality of being both so this painting is trying to capture the energy of zero.”

It comes as little surprise to hear that Houshiary seriously considered becoming a mathematician. “Numbers are beautiful to me,” she says. “They come to me very easily.”

Ultimately she chose art over science because “it contained everything. It was not specialised. I didn’t just want to live in the mind as mathematicians do.”



Shirazeh Houshiary's busy but organised desk at her studio © Jasper Fry

Although her father — “an architect and musician” — hoped she would become a scientist, he fostered her capacity for independent choices. Touchingly, she credits him with “whatever I have”, adding that he taught her “to look, to understand, to not judge and not have preconceived ideas. To not believe what anyone tells me.”

Unable to connect with the radical ideas of revolution swirling through 1970s Iran — she grew up first in Shiraz then in Tehran — Houshiary moved to London in 1974 and enrolled at the Chelsea School of Art. By 1982, she had joined Lisson Gallery, whose practitioners commanded the radical heights of the contemporary art world. Ostensibly she was part of a new generation of British sculptors such as [Anish Kapoor](#), Richard Deacon and Tony Cragg, yet Houshiary always felt an outsider.

“I was too many wrong things,” she says with a dry laugh. But as she describes the experience of being a woman from the eastern hemisphere in what was, save for Kapoor, essentially a western “boys’ club”, it’s clear that for all her success, those early decades were lonely.

Today, her curriculum boasts a galaxy of solo shows at Lisson, Lehmann Maupin and others, plus numerous participations in international events including the Venice and São Paulo Biennales, while her work is in major collections such as Tate, MoMA and the Guggenheim. In 1994, she was shortlisted for the Turner Prize when it was won by Antony Gormley.





Buckets full of pencil sharpenings, organised by colour © Jasper Fry

Most importantly, she has achieved inner serenity. “I wanted to be part of something. I wanted affirmation,” she says of her younger self. “Now I’ve transcended that. It doesn’t matter to me.”

Her quest for self-acceptance dovetails with the journey of her practice. “In my thirties, I began to be very disappointed with something. Maybe the art world was not what I thought it was,” she recalls. “I sat in my studio trying to understand who we were and who were not.”

That exploration led her to the concept of “the fold”, which is fundamental to her art. She explains it as “a hinge or space” that acts as “the gap where reality is. Where you exist and don’t exist.”

Serendipitously, we have journeyed back to one of the sculptures that will also grace Lehmann Maupin’s LA booth.



Houshiary's 'Lunate' (2018), which appears at Frieze LA



Entitled “Lunate”, it is made from small glass bricks cast on Murano in a translucent caramel hue that fluctuates constantly in the light. Laid one on top of another by Spanish studio Factum Arte — whose digital knowhow has made it the first port of call for many contemporary artists — the glass nuggets defy their material hardness to fold around their centre in a spiralling motion. When I peer within, the sense of spin and light evokes the cosmic suck of a star plunging into a black hole or the double helix of DNA.

For Houshiary, the sculptures encapsulate her realisation that “we are never sitting still. Everything is constantly shifting and moving, like being on the waves of the sea. That’s one of the ideas we get from Carlo Rovelli — the concept of waves. My work deals with that fluidity, that intangible space.”

## OCULA

OCULA CONVERSATION

### A conversation with Shirazeh Houshiary

Artist

Diana d'Arenberg | Hong Kong | 17 May 2018



Shirazeh Houshiary. Photo: Dave Morgan.

Shirazeh Houshiary was born in 1955 in Shiraz, an Iranian city known for its rich literary and art history. She came to London in 1974 to study at the Chelsea School of Art—five years before the Iranian Revolution broke out. It was her sculptural works that first garnered attention in the 1980s, and which also earned her a Turner Prize nomination in 1994, along with Willie Doherty, Peter Doig, and Antony Gormley. Although she was part of the New British Sculpture movement at that time, Houshiary's body of work encompasses much more than sculpture, extending to painting, video installations and in more recent years, virtual reality.



Shirazeh Houshiary, *Genesis* (2016). Pigment and pencil on black Aquacryl on aluminium. 190 x 540 cm. © Shirazeh Houshiary. Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London/New York. Photo: Dave Morgan.



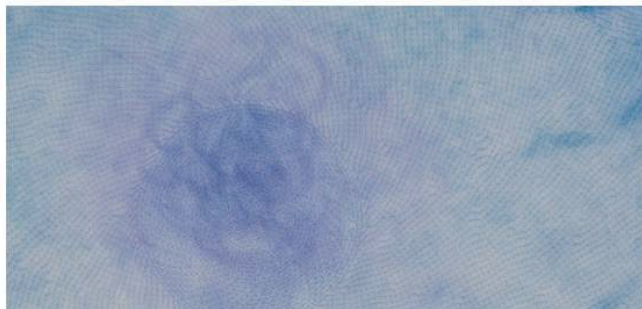
Houshiary's paintings bristle with contradictions. *Genesis* (2016), is a molten pool of black and red pigment and pencil on aluminium, which hints at both creation, as the title suggests, and destruction. *Veil* (1999), a monochromatic acrylic paint and graphite work made up of layer upon layer of pigment both reveals and conceals, giving the impression of both translucence and solidity; it initially appears completely black, but on closer inspection a square form emerges that recalls Malevich's iconic *Black Square* (1915). Unsettling, calming, metaphysical and mystical; these are demanding and time-consuming paintings that can take several months to complete. Laying the canvas horizontally on the floor, Houshiary pours washes of pigment on them before moving to layers of detailed textures in pencil or paint, some feather-like and others like liquid ripples. Much like water and pigment, breath is a central element in Houshiary's practice. 'I set out to capture my breath', she said in 2000, to 'find the essence of my own existence, transcending name, nationality, cultures.'



Shirazeh Houshiary, *Veil* (2005). Digital animation. Screen dimensions: 71 x 116 x 14 cm. © Shirazeh Houshiary. Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London/New York.

From breath and water, Houshiary creates a universe where forms dematerialise and materialise in a veil of colour and repetitive forms. Her work connects shamanism with science, and poetry with physics, drawing a balance between chaos and order. 'The universe is in a process of disintegration', she said in a 2013 interview with [Lisson Gallery](#); 'everything is in a state of erosion, and yet we try to stabilise it. This tension fascinates me and it's at the core of my work'.

Mark Rothko once said that his colour field paintings should be viewed from a distance of 18 inches, in order to dominate the viewer's field of vision and thus create a feeling of contemplation and transcendence. Much the same could be said of Houshiary's work. From a distance, her detailed monochromatic paintings resemble the cosmos, or microbial matter under a microscope. It is only once you step closer that the patterns in her compositions reveal themselves to be miniscule writings: Arabic letters that swirl, undulate, and dissolve into washes of colour. Some works resemble soundwaves, nebulae, or the movement of gas as it disperses through the air; they quiver and vibrate, giving the impression of atmospheric phenomena and energy that appears barely contained within the frame of the canvas.





Shirazeh Houshiary, *Soar* (2015) (Detail). Pencil and pigment on white Aquacryl on canvas and aluminium. 190 x 190 cm. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York/Hong Kong. Photo: Dave Morgan.

*Soar* (2015) is a haze of blue and violet pigment on canvas, across which 'I am' and 'I am not'—one an affirmation of self, the other a denial—are repeated in pencil in Arabic, pulsing across the surface until they dissolve into a thin veil of clouds. Words play a great role in Houshiary's work; with the simplest repetitive gesture of writing a simple self-affirmation (or denial), she creates a space in which different layers of consciousness both exist and emerge. The order of our language, philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein proposed in the collection of fragments of his works, *Zettel*, arises out of chaos and nothing. So too, Houshiary's work suggests, does our understanding of self.

I spoke to Houshiary about her practice in Hong Kong in March 2018, where Houshiary was being honoured with [Asia Society's](#) Asia Arts Game Changer Award alongside [Subodh Gupta](#), Ju Ming, and [Park Seo-Bo](#).



Shirazeh Houshiary, *Eclipse* (2016). Aluminium. 150 x 64.2 x 37 cm. © Shirazeh Houshiary. Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London/New York.

**What kind of art were you initially making when you moved to London?**

In Iran, I was more interested in theatre, so the change was dramatic. My real art education was in England. As an art student, I was making a lot of installation art and experimenting with light—it was about how you can intervene in the environment on a large scale. That's how I started, and I moved to sculpture from there; and from sculpture I moved into everything—painting, sculpture, film. I hated these boundaries after some point, because I think these are all artificially created by us. When you're involved with a visual experience, you will experiment with very different tools, and each tool allows you to discover a new vocabulary. Because the tool is new, it gives you a new vision and revitalises the process.

**Your sculptures are like three-dimensional versions of your paintings. What is the relationship between them?**

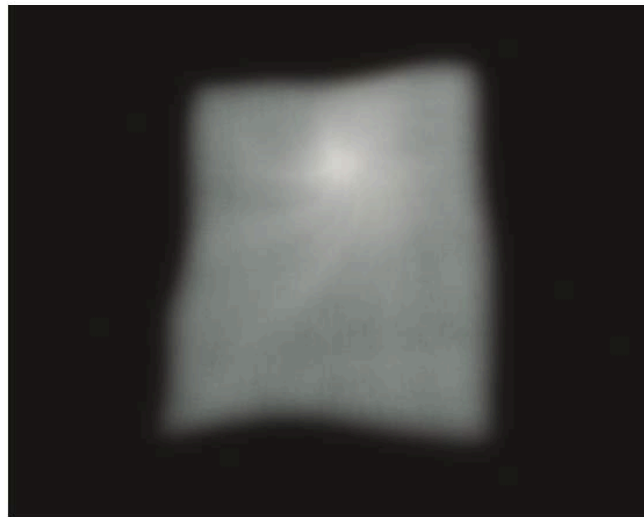
There is a connection. And I make film too—animation films on computer, because I'm also interested in the virtual world or the world that doesn't exist, and where the role of the body is in that. In my paintings, the role of the body is very clear, and in my sculpture the body is present. It's really about understanding your position and moving from one experience to another, because all these experiences are available to us as human beings. We are each inside a body—we cannot deny that. We understand the world through our senses, eyes, and ears; and we are constructed in a particular way that limits our vision of the world outside. So, it all affects the way we see the world.

