TRANSCENDING THE METANARRATIVE: THE POSTMODERN
SPIRITUALITY OF SHIRAZEH HOUSHIARY’S SCULPTURE

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TRANSCENDING THE METANARRATIVE: THE POSTMODERN SPIRITUALITY OF SHIRAZEH HOUSHIARY’S SCULPTURE

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ABSTRACT

Through her mystically infused, minimalistic sculptures, Iranian-born, London-based artist Shirazeh Houshiary (1955- ) has continued the trend of abstract spiritually in contemporary art. However, the theology that she represents is a mixture of her own creation, taking inspiration from Sufism, which welcomes the beliefs of many religious traditions. This combination of spiritual disciplines is influenced by the dawn of the postmodern era, and what philosopher Jean-François Lyotard theorized as the collapse of the “metanarrative”.

Transcending the Metanarrative: The Postmodern Spirituality of Shirazeh Houshiary’s Sculpture will discuss how Shirazeh Houshiary portrays a hybrid spirituality in her sculptures, which in turn exemplifies Jean-François Lyotard’s theory of the postmodern disintegration of the religious metanarrative. This exhibition attempts to show how Shirazeh Houshiary’s fusion of spiritual narratives is more accessible to the postmodern public, and ultimately creates a more universal experience of the divine.
The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “Transcending the Metanarrative: The Postmodern Spirituality of Shirazeh Houshiary’s Sculpture,” presented by Aubony R. Chalfant, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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for Bran and K.B., my greatest teachers
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The giant metal wall ominously looms in the distance, almost overfilling the exhibition space with its dark grey mass. Upon approaching the huge metallic barrier, one can almost feel the cold emanating from its steely form. Over 11 feet tall and 23 feet wide, it towers over the viewer and leaves no room to walk around it. Even closer now, one notices that the wall is not completely solid, but has a narrow split that divides it into two parts. With its massive form blocking the entire gallery space, viewers have no room to bypass or walk around it. They must go through it.

The passageway through the vast dark wall is only large enough for one person to pass through at a time. The viewer must enter this space alone. Once one steps into the crevice, the sides give way to the inside of the wall and reveal its hollow core. Contrasting the cold grey exterior, the interior appears to be made of liquid fire, a radiant mixture of copper and gold. The impact of this brilliant internal light surprises and stuns the viewer, making them pause in the passageway where they might have wanted to rush through before. Depth and space are lost as one's peripheral vision is completely absorbed by the ethereal glow of the fiery metal. It is as if the viewer has been consumed by golden light, or transported to another place entirely. This experience is powerful, and can only be described as transcendent. The act of walking through a gallery space has become a transforming, surprising, fearful, confusing and beautiful experience. Or, as most viewers explain it in one word: spiritual.

*Isthmus* is one of many awe-inspiring sculptures that have made Iranian-born, U.K.-based artist Shirazeh Houshiary world-renowned. Pulling references from spiritual
practices such as Sufism, Christianity, Buddhism and Islam, *Isthmus* is just one example of Houshiary's use of hybrid religious subject matter. In her more recent works, Houshiary has perpetuated this broad-spectrum spirituality by using more basic shapes and abstract forms that would appeal to a wider audience. The abstract nature of her sculptures aids in this more diffused spirituality, but she is also very intentional in her selection of form, material, composition and location. By combining all of these choices, Houshiary not only creates powerful sculptures, but powerful experiences as well. For her, the experience of the work is just as, if not more so, important as the work itself.

While interviewing Houshiary in 2000, contributor for *Sculpture (Washington D.C.)* magazine Anne Barclay Morgan asked Houshiary about what she was hoping viewers would experience. Houshiary’s response was such:

> So, I start with structure, but move towards formlessness, toward placelessness, toward nothingness, toward something that is like a ghost. It evaporates right in front of you. Ultimately, I don’t want people to think about this, because this is about direct cognition. Without that experience, there is absolutely nothing….¹

Morgan also comments on how difficult it is to photograph Houshiary’s work because of its experiential nature, therefore photographs always have something lacking in the way they capture her art. Houshiary replied, “I like that, because it confirms that it can only be experienced. The most successful thing about this work is that it’s so elusive and intangible. You can’t physically document it…Viewers understand this; they want to see this work in different light conditions or different moods, because they can’t have that

experience for one moment and understand it.”

