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Shirazeh Houshiary Lehmann Maupin

By Donald Kuspit

On entering Shirazeh Houshiary's show, one saw what appeared to be a group of monochromes—some black, some white, and all square—installed in contrasting groups of large and small works. As one drew nearer to several of the paintings, however, one began to discern the presence of Arabic texts (actually Sufist chants), meticulously transcribed onto the canvas in graphite or pigment, where they proliferate like coral. These inscriptions are clearly legible when examined up close (the fact that they are incomprehensible to most Western readers only adds to their exoticism), and evoke Muslim iconography. From any distance, the work seems to illustrate perfectly Robert Motherwell's observation that abstract painting is a form of mysticism. But just as important, Houshiary has produced convincing monochrome field paintings that refine and intensify "post-painterly abstraction" to uncanny new perceptual effect.

Kenneth Noland seems a particular, if oblique, influence on Houshiary, as suggested by the circular imagery in a number of works—in *Luminous darkness*, 1998, the center is marked by a yellowish bull's-eye—and by the highly nuanced surface. Even more crucially, at least from my point of view, Houshiary's paintings are unabashedly aesthetic, indeed beautiful. Under the auspices of religious idealism, these works become formally ideal. Like abstraction, beauty has also been thought to have mystical import, that is, regarded as a mode of transcendence and self-recovery. Houshiary's works restore spiritual feeling to abstract painting, which, under Greenberg's ministrations, had become mindlessly materialistic. As titles such as *Brittle Moment*, *Presence*, and *Veil* indicate, Houshiary's canvases seem to "picture" a perceptual epiphany—the moment that spirit becomes manifest and one realizes that there is a center to existence and to one's being.

Houshiary's titles make clear as well that she is in pursuit of what has traditionally been called the sublime; for her, beauty is its surface. The physical experience of approaching her paintings, then, is in effect a spiritual experience, that is, a process of initiation and revelation. From a distance they look like blank slates; as one gets closer one sees the more or less clear mandala-like, peculiarly dense form embedded in their seemingly amorphous surface; and up close one discovers the intricate, excited, minute detail. The emerging center comes to represent the ritualized concentration necessary for inner illumination. Equally important, from a purely painting point of view, Houshiary's works show a patient perfectionism that seems increasingly rare today, and thus all the more admirable.