The more we try to see the world on a different level, for example, by seeing it through a virtual lens or through your body or your mind, maybe then you can glimpse a reality. Stephen Hawking once wrote in his book that we are like gold



fish in a glass bowl. The gold fish's vision of the outside world is distorted because he sees the world through that glass. This is our condition too—we see the world through our glass, which is our senses, our bodies; even our ethics and moral structure. These are all limitations. So how do we see the nature of our reality when nature has created us with limitations? In a way, to go from one way of looking to another—say, from two-dimensional to three-dimensional to no dimensions or infinite dimensions—allows me to maybe glimpse at something that is in between all these stages.

The paintings are more of a field, the sculptures are more of an architectural body—but my paintings are definitely a field. I think fields are very powerful. I was studying the quantum world, and how tiny electron quads are affected by a beam of light, completely distorted and affected by a field. We don't even realise that our body is affected by a powerful field of energy all over the world. You're sitting here before me but you're nothing but energy, and I'm nothing but energy. Even our minds are energy. My paintings have that dimension: creating a field in the vision of the viewer.



Shirazeh Houshiary, *Veil* (2005). Digital animation. Screen dimensions: 71 x 116 x 14 cm. © Shirazeh Houshiary. Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London/New York.

**The expression of opposing forces encapsulates your work very well. Your work is very much about binaries.**

Yes, because if you look at my paintings you see these two sentences, 'I am' and 'I am not': they are two opposing forces that are a condition of who we are. Our existence and the universe is constantly in dialogue and not divided. We have a space between the two that is in constant collaboration. To be certain and to be uncertain is part of the same story, but we only take the one side. We like the certainty of existence and being sure about the economy, politics, society, our opinions, who we are. We look for certainty, but if you accept uncertainty as part of the same story you will see that your whole perception changes.

**Your paintings require a lot of repetitive gesture and concentration. The words 'I am', and 'I am not' are pencilled in over and over—it seems almost ritualistic.**

I'm interested in this idea of process and ritual and your experience of it in the work. In a way, I'm trying to understand my own existence in relation to the world around me. I'm trying to dig deep down into primordial sources of myself. This is why I think process and ritual is a way of framing; for me to understand all of this. Because if I didn't understand, it would be reflected on the surface of my work for the viewer to experience. That surface is purely a reflection of my understanding of what I have been going through. It cannot just be an intellectual activity. This is a combination of intellectual activity and physical activity—it's both. It's almost like being a scientist, you experiment to understand what the nature is of what you are trying to understand. What is energy? What is matter? Who am I in all of this? Where is reality? Do I see the nature of truth or do I not see? I have to understand all of this to make a work.



Shirazeh Houshiary, *Blue Hour* (2017). Pigment and pencil on black Aquacryl on canvas and aluminium. 190 x 270 cm. © Shirazeh Houshiary. Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London/New York.

#### **Ritual has been instrumental in building community and civilisation.**

Yes, shamans did that. This is why image-making is part of the evolution of our brain, in a way. The shaman wanted to connect to the world of spirit, to something bigger than himself. He found his own limitations in his own existence, just like that goldfish in the glass bowl. His perception is completely distorted and he has to connect to something else to have a connection to the outside world. This has always been the role of art, I think: to connect to something universal so that it can connect to other people.

#### **Is this why you leave your works quite ambiguous and open?**

People can take whatever they need out of it. They don't have to necessarily understand what I'm trying to get at, but it's a reflection of them. I become a mirror for them to see themselves and find their own way through this conundrum of 'I am' and 'I am not'—of the polarity of our existence.

The linking of the small to the large is what I enjoy more than anything else. From different distances, you're more aware of this field—it's more ethereal on the surface. The moment you come close it's a tiny structure that is very concrete. So, both illusive and concrete, fragile and strong. They exist simultaneously and I'm trying to show that sometimes our understanding of the world is very limited, because we cannot see that opposing forces are continuously in collaboration. They dance together, they are not separated. We are the ones who separate it. And that's why we have a lot of problems and tension in our lives and in society.



Shirazeh Houshiary, *The Ebb* (2017). Glass and mirror-polished stainless steel. 135 x 118 x 118 cm; *Slow Time* (2017). Pencil and pigment on black Aquacryl on canvas and aluminium. 190 x 190 cm (left to right). Installation view: *Nothing is deeper than the skin*, Lisson Gallery, New York (3 November–22 December 2017). Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery.



**Can you discuss the importance of water as a medium in your work?**

It's a necessity for life. Water flows, just as society flows. Culture flows and shifts and changes. Ideas and thoughts shift and change. I like the movement of water because it flows and cannot be fixed. If you understand the nature of water—that it constantly changes—then you understand that everything changes. Everything is in a state of flux—nature, the world, us with it. But we don't realise that. We create fixed stories about ourselves, our cultures, and there is a tension there. We like to fix everything because it feels more secure. We have a home, stability, a context and narrative, but these are all artificial. You have to go with this flowing movement. It's hard for us to do that. We struggle with it.

**Is making the intangible tangible part of what you are trying to do in your art?**

Yes, I would like to say that for me what is intangible and invisible is more important than what is visible and tangible. The intangible seems to be something that is more appropriate to want to grasp, for me. And the world around me, actually. The much bigger picture.



Shirazeh Houshiary, *Desire* (2004). Black Aquacryl, white pencil, and ink on canvas. 49.85 x 49.85 cm. Installation view: *Long, Winding Journeys: Contemporary Art and the Islamic Tradition*, Katonah Museum of Art, Katonah (25 February–17 June 2018). © Shirazeh Houshiary. Private collection. Courtesy Katonah Museum of Art. Photo: © Margaret Fox.

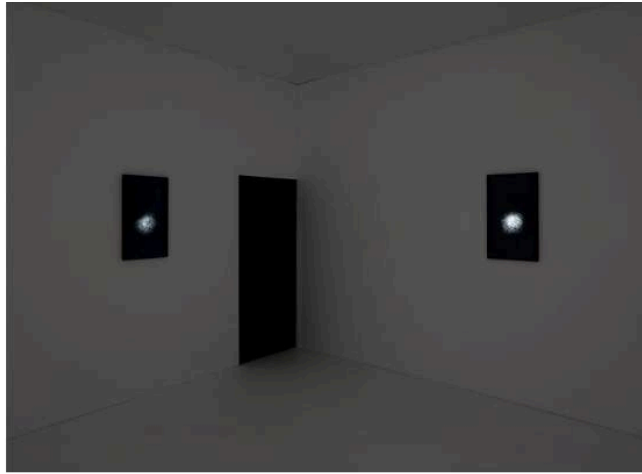
**Tell me more about your VR work. Does it allow you to better navigate around these limitations?**

Yes, but it does also have its own limitations. I've been working with VR since 2003 so I was really working with it from its inception. In 2003 we had very little, actually. I did quite a bit of work with breath on the video screen. For *Breath* (2003), I choreographed breath from four different vocalists from four different heritages. I tried not to use the technology as a space of emptiness, but as a tool to reach for what is intangible and inaccessible to my senses. There is an awful quality of VR that offers you emptiness.

**Escapism?**

Yes, I'm not interested in that. It's a cliché. But what is interesting about it is that you can connect to things that you have no access to; that you can't understand because you're limited by your senses. Perhaps with this medium you can connect to something very powerful that you cannot find within your ordinary experience in your physical body. It's a difficult area, I have to be honest. I have only done five pieces up to now—and I'm making the last one now. I've been struggling for five years to get it right. It takes me two to three years to do one work and they're very short—five to seven minutes maximum. The virtual can be quite useful to convey certain experiences if it's handled well and not turned into some sort of kitsch spectacle. I just try to use the media available to me to convey what I feel but is sometimes difficult to express through other media.





Shirazeh Houshiary, *Breath* (2003). Four-channel video. Installation view: *Everything at Once*, the Store Studios, London (5 October–10 December 2017). Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London/New York. © Shirazeh Houshiary. Photo: Jack Hems.

I remember seeing *Breath* (2003) seven years ago in London at Lisson Gallery (*No Boundary Condition*, 12 October–12 November 2011). That was my first encounter with your work.

I made *Breath* in 2003. It was one of the pieces I showed at the Venice Biennale in 2013. I wanted to see who I was—the closer I was to the mirror the less I was able to see, but when I stepped away from it I could see my breath.

This is interesting in relation to Lacan's concept of the 'mirror stage', when an infant recognises itself in the mirror, which in turn gives rise to the affirmation of the self; the 'I' or 'I am'. Except here you are no longer able to see, or recognise the self. It's the breath you see instead, not the reflection.

Exactly. I discovered that Einstein did a similar thought experiment about human identity. Einstein said, 'If I moved at the speed of light, what would I see when looking into the mirror?' He wouldn't be able to see an image of himself because the light wouldn't have time to go back and hit the mirror and reflect his image back. He realised it wasn't fixed. I didn't initially know about this experiment; I to see, but when I stepped away from it I could see my breath.

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My experiment was really about identity—whether it is a fixed proposition or whether it is shifting constantly. I realised that it is constantly shifting, and the agony of humans is that they don't like that, and we are constantly trying to fix it. The conflict is huge, and on the individual level it's also a crisis, because identity cannot be fixed. It's impossible, but that is the nature of it. Einstein realised he could not fix it; the speed of light is always stable—light would not be able to come back and hit the mirror so he would have a void.

Everything else in this universe is related to this idea of fixity. Fixity and change shift constantly in relation to each other. But we are only aware of the fixed, not the shifting process. We get surprised about how much we don't understand. We think time exists, but actually in this process time doesn't exist—it's movement that gives the sense of time. Perhaps it's heat that gives us a sense of change; and when it's cool, it changes. Change is time.







Shirazeh Houshiary, *Breath* (2003). Installation view: Collateral Event of the 55th International Art Exhibition—la Biennale di Venezia (1 June–24 November 2013). © Shirazeh Houshiary. Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London/New York. Photo: Ken Adlard.

**It's funny to think about mirrors in an art fair context. Reflective art works attract scores of people who look at their image on the surface of them, taking selfies.**

Our biggest problem is that we want to fix that image in the mirror, and there is nothing there. That's why we're attracted to shiny art. It is a desperate affirmation that we exist. It's the uncertainty we don't like.

**You once stated, 'I set out to capture my breath, to find the essence of my own existence, transcending name, nationality, cultures.' Your works emphasise the similarities between people. That we all strive for the same thing, understanding of the self, our place in the world.**

Yes. You will begin to see within yourself and the world around you the same thing constantly at work. Then your prejudices drop. That allows you to get rid of prejudices, intolerances. They are a part of all of us and there is so much intolerance in the world we're living in. This is the problem today, even in a democratic country like the United States, and England with Brexit. So much intolerance has surfaced. It doesn't matter where you are. We have to dig down to the source of intolerance.

We're all unique and the same. It's like a drop of water. All the droplets in the ocean are different, and yet they are the same. They are each individual droplets, but each shape is unique. It's quite amazing. I was shocked when I discovered this, that each droplet has got a particular shape. No two droplets are the same.



Shirazeh Houshiary, *Coming and going* (2017). Pigment and pencil on white Aquacryl on aluminium. 190 x 270 cm. © Shirazeh Houshiary. Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London/New York.

**Just like every snowflake is individual.**

Yes. Can you imagine that? Yet, they all have the same structure. Water is an amazing substance. In my work, from afar the paintings look like the cosmos, but actually when you get up close to them the patterns reveal themselves. They have their own identity, like a fingerprint. Our fingerprints are all different. You know where they come from? When we are in the uterus of our mother in a watery environment, the water has left a pattern on our skin.

**That's incredible.**

Yes, it is! It's not the same pattern, ever. Before we even take our first breath in the world, the memory of the time in our mother's uterus is imprinted upon us. And when I understood this I was completely overwhelmed by it. We have so much to learn about who we are. And this is part of our identity. The fingerprint is the only thing that doesn't change. Our face and bodies change, but not our fingerprint.

**You engage so much with physics in your work. Did you ever want to be a scientist?**

I did actually. But I loved art too much. —[O]



U Magazine  
April 2018

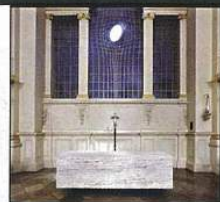
今天Art Basel，已無力看節的重點電影。今天的展覽和昨天Art Basel買的都是草間彌生、奈良美智、Damien Hirst、趙……和Art Basel同於會比，大名藝術家作品數於Art Basel。

Art Central創立時，走不同於Art Basel的「來，還是要順應市場」，Indiana的Love雕塑便各有一座。兩個藝術布了今屆入場人次，萬，Art Central則超過場人次新高。從數字上畫的決定。

## 之福

藝術盛在三月舉旅客，來到晚都有精彩的藝術節

的藝術家、觀眾，以及行業如技術人員、行政說是好事。觀眾自然是術家趕創作趕應酬，一心血被埋沒在成千上萬對於技術人員，三月的，但之後無以為繼……山大道名言：有量才有門當局者迷，不如聽聽門怎麼說。



《East Window》，2008  
© Shirazeh Houshiary  
Courtesy Lisson Gallery  
Photography: James Morris

## Shirazeh Houshiary： 藝術若單純追求樂趣 是沒有意義

Art Basel這個級數的藝術博覽，其中一個好處是吸引大量出色的藝術家於此地聚腳，Shirazeh Houshiary是其中之一。

生於伊朗的Shirazeh Houshiary，是著名的藝術多面手，繪畫、雕塑、拍片樣樣皆能，這次來港除了參與Art Basel，出席畫廊安排的活動，亦因為她剛獲亞洲協會香港中心頒發「亞洲藝術創變者大獎」。

Shirazeh說：「我一直透過創作思考我們的身份，究竟我們是誰。世上沒有另一個物種會思考這個問題。」身份，是一個很普遍的問題，有些人一輩子對此無思無感，樂得清閒，一旦開始發挖問題的答案，就如打開了潘多拉盒子。Shirazeh坦言：「潘多拉盒子有打開的必要……在昨天的講座，有人問：Art is for pleasure or for political change？對我

而言，藝術若單純追求樂趣是沒有意義的。藝術是在於make difference。我相信藝術可以扭轉成見。」Lisson Gallery於Art Basel選展她的大幅作品《Flicker》（2017），不以構圖取悅觀眾，而是嘗試觸動你的思緒。

請她談談Art Basel這類場合的貢獻，Shirazeh似乎明白記者沒說出口的憂慮，「We are the one, we can change。」現居英國的她，明白伊朗的處境和其他國家有參照之處。「Art Basel和Art Central這類藝展是一個平台，讓我可以發言、討論，令世界各地的人都能注視我們討論的議題。」



《The Ebb》，2017  
© Shirazeh Houshiary  
Courtesy Lisson Gallery  
Photography: Elisabeth Bernstein







## 周育正： 視覺藝術結合表演藝術 是一個趨勢



- 039 -

近年看到不少視覺藝術結合表演藝術的作品，來自台灣的藝術家周育正認為：「這的確是一個趨勢，我的表演都是很簡易的，就是最低綫的表演，很日常的。」

在Art Basel現場所見，就是一個姐姐不斷在清潔巨型的碗碟筷子，旁邊則有一個名牌吸塵機械人在巡邏。周育正說：「作品其實很簡單，就是從居家打掃出發，維護日常環境衛生。當初在上海聽到一句話：做衛生。衛生，是用做的。在台灣我們叫：清潔打掃。做衛生，我覺得『做』這個動作很有趣。」於是有了這組作品《刷新、犧牲、新衛生、傳染、清新、機器人、空氣、家政、阿姨幫、香煙、Dyson、現代人》。碗筷超大，周育正說：「表演需要劇場感。而且這次是和品牌合作（著名吸塵機和風筒品牌），像商展只是用我的方

式來說明。像車展會有車子有說明，最後有人會講話。我是將商展的部分元素造型化來處理。」

「這個作品，其實在上海和台灣是要透過App預約。像預約去畫廊看展覽，只是預約的是清潔服務。這個作品的特殊性是，使用者自己付費，自己預約，自己表演，而這個表演其實是生活中的事情。」讓家務成為表演，讓商展成為作品，在Art Basel這個空間上演，份外有解讀趣味。這組巨型餐具背後，還有三座無葉風機的雕塑。





LISSON GALLERY

*Modern Painters*  
December 2017

# BLOUINARTINFO



Shirazeh Houshiary  
*Exuviae*, 2016-17.  
Glass and mirror-  
polished stainless  
steel, 285 X 37 X  
20 cm

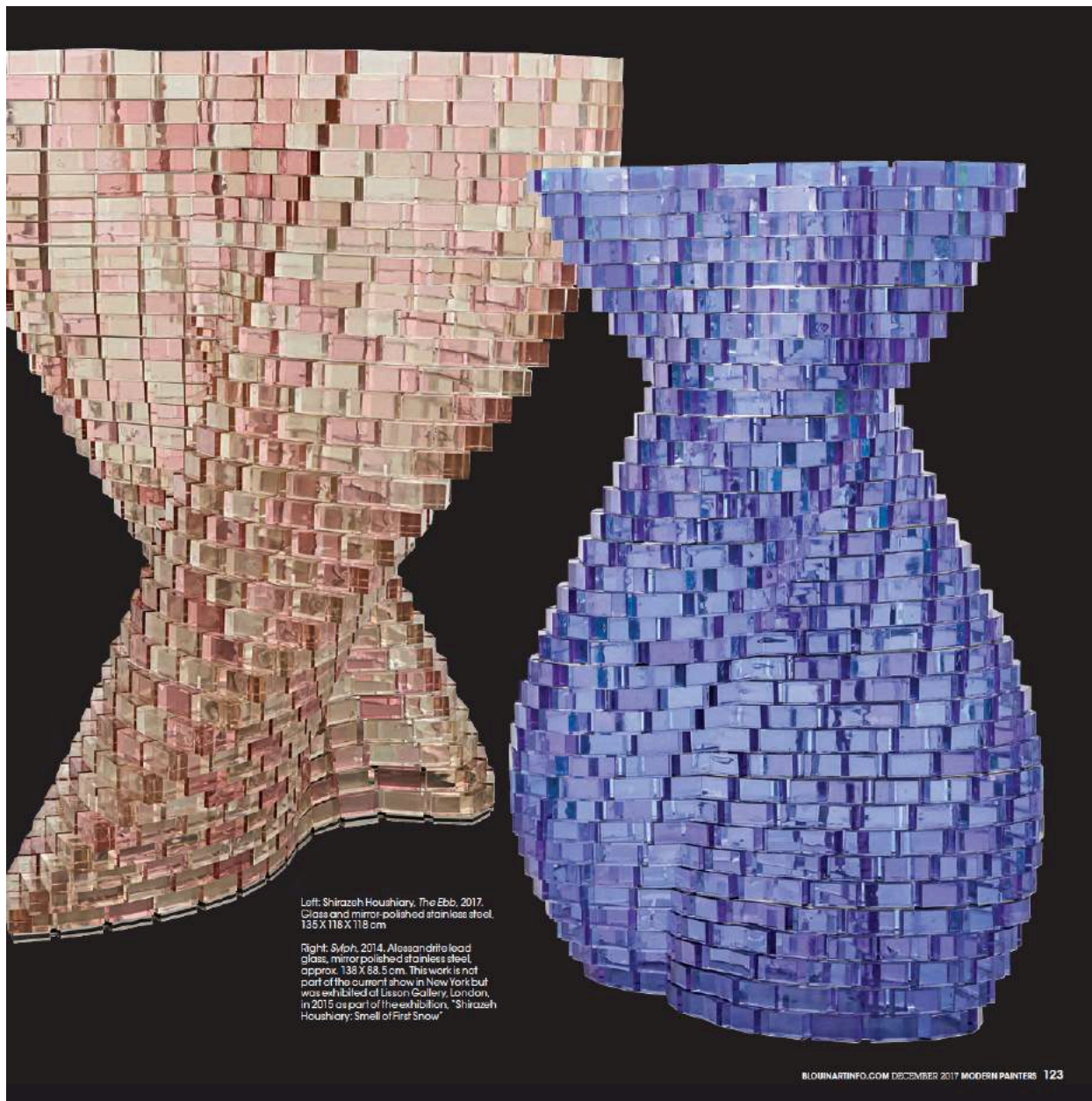
## SHIRAZEH HOUSHIARY TESTING BOUNDARIES