Houshiary’s creation of a hybrid spiritual experience continues a trend in art of the postmodern era and, as we will see, directly relates to French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard’s theory of the breakdown of metanarratives. This study considers the work of Shirazeh Houshiary in context of the multinational contemporary trend toward expressing the spiritual in art. It will look at her sculpture in particular and at this contemporary movement in general, posing the theories of Jean-François Lyotard on postmodernism as a means to understand it.

The Trend of the Spiritual in Contemporary Art

Houshiary is one of the numerous contemporary artists to take part in this growing trend of spirituality in art using abstract means. In her book Art and Today, Eleanor Heartney agrees that "abstract spirituality has replaced religion in modern and contemporary art." According to Heartney, this trend is the result of a decade-long build-up going back to the "birth of modernism in the late 19th century." She describes how the relationship between art and religion began as cooperative and entwined and eventually became tumultuous and distant. Heartney ascribes this to "the emergence of pan-European avant-garde movements that promised to sweep away old traditions and rejected organized religion as a reaction to authoritarian forces that were everywhere

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2 Ibid., 29.

3 Eleanor Heartney, Art and Today (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2008), 266.

4 Ibid., 266.
being overthrown." Although artists of the period moved away from specific religious beliefs, they continued to maintain a discourse of transcendence and spirituality, perpetuating the idea of art itself as sacred.

Heartney cites Houshiary as one of these artists that show how "the cross-cultural currents have given way to a more generalized sense of spirituality that contains Eastern and Western elements." Heartney also attributes Houshiary's successful blending of many different spiritual thoughts to her particular abstract style, stating that "Eastern practices like Zen, Hinduism and Sufism mesh surprisingly well with developments in Western art over the last thirty years." It is no surprise that each of these spiritual practices involves meditation and altered states of consciousness to achieve a journey within. It is precisely this "spiritually-altered state" that Heartney believes goes hand-in-hand with the "reductive aesthetic of Minimalism, the perceptual experiments of Post-Minimalism and Conceptualism's dematerialized objects."

Heartney mentions Houshiary's *Breath II*, a sculpture from 2004 (discussed later in this essay) as a perfect example of this synchronicity. The 21-foot high tower of glazed bricks is made to issue sounds from many different religions: the Islamic call to prayer, a Jewish hymn, the exhalations of Buddhist monks and a chant by the twelfth-century Christian mystic Hildegard of Bingen. The title of the work not only suggests its intention to "create the suggestion of a living entity," but also highlights the common

5 Ibid., 266.
6 Ibid., 285.
7 Ibid., 285.
8 Ibid., 285.
9 Ibid., 285.
denominator that brings all of these worship practices together.\textsuperscript{10}

Art critic Lynn M. Herbert also acknowledges this postmodern move towards more spiritual themes in contemporary art, so much so in fact that she curated an entire exhibition that explored this shift, titled \textit{The Inward Eye: Transcendence in Contemporary Art}. She discusses how this exhibition came to be because of the massive amount of contemporary artists exploring “how someone can look at a work of contemporary art and be transported…in effect accessing one’s spiritual side.”\textsuperscript{11}

Herbert states that this gradual trend is not new to public art, but discusses the lingering difficulty of bringing words like “transcendence” and “spirituality” into a contemporary art exhibit, saying that the concept “makes people nervous” and is something that “debunkers excluded long ago from critical discourse.”\textsuperscript{12} She does, however, address these “debunkers” and shows how postmodern spirituality is even affecting the realm of science, with experts now measuring how our brains process a sublime or meditative experience through scans and monitoring of brain waves.

When viewing abstracted works such as Houshiary’s, Herbert admits that personal responses will be up to the individual, but also contends that, when dealing with the sublime, