

Art in America November 1999

Shirazeh Houshiary at Lehmann Maupin

By Edward Leffingwell

In her first New York solo exhibition, the London-based Iranian painter and sculptor Shirazeh Houshiary presented a series of monochromatic paintings that invited the viewer to peer closely into their graphite-inflected surfaces to discern the minute grids and vortices of calligraphy that are central to the artist's mystic contemplation. Houshiary achieves these dense matte surfaces of either white or black with an even application of Aquacryl, a concentrated, viscous suspension of rich pigment that dries to a uniformly flat finish with a barely perceptible incidence of randomly distributed pores. She then painstakingly inscribes the delicate patterns of Sufi incantations in graphite across the black surfaces, and across the white ones in graphite, silverpoint and occasionally pencil, on canvases ranging from 11 inches to nearly 75 inches square.

For Houshiary, the labor-intensive paintings of this impressive show express Sufi doctrine in both their making and viewing. They involve a search for the reconciliation of opposing forces, unification with the world and the achievement of transcendence. As a kind of prayer, these complex paintings are at once contemplative and celebratory, bearing evidence of the concentration and discipline necessary to their making, and requiring quiet study or contemplation on the part of the viewer to be perceived on any meaningful level. The fine graphite calligraphy that makes up the central element in the large black field of *Unknowable* (1999) appears to begin at an unseen central point and spirals out in moirélike patterns, the text repeating, gracefully opening out and becoming less dense then disappearing. The similarly scaled *White Shadow* (1998) consists of a densely painted elongated oval from which a pattern reminiscent of wood grain extends, repeating in concentric bands. The intimacy of *Breath* (1999), again a work with waves of text emanating from a central, circular beginning, seems to capture its subject like vapor exhaled onto glass the embodiment of a spiritual condition.

Touch (1999) resembles a fingerprint whose whorls are limned in dust, while several other paintings explicitly recall the warp and weft of finely woven gauze as the marks seem to float like mist over the painting field. Fine lines of cadmium yellow text on white ground in another group of paintings were made almost invisible by their intensity, as though the viewer had moved from the darkness of the void to the brightness of the sun. Houshiary graduated from the Chelsea School of Art in 1979, emerging with a group of artists that included Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon and Anish Kapoor. In 1994 she was shortlisted for Britain's coveted Turner Prize.