IN HER FIRST NEW YORK  
SHOW WITH LISSON  
GALLERY, SHE EXPLORES  
THE CONCEPT OF  
IDENTITY THROUGH THE  
METAPHOR OF SKIN

BY ANYA HARRISON



THIS PAGE AND FACING PAGE © SHIRAZEH HOUSHIARY, COURTESY LISSON GALLERY



Left: Shirazeh Houshiary, *The Ebb*, 2017.  
Glass and mirror-polished stainless steel,  
135 X 118 X 118 cm

Right: Syloh, 2014, Alessandrite lead  
glass, mirror polished stainless steel,  
approx. 138 X 88.5 cm. This work is not  
part of the current show in New York but  
was exhibited at Jenson Gallery, London,  
in 2015 as part of the exhibition, "Shirazeh  
Houshiary: Smell of First Snow"



Shirazeh  
Houshary

PHOTO BY DAVE MORGAN, COURTESY LUSON GALLERY



**S**hirazeh Houshiary first rose to prominence in the 1980s as part of New British Sculpture, a loose

group that included Anish Kapoor, Richard Deacon, Tony Cragg and Antony Gormley. Whether working in painting, sculpture, installation, across architectural projects or film, Houshiary's practice is deeply concerned with trying to capture and visualize modes of perception and being. Her work has been exhibited at the Venice Biennale; MoMA in New York; the Sydney Biennale; Camden Arts Centre; and Magasin-Centre National d'Art Contemporain, Grenoble; and she was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1994. Her exhibition "Nothing Is Deeper Than The Skin" (through December 22) brings together new painting and sculpture, and is her first show with Lisson Gallery in New York. MODERN PAINTERS spoke with Houshiary on the eve of

the show's opening.

**You were born in Iran but moved to England to study art. What was that experience like?**

I first came to London in 1974 to study art at Chelsea School of Art. During my studies it became difficult to return to Iran because of the Revolution, so I stayed and have been here ever since.

At art school, at least at the time, you were left very much alone to figure out your own identity. I was at Chelsea with Anish Kapoor and Bill

Woodrow, both of whom were a few years ahead of me, but was experimenting a little bit in isolation at first. I then became more involved with the group of New British Sculptors in the 1980s, although I never really felt part of it. At the beginning, I was the only woman, and it was generally a very male group. The early 1980s was not an easy time to be a woman artist, and the 1970s were impossible.

I met Nicholas [Logsdail, Lisson Gallery's founder] in 1982 and have been showing

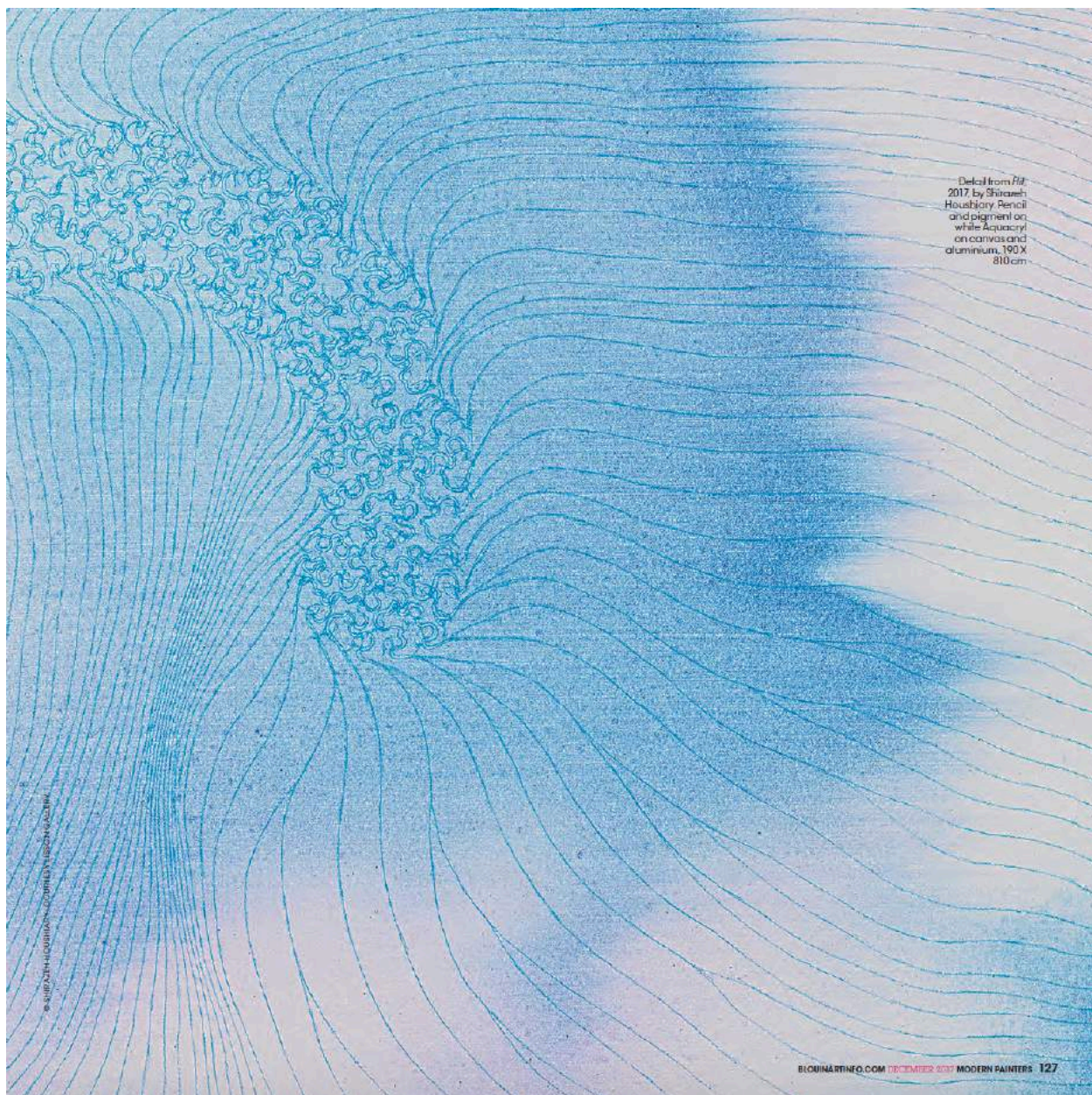
**AT THE BEGINNING, I WAS THE ONLY WOMAN, AND IT WAS GENERALLY A VERY MALE GROUP [NEW BRITISH SCULPTORS]. THE EARLY 1980s WAS NOT AN EASY TIME TO BE A WOMAN ARTIST, AND THE 1970s WERE IMPOSSIBLE**



A detail from  
Shirazeh  
Houshiany's  
*Genesis*, 2016.  
Pigment and pencil  
on black Aquapanel  
on aluminium, 190 X  
540 cm

© SHIRAZEH HOUSHIANY; COURTESY LEBON GALLERY





Detail from *Pit*,  
2017 by Shiroasa  
Household Pencil  
and pigment on  
white Aquacryl  
on canvas and  
aluminum, 190 X  
810 cm

© SHIROASA / COURTESY OF GALLERIA D'ARTES





Shirazeh Houshiary, *Phase* 2016. Pigment and pencil on white Acrylic on aluminium, 190 X 270 cm

© SHIRAZEH HOUSHIARY. COURTESY UJSSON GALLERY

with the gallery since 1984. This type of long-lasting relationship is very special because our thinking and intellectual ability evolve in relation to the people that surround us. We're not isolated but part of a continuum, and it's the interaction that makes us who we are.

**What's your working process?**

The body of work in this exhibition differs from earlier pieces because I've allowed chance to come into play. Previously I've been stricter, in control of production, and aware of my rational consciousness because I was concentrating on my own self and energy. Here I wanted to invite the unconscious — perhaps a difficult word to use because there are many layers of consciousness involved in producing a work of art. I wanted to include an element of chance, which would allow me to see deeper into the nature of reality. Our understanding is limited, and sometimes we need to rely on accident to make us see more clearly.

## THE WORK IN THIS EXHIBITION DIFFERS FROM EARLIER PIECES BECAUSE I'VE ALLOWED CHANCE TO COME INTO PLAY... HERE I WANTED TO INVITE THE UNCONSCIOUS... PERHAPS A DIFFICULT WORD TO USE...

