

## Art Papers January/February 2000

### Shirazeh Houshiary at Lehmann Maupin

By Anne Barclay Morgan

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In her first New York solo exhibition, the London-based artist Shirazeh Houshiary presents an exceptional body of work completed over the last two years (Lehmann Maupin, September 6—October 9). These works on canvas are neither drawings nor paintings, but have a greater affinity to wall sculptures. Each of the 15 works is composed of a square canvas in one of three sizes: 11 by 11 inches, 27 1/2 by 27 1/2 inches, and 74 8/10 by 74 8/10 inches. The meticulously prepared black or white grounds impart a sensation of depth. With extraordinary mastery, labor, and devotion to exploring the essence of our existence, Houshiary carefully marked these surfaces with graphite or silverpoint, and in a few pieces, with pigment and pencil.

The differing patterns of markings are composed of words in loosely formed script that remain unknown to the viewer. Houshiary makes each minute form so abstract that the word becomes deliberately unintelligible. Here, she brings to light the concept contained in many religious texts that creation began with the word.

Markings in most of the works extend out from an open center. In *Mist* (1998), they undulate upward and outward in all directions, expanding far beyond the limitations of the square. Works such as these are particularly powerful in that their dimension becomes irrelevant. In contrast, in the small square titled *Touch* (1999), the markings emanate from a single point.

To experience the subtle power of these pieces, one must view them at numerous distances and under different lighting. The process of viewing becomes an experience of unveiling. At each distance, further markings become visible. While some of the pieces have more easily discernible markings, the ones in which yellow lines were placed on white ground become manifestations of pure sunlight. Although these particular works show upon close examination equally minute markings, the yellow color on white makes them ethereal and diffused. While all the titles of the work in this exhibition are enigmatic, these are particularly so as in *Luminous Darkness*. As the yellow markings hover into light, it is hard to discern yellow from white.

One senses that the sizes of the squares relate specifically to the head, the upper body, and the whole body. Furthermore, some of the placements of markings within a given work also capture these proportions, adding another layer of interpretation to the viewing experience. Since Houshiary sits with the works on the floor in order to create them, they retain a dimension of intimacy regardless of scale.

Houshiary's oeuvre embodies a profound quest and spiritual transformation. Going toward an ever unfolding center, these works reflect the very essence of our existence as fluid and intangible, and are about the notion of presence. Only in the latest works titled *Veil* and *Warp and Weft*, Houshiary seems to create a matrix, like a

tartan of experience, a temporary barrier to go toward. It is as if she worked through a whole cycle of transformation beyond the concept of death and then reached another level of existence, another dimension to penetrate.

In her previous sculptures and drawings, Houshiary implemented the poetry of Rumi and concepts of Sufism much more directly, even placing quotes of Rumi adjacent to the titles of each piece. In this exhibition, however, she does not include any direct references to that body of thought. The spiritual source for her artwork seems more inclusive. While confining herself to a precise visual vocabulary, Houshiary succeeds in creating remarkable works of art with exceptionally insightful and illuminating experiences of the infinite nature of our existence.

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