

ARTFORUM

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Shirazeh Houshiary Lehmann Maupin

By Jeffrey Kastner

Poised between aestheticism and asceticism, Shirazeh Houshiary's delicate, elusive new canvases are marvels of formal restraint and rigor that manage to generate extravagantly seductive perceptual effects. Her recent show—dominated by a suite of large-scale black or white monochromes illuminated with feathery passages of contrasting pen or pencil—is evidence of progress in a conceptual program the artist once characterized as following a trajectory "from form to formlessness."

The Iranian-born, London-based Houshiary is usually associated with the British "New Object" sculptors (including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, and Anish Kapoor) with whom she emerged during the '80s. Yet over the last decade, she has increasingly shifted from three-dimensional, floor-based work—minimalist geometric forms suggestive of both honeycombed organic structures and the mathematical proliferations of Islamic decorative motifs—toward two-dimensional wall-based pieces whose light touch and indeterminate surfaces can evoke the subtle opticality of Robert Irwin's early ovoids.

Throughout her career, Houshiary has often located her practice within the context of her Sufi beliefs—her previous New York solo exhibition featured paintings covered with sacred incantations rendered in fine Arabic calligraphy. As with other artists' work that engages issues of faith, Houshiary's is vulnerable to the kind of readings where the complex social and philosophical histories of specific religions are glossed in favor of easily digestible, generalized rhetoric around "the spiritual." The gallery announcement for the recent show, for instance, tritely describes Houshiary's process as a "slow dance around the canvas," with which she engages "by bending into it as if in prayer." Such treatments have more than a whiff of exoticizing hokum about them and do no favors for a strong and serious practice.

A group of small, untitled mixed-media works on paper (all works 2003) explore basic issues of painting and draftsmanship: figure/ground relationships, compositional rhythms, even moments of lambent near color. Yet her large canvases, with their serene white or black Aquacryl grounds, strive to avoid becoming fully either paintings or drawings, referencing the artist's roots in sculpture by seeking an emphatic objecthood of their own. While her black pieces can resolve more readily into the figurative—the band of graceful white ticking bisecting *Outside In* reads like an infrared horizon; the nebulous halo of *Iota* suggests the galactic—Houshiary's white canvases remain abstract, achieving an immersive immateriality that in certain cases produces cognitive destabilizations that border on the mystical. On one gallery visit, I saw a man physically restrain a companion about to actually fall into the seductive alabaster expanse of the six-by-six-foot *Deep Sleep*; a few moments later, drawing close to examine the minute graphite cross-hatchings that form a phantom triangle at the center of *Gaze*, I nearly toppled into its pearly plane myself as the

painting's edge appeared to melt and spread, merge with the wall, and swallow the room and everything in it.

Given such profound sensory pleasures, it's surprising to find *Breath*, the artist's first video project, so self-conscious and listless. On four small, dark screens set in wall recesses, an animated blossom of white appears and disappears in respiratory rhythm; each has its own sound track, ranging from Buddhist liturgical music to a vocal invocation by Hildegard von Bingen, the twelfth-century German nun now best known for her work's ubiquity on relaxation compilations. Though the atmospheric lighting, lulling sounds, and calming video cadences would seem to represent an attempt at a kind of Sensurround version of Houshiary's work, it ends up feeling like a wan simulation of the ecstatic moments to which her best pieces aspire, in which elemental perceptual experience flowers into a truly numinous state.