The footprint of the sculptures, which is the result of me dropping an elastic band on the floor, is an act of chance and accident — very much like our own existence. This moment of chance is then balanced by precise calculations as I create twisted layers of this footprint, shifting each one by four or five degrees — any more and the whole thing will collapse.

Similarly, I have incorporated water in to the paintings. I place the canvas, which has a backing of aluminium, horizontally on the floor and flood the surface with pure water and pigment. The pigment, which is heavy like river sediment, settles while the water just moves across the surface and leaves traces like in "Flit" (2017), a

huge triptych, where it dances across the whole canvas. Both water and glass are amorphous materials that can take any color or shape.

**What role does language play in your work?**

I incorporate words in Persian because that's my mother tongue, which allows me to move beyond meaning to a primeval level. In earlier paintings, words were tools to keep my mind still. My interest in words stems from the fact that they are a manifestation of breath, an element that we all share but forget about. I have a piece on show in London [as part of "Every Thing At Once"], "Breath," which deals with our interconnection as humans on the level of breath. With that

I ALWAYS FELT THAT TO  
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MYSELF AS A HUMAN BEING

work I'm interested in looking at the reason we don't see ourselves as part of the same story — even though each civilization is a layer of our story as humans. At the same time, my work is very experiential. As Wittgenstein said, "What can be shown cannot be said." That's why I make art.

**How important are titles for you?**

In "Nothing Is Deeper Than The Skin" I'm dealing with the concept of identity, and skin in this respect is very powerful. We understand more through our touch than through our eyes. Identity isn't fixed. Skin is the only real boundary between the outside world and who we are. The rest — nationality, culture, religion — is all created by us. The works in this show are the

story of skin. "Exuvia" [a glass brick sculpture] means a snake's skin; if a snake can't shed its skin, it dies. Another sculpture, "Chrysalis," refers to skin as a cocoon, which offers protection in which to grow. In the show I'm trying to explore different aspects of what skin means — it's individual, sensual, it offers protection and it's political.

**What else interests you and informs your work?**

I find maths very beautiful as it's about thought experiment. Art and science are not so far apart because both disciplines are inquiries into the nature of who we are and what we are about, albeit from different angles. Einstein came to understand his theory of relativity in relation to space, light and time; I have come to

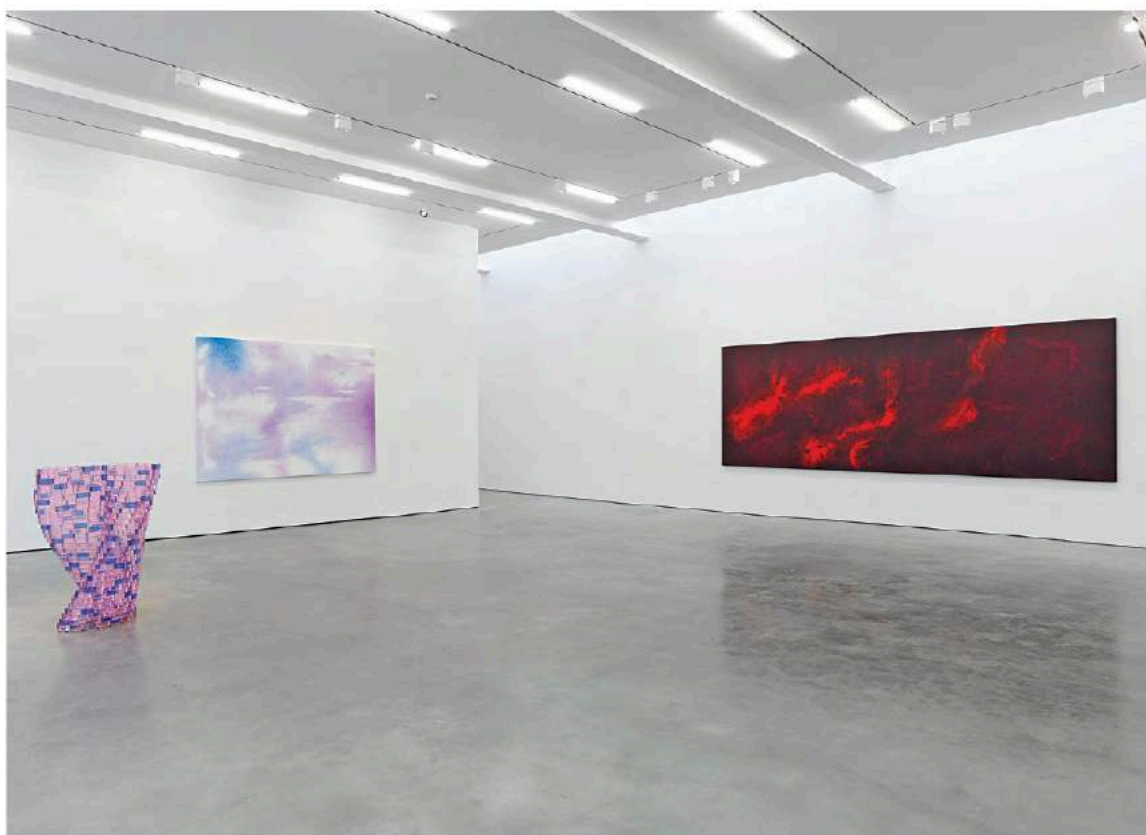
understand mine in relation to race, nationality, culture and heritage.

I love Renaissance painting for the intensity of the colors. The Italians were very good at color, which is why I make my glass bricks [for the sculptures] in Murano.

**Do you consider yourself a political artist?**

By definition, we all are. As artists, irrespective of the period in which we practice, we are reacting to our time. However, I don't believe "political" means that I make direct, literal work. I want to understand the nature of certain perceptions and change them, rather than just provide people with information. I always felt that to be a political artist in relation to my nationality or race was too simplistic. Instead, I want a deeper understanding of myself as a human being. That's why time is important to me. As humans we have a short-term memory. I'm interested in long-term memory and I think that's where we can make a difference. **MP**





© SHIRAZEH HOUSHIAN; COURTESY  
LISSON GALLERY

Installation view of  
Shirazeh Houshian:  
*Nothing is deeper than  
the skin* at Lisson Gallery,  
New York.

# LISSON GALLERY

*Studio International*  
21 December 2017

## studio international

Lilly Wei



### Shirazeh Houshiary: ‘We can’t fix our identity or our borders, the only real border is our skin’

Houshiary talks about evolution, Einstein and shamans, and how her work involves thinking in other dimensions.

Nothing is deeper than the skin, London-based multidisciplinary artist Shirazeh Houshiary’s current exhibition at the Lisson Gallery in New York, combines aesthetics and the history of art, physics and poetry as a way to express her recurrent theme of a universe in flux, in disintegration. These works, characteristically, are of extraordinary delicacy, their ephemerality possessing a fey distinctive beauty that seems on the verge of transformation. It is this state of precarious balance that provides the perceptual and psychological tension that is the essential source of their charisma, like the moment, perhaps, between the inhalation and exhalation of breath.



*Installation view of Shirazeh Houshiary: Nothing is deeper than the skin at Lisson Gallery New York. © Shirazeh Houshiary; Courtesy Lisson Gallery.*



Houshiary was born in Shiraz, Iran in 1955, where she attended university before moving to London in 1974. The following is an edited excerpt of a conversation between the artist and Lilly Wei at the gallery.

**Lilly Wei: You went to London from Iran in 1974? Was that a political decision?**

**Shirazeh Houshiary:** No, I was too young and Iran was different then. It was a free society even if we had a shah. People don't realise that democracy isn't acquired just like that; they have to learn what it is. My father said that democracy was like a bicycle. You had to learn to ride the bicycle. So many countries have suffered because they don't understand that. Changes come slowly; different cultures require different evolutions. I've learned that. I live in Britain and it's had a democracy for some time, but they had many problems before it was established.



*Shirazeh Houshiary. The Ebb, 2017. Glass and mirror-polished stainless steel, 53 1/8 x 46 1/2 x 46 1/2 in (135 x 118 x 118 cm). © Shirazeh Houshiary; Courtesy Lisson Gallery.*

**LW: Did you plan to stay in London?**

**SH:** At that age, you live in the moment. I went to London to Chelsea School of Art (now Chelsea College of Arts) and stayed because Iran had a revolution in 1979. I couldn't go back. I might have been killed in that society, since I would not have been able to keep silent and the new Islamic republic was a very brutal regime.

**LW: And what did you study?**

**SH:** I was interested in theatre at first, then moved into visual arts. It happened very naturally.



*Shirazeh Houshiary. Genesis, 2016. Pigment and pencil on black aquacryl on aluminium, 74 3/4 x 212 5/8 in (190 x 540 cm). © Shirazeh Houshiary; Courtesy Lisson Gallery.*



**LW: Chance, you have said, is important to you?**

**SH:** Yes, it is very important to me – and more and more so. John Cage, who based his work on chance, is my favourite artist. He is like Einstein – they are both special people who think in other dimensions. Chance not only exists in nature but also in history, in science, in art. In the Altamira caves [in the north of Spain], humans created images more than 35,000 years ago. I try to understand why they did it. It has to do with the neurological system in our brain. We have a spectrum of consciousness unlike other species. So why did we make images? Because it is social. Art is a social activity that creates patterns of social structures, of rituals.



*Shirazeh Houshiary. Phase, 2016. Pigment and pencil on white aquacryl on aluminium, 74 3/4 x 106 1/4 in (190 x 270 cm). © Shirazeh Houshiary; Courtesy Lisson Gallery.*

**LW: So the basis for our need for art is neurological, embedded in our consciousness?**

**SH:** It is responsible for the way our brain has evolved and this evolution has determined how we create society and its structures. And with that, our predecessors have always felt that there was the supernatural. They were also able to project imaginatively. So the human race has evolved through making images to what it is today. Making art has played a powerful role in our system of evolution; we don't realise how essential it is. Even our sciences are based on that kind of imagination. Whether shaman or astrophysicist, it is the same curiosity that leads us to penetrate what is beyond what we see and know. There is no difference.

**LW: What drives your curiosity?**

**SH:** It is to understand who I am. How do I describe myself in relationship to the world? What is my identity?

**LW: How would you describe or define identity?**

**SH:** Many years ago I did a thought experiment about identity. I looked into the mirror to see what I would see and saw no image of myself. But my breath left a vapour on the surface of the mirror. I tried to see if there was anything I could grasp, and the vapour evaporated. This was a thought experiment that tried to understand how we define ourselves. And there is the well-known thought experiment Einstein conducted, which was beautiful. He wondered if he would see his reflection when looking into a mirror while travelling in a train at the speed of light – and this is where his theory of relativity came from. While I am not a physicist or a mathematician or Einstein, we were both thinking imaginatively, our thought experiments are reveries, imaginative visualisations. My thought experiment was similar, trying to understand that there is no fixity. Identity is constantly changing, so if it is constantly changing, how do we define ourselves? And that's one of our problems. We constantly try to fix ourselves and there is a clash between reality – what's outside – and our psychology – what's inside.



*Installation view of Shirazeh Houshiary: Nothing is deeper than the skin at Lisson Gallery New York. © Shirazeh Houshiary; Courtesy Lisson Gallery.*

**LW: So hence the title of your show, Nothing is deeper than the skin?**

**SH:** Yes. We can't fix our identity or our borders (borders are artificial, like borders between race and country), the only real border is our skin. The skin is the first border between the external world and us; it separates and connects us. We feel heat and cold, we see through our skin more than through our eyes. It is very powerful; sometimes it protects you from the outside world, sometimes it has to be shed otherwise you die inside. Sometimes the skin is like a chrysalis that transforms. It is politically charged. We judge people through skin. Our identity is determined through fingerprints, skin. Everything changes but this doesn't change.

**LW: And breath was a recent subject of your work also.**

**SH:** Yes, and now skin, so breath and skin. I'm dealing with a spectrum of consciousness and trying to figure out why we are the way we are and why we create so many boundaries and separations, why we make so many problems for ourselves. Scientists such as Einstein go beyond the immediate phenomena, even beyond commonsense. It is very shamanic.



**LW: Do you think that's your role also?**

**SH:** Yes, it's a very powerful one if you are able to delve into the spectrum of consciousness, not just the rational. There are so many layers of consciousness beyond the rational and irrational.

**LW: Would you discuss the sculptures in this show?**

**SH:** I always make sculpture but I don't like to be or do just one thing because it becomes too narrow. I like the difficulty of seeing the world on many levels, as two dimensional, then three dimensional, then as material, then as animation that is completely digital without space or materiality. It helps me to understand the world we live in. When you look through different windows, you understand that the window that you had been looking through is not the only one. They are not fixed and when looking through many windows, you see and make something more real.



*Shirazeh Houshiary. Exuviae, 2016-2017. Glass and mirror-polished stainless steel, 112 1/4 x 14 5/8 x 15 in (285 x 37 x 28 cm). © Shirazeh Houshiary; Courtesy Lisson Gallery.*

**LW: And this work, *Exuviae* (2016-2017)?**

**SH:** It's named for the skin of the snake that is left behind. We leave our skin behind so ideas can change, like the skin of a reptile has to change since otherwise it will die. I use Murano glass to make these blocks. I'm interested in building blocks and I use these blocks to construct as nature does and as the computer does. They are fragile, brittle and transparent and the

corrugations they make suggest the skin of a snake. I like glass because it is like water. It is silicon-based and immediately becomes cool so that the atoms don't have time to crystallise, and that makes glass more transparent. That's why it has the viscosity of liquid, of frozen water.

**LW: You also talk about how water is so important to you.**

**SH:** I am fascinated by the idea of water. It can take any colour and any shape. Absence and presence intersect and they are not separable. I see it like a skin. The water has accidental piercings and the skin has accidental piercings to connect us to the world. The universe, your body, it is all water. We are made mostly of water. It is the genesis of everything, but doesn't have any form itself. I like the idea of the amorphous quality of water.

**LW: And the paintings?**

**SH:** These paintings are organic, not mechanical. They are very simply made; I do it all by hand. People are shocked when I tell them. I get on the floor and use fingers, pencils, cloth – very simple tools. I hardly ever use a brush. It is done by pouring and fingers. I want to do something organic. I call this “process” since we don't use the word “supernatural”. Process is a more scientific term. I also use the term ritual; it is a ritual.





*Shirazeh Houshiary. Flit, 2017. Pencil and pigment on white Aquacryl on canvas and aluminium 74 3/4 x 318 7/8 in (190 x 810 cm). © Shirazeh Houshiary; Courtesy Lisson Gallery.*

**LW: Would you talk a little about the process you used to make Flit (2017). It's enormous.**

**SH:** Yes, it's a triptych and it is the first time I have made such a big painting. I poured water over the entire surface, leaving marks. Then my own mark-making had to collaborate with that of the water. It is a ritual of tangled energies and creates the painting. I need both agitation and calm, not just one. Once I get into this state of mind, my concentration is immense. This took three months to complete, working every day, from morning until evening.

**LW: You often refer to time.**

**SH:** I'm very interested in how time has a very different meaning when we look outside of ourselves and we must do that. We are not the centre of the universe. We are tiny things on a tiny planet among millions of galaxies. But I think we are inevitably coming closer together, evolving together; I am fascinated by this.

• Shirazeh Houshiary's exhibition *Nothing is deeper than the skin* is at the Lisson Gallery, New York, until 22 December 2017.

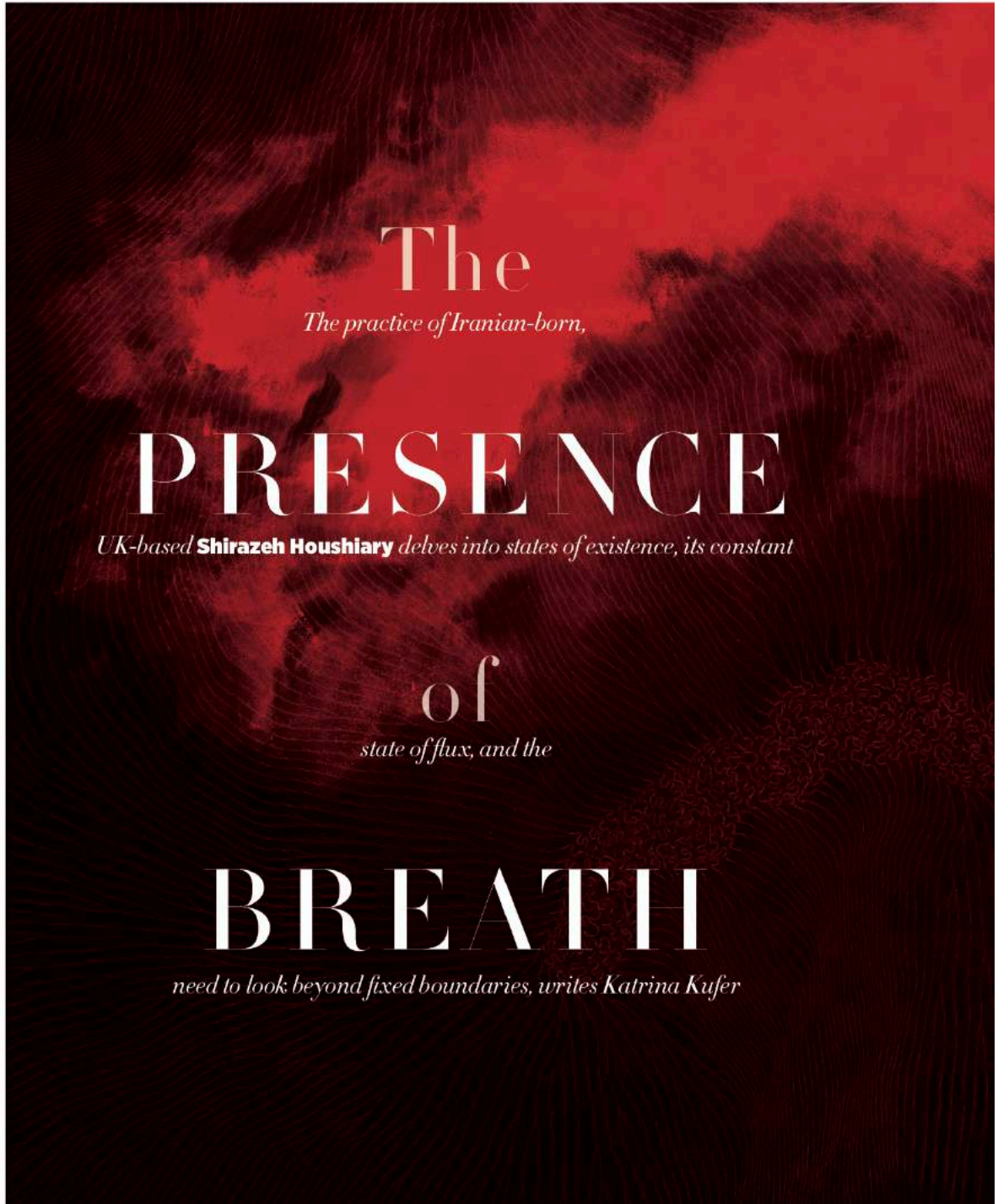
LISSON GALLERY

*Harper's Bazaar Arabia*

December 2017

Harper's  
**BAZAAR**  
ARABIA





The

*The practice of Iranian-born,*

PRESENCE

*UK-based **Shirazeh Houshiary** delves into states of existence, its constant*

of

*state of flux, and the*

BREATH

*need to look beyond fixed boundaries, writes Katrina Kufer*





(Detail)  
Genesis, 2016.  
Pigment and  
pencil on  
black acrylic  
on aluminium.  
190x540cm.

Whether sculpture, painting, architecture, film or installation, Shirazeh Houshiary's practice is marked by a sense of fragility and effervescence. What should be rigid, upright geometric forms reminiscent of helical strands appear more like gentle, organic undulations (*White Shadow*, 2005, or *Flex*, 2013, shown at the Venice Biennale). Tonal gradients of inconsistent yet repetitive patterns seem as though they are dissolving in slow motion into their larger backdrops (*Deluge*, 2012, or *Quiver*, 2008). Despite being tangibly captured, each of her works look as though they are mere moments from disappearing—and this is because Houshiary aims to capture her breath.

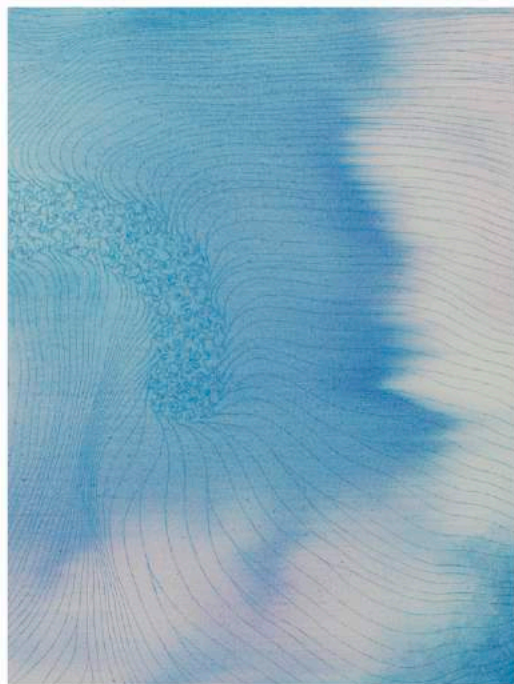
Sufism and physics play into her minimalist works—faculties that likewise endeavour to express and explore the transcendent essence of the self and experience. "Clearly identity and place are important to every one of us in shaping our being," explains Houshiary. "To breathe is to be, and to speak is to deliver breath." Breath, in her mind, is a fundamental of human existence and, she adds, "is identified with consciousness, locating both thought and feeling." Houshiary may have emerged onto the London sculptural scene in the 1980s alongside Tony Cragg and Anish Kapoor, but since 1992 she has been manipulating two-dimensional mediums to capture the intangible and incorporeal by posing questions such as, "Who am I? Where have I come from? What is the significance of being here?" Even her base in London, where she has lived and worked since leaving Iran in 1974, taps into this mode of blurred boundary thinking—she has expressed her fondness for the light in England, stating, "It's very bleary and hazy. There's no edge to things." This sensation is mirrored in taking inspiration from Turner, Monet, Rothko or Francisco Zurbarán's *Veil of St Veronica* (1635-40), featuring the imprint of the face of Christ on cloth. "The painting moves me because it seems the distinction between subject and object disappears," she says.

The focus on the formal qualities and leitmotifs such as veils, membranes or mist within each work allows the 1994 Turner Prize nominee to transcend stereotypes that can override artists with Persian or Arab backgrounds. Houshiary doesn't deny her heritage, although has returned only twice, and admits that she has strong memories as a child of her father's "musician, writer and poet friends, who regularly visited and I used to eavesdrop on their discussions about arts and life." Though she spent many of her traditionally 'formative' years in Shiraz, attending university there before attaining a BA from the Chelsea School of Art, London, her works go beyond initial aesthetic references

## The ARTIST



This image and below: *Fit*, 2017. Pencil and pigment on white Aquacryl on canvas and aluminium, 190x810cm.



to Islamic geometries and Sufism. They even surpass the terms 'spiritual' and 'metaphysical'—which she dislikes—and actively resists the human tendency to want to fix interpretations. This merely causes friction, she implies. "I would say my concerns reflect on how our destiny is shaped by the way we see the world," she clarifies. "Our perception is not fixed and is constantly in a state of flux. My approach is to look through many different windows so that I can get a glimpse of what connects us and gain a better understanding of the world and ourselves, rather than looking through a particular dogmatic viewpoint." Noting that seeing the whole is more challenging, whether of a culture or continent, "We are at a tipping point in rescuing our planet from the divisions and artificial boundaries," she says. "As John Cage said: 'In removing boundaries is the preservation of the world.'"

Houshiary includes a mix of repetition, fusion and chance in her typically six-month artistic process—through which a sense of calm emanates to the visitor. "In my most recent paintings, I have placed the canvas on the floor and a mixture of water and pigment is poured onto it," she explains. "I drain the water to leave sediment, creating the first trace of chance. Then over this layer I inscribe rigorous marks: the repetition of two words, one of affirmation (I am) and the other of denial (I am not)." Continuously overlapping them to the point of indecipherability where the entirety of the canvas is covered, Houshiary's second layer embodies precision, while the third layer fuses both to "attempt to unite the chaos with control," she says, a process which allows for true infinite possibilities. "The process is a collaboration between the spontaneous and the pre-planned, between the unconscious and the conscious."

The result, whether *The East Window* (2008), a luminous twisted oval cross on a window at the St Martin-in-the-Fields Church, London; *Breath* (2004), a black felt structure emitting the inadvertently harmonious cadence of chants from Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam installed in Manhattan and now owned by MoMA and the Guggenheim; or the eight-metre triptych, glass or 'ribbon' sculptures on show at Lisson Gallery in New York (3 November–23 December), each concretely incite contemplation. Houshiary, however, would prefer that any transcendental associations be omitted, offering a sensorial description of her *oeuvre* with, "You are kneeling at the edge of a lake and its surface is still with no ripples. You slowly immerse your hand into it and you feel the atoms of water bouncing and vibrating as the cold water from the deep fuse with the warm water above creating turbulence just below the surface." ■

[lissongallery.com](http://lissongallery.com) [shirazehhoushiary.com](http://shirazehhoushiary.com)

© Shirazeh Houshiary. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery



"WE ARE AT A TIPPING POINT IN RESCUING OUR PLANET FROM THE  
DIVISIONS AND ARTIFICIAL BOUNDARIES. AS JOHN CAGE SAID:  
"IN REMOVING BOUNDARIES IS THE PRESERVATION OF THE WORLD."  
- Shirazeh Houshiary



S/zero, 2014.  
Alessandrite lead  
glass, mirror polished  
stainless steel.  
138x88.5cm.





## Where I Work

# Shirazeh Houshiary

TEXT BY SIMON FRANK, PHOTOGRAPHS BY BENJAMIN HAYWOOD

**Talking abstraction, Renaissance art and why the transcendental is overrated with the Turner Prize-nominated British-Iranian artist**



Shirazeh Houshiary in her studio in London.

During London's morning rush hour, as commuters crowd train platforms and stream toward the city center, I head in precisely the opposite direction, traveling to the placid southwestern suburb of Barnes, home to Shirazeh Houshiary's studio. The site of a wetland conservation center—rather than the sort of postindustrial decay sometimes associated with artists' studios—Barnes's juxtaposition of city and nature is an oddly appropriate fit for an artist whose abstractions across various media are at once intense and calming, suggesting something beyond a standard urban setting.

Born in 1955 in Shiraz, a major city in southwest Iran traditionally known for its art and literature, Houshiary has been in London since 1974, based in varying neighborhoods before settling into

her current studio in 2008. The Chelsea College of Arts graduate first attracted wider attention for her sculptures in the 1980s, and more recently has been celebrated for projects such as *East Window* (2008), the playful and esoteric permanent installation of cross-shaped etched glass and steel in London's renovated St. Martin-in-the-Fields Church, and her 2003 four-channel video installation, *Breath*, which juxtaposes chanted prayers from major world religions. The Turner Prize nominee—in 1994, for her installations *Enclosure of Sanctity* (1992-93) and *Licit Shadow* (1993)—is sometimes presented as an Iranian artist, but doesn't see her work as innately bound to a single nationality. "I'm actually a Londoner. I've lived here most of my life," she says, smiling as she shares her love for England's capital, before adding, "Quite frankly, I like to be a nomad."

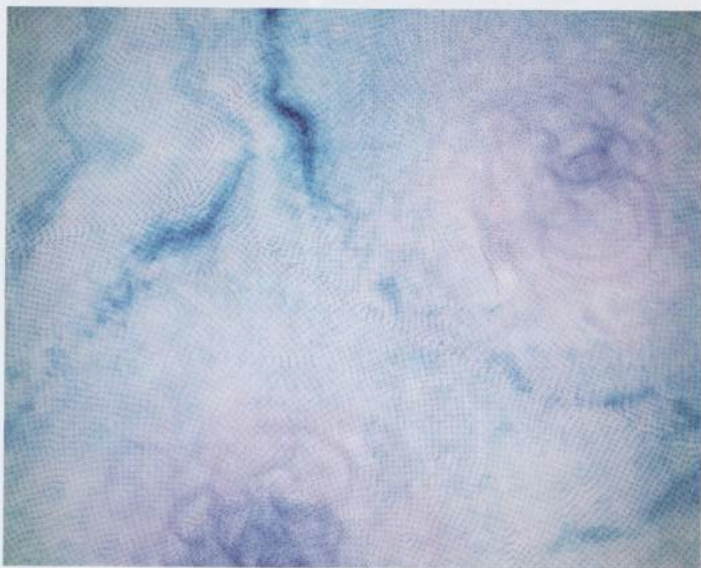
Even a wanderer needs a home base, and Houshiary's can be found down a quiet residential lane in the modest-looking brick building that her studio shares with her husband Pip Horne's architecture practice. Her workspace spreads over three expansive floors organized by media. Videos and installations are created in a small basement; she makes sculptures with the help of an assistant on the slightly more workshop-like ground floor; and she creates her detailed paintings on the airy, high-ceilinged top floor. The structure was discovered by Horne and refurbished by the couple to let the surroundings in through skylights and a large window in the back of Houshiary's painting space, overlooking a tranquil wooded area.

"There are not many artists here," admits Houshiary, as an interplay between somber cloud cover and bursts of sunshine play out over her canvases. Petite and dressed casually in clothes

that echo the cool colors of her work, she enthuses about Barnes's proximity to London, its gardens and the beauty of her daily walks along the Thames. She grows more animated as she discusses her work. "I have an obsession, and this obsession is quite powerful, and it's very useful. But you don't want to not have another life—because that's not good," she says with a laugh, after recalling moments when she had to be "dragged out" of the studio at the end of the workday.

It is easy to see how Houshiary can get caught up in her work. Her large-scale paintings, most of them measuring more than a meter in height and in width, take two months of daily work to complete. "Nobody realizes how physical these are," she sighs. She works with the canvases placed on the floor, first pouring a wash of pigment over them, and then building up intricate feather- or scale-like textures through pencil or paint. The pencil shavings tidily collected in bowls on her desk speak to the exhaustive work that goes into each piece. Pointing out a painting, *Soar* (2015), a two-by-two-meter wash of cloud-like blue clusters, which would soon after be sent overseas for an upcoming show at Lehmann Maupin gallery's branch in Hong Kong, Houshiary explains that piece's texture comes from repeatedly writing two Arabic phrases—"I am" and "I am not"—until they vanish into the canvas. Microscopic and abstracted, the form created by the words resembles chain-mail armor rather than text. "These words are not about meaning, because actually they dissolve, you can't really read them. But they're more about . . . the contradiction of saying 'I exist,' 'I don't exist,' like breathing," she explains. "I mimic, in a way, the inhalation and exhalation of breath. That's why they are pulsating like a generative force."





(This page)  
The artist's painting *Soar* (2015).

(Opposite page, top)  
Houshiary's desk in her painting space, including a postcard of Piero della Francesca's *Madonna Del Parto* (c. 1450–75), an inspiration for her work.

(Opposite page, bottom left)  
Bowls of pencil shavings, created as a by-product of Houshiary's painting process, occupy a corner of her desk.

(Opposite page, bottom right)  
*Flux* (2013), one of the artist's many recent sculptures made of Italian anodized glass bricks.

Considering the ethereal, organic feeling that Houshiary evokes through these paintings, as well as the spiraling, ascending shape of her glass and metal sculptures, there is a tendency for writers to reach for words like "spiritual" and "transcendental" when describing her work. Such descriptions have "become very banal now," she laments. "My work is actually very physical," she says. "I'm very interested in our senses, our sight, our hearing. We are [each] in a body . . . Out of my body, I don't exist."

While there is undeniably an intangible quality to Houshiary's work that reaches beyond daily experience, her range of inspirations is far wider than reductive ideas about spirituality. The austere white walls of the studio's top floor are countered by a pile of books casually strewn in a corner, ranging from a collection of ancient Chinese poetry to a volume of paintings by Spanish Baroque artist Francisco de Zurbarán. "I spend my life looking into things and trying to understand," Houshiary elaborates. "I'm not just fascinated by making art, but I'm also fascinated by nature, by science." Searching for a postcard of Renaissance

artist Piero della Francesca's *Madonna Del Parto* (c. 1450–75), she recounts how moved she was seeing the painting in Italy. "It still vibrates . . . there's so much tenderness." European paintings of religious subjects may appear to be an unlikely reference point for Houshiary's non-figurative work, yet as she explains it, she's trying to move beyond the "narrative" of traditional art while retaining the "the colors, the structure," and the human touches that grant it emotional resonance.

In a similar manner, Houshiary's sculptures draw on equally disparate influences, from the genesis of their inspiration to the very materials used. The twisting helix-like shape of *Flux* (2013), which reaches the observer's eye-level, was inspired by the outline of a randomly dropped elastic band. The sculpture is composed of anodized glass bricks made in Italy, though Houshiary has previously used aluminum blocks for similar pieces. She has been experimenting with the subtle, varying tones possible with blue- and purple-tinted glass, yet the root symbolism of the brick has remained constant. "These are human," she says, holding up a glossy blue brick measuring roughly

Art Basel





ten by four centimeters. "We have created shelter by this building block, just as we have created sense out of words."

Music also figures in Houshiary's creative world. Classical melodies softly emit from speakers in her painting room as we walk down to the basement, where she brings out a scale model of the sculpture *Chord* (2014), a piece she hopes to eventually transform into a public installation roughly 12 meters tall. A smaller version, also titled *Chord* (2015), appeared earlier this year at London's Lisson Gallery, which has mounted regular exhibitions of her work since hosting her first solo show in 1984. Five ribbons of dark metal intertwine as they reach upward, reflecting, she says, both the chord's fundamental role in music and the way in which sound is "actually completely chaotic."

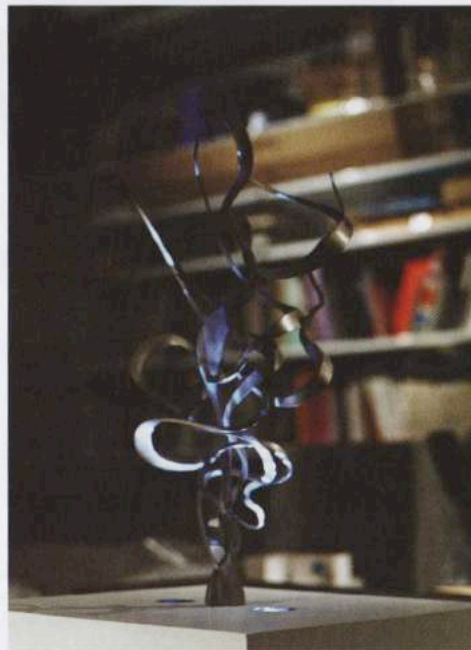
While turning on a projector to demonstrate how moving-light displays could open up *Chord* for collaborations with artists, dancers and musicians, Houshiary discusses the role of technology in her work. A computer sits at her desk among books, postcards and small trials

on paper. Though she steers away from a high-tech sheen in the finished product, she's not averse to using computer design programs or 3-D printing to model new pieces. Preparing for her September residency at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute when we meet, she outlines her plans to layer papers with text in various languages to respond to the city's multicultural makeup, and then place the assemblages in backlit Perspex boxes to reference computer screens' current monopoly on communication. "If you take the technology, it's just a tool—what makes us human is our feeling," she offers. "If you have that quality . . . you can use any tool." Fittingly, Houshiary has managed to capture a distinctly human quality across varied media, from wall-covering canvases to monumental sculptures and video installations, creating a genuine connection through subtle and delicate work built on organic forms and shared experiences.

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(Top)  
A model of the proposed piece *Chord* (2014), which Houshiary hopes to integrate with an interactive lighting system.

(Bottom)  
The rear window on the studio's top floor offers a view of the surrounding neighborhood's lush greenery.





# ARTNEWS

PROFILES — MAY 2013



## SHIRAZEH HOUSHIARY: 'LIKE THE DARK SENSES BEING REVEALED'

BY Elizabeth Fullerton POSTED 05/22/13 7:00 AM

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

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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.

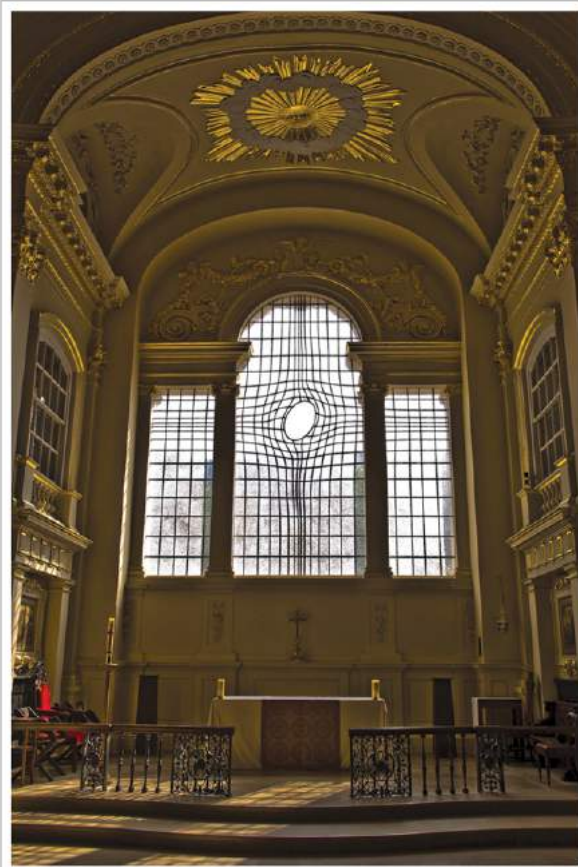
Houshiary, 58, does not practice any religion and dislikes such labels as "transcendental," yet her work has an undeniably spiritual quality, overtly so with installations such as *Breath*, a white glazed-brick tower emitting chants from four religions that was erected in Battery Park in Manhattan in 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 *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](#).



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

SHANNON OKSANEN/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LEHMANN MAUPIN, NEW YORK AND HONG KONG



Houshiary and Horne's window for St. Martin-in-the Fields, London, 2008.  
DAVE MORGAN/COURTESY LEHMANN MAUPIN, NEW YORK AND HONG KONG

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 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 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 \$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.”

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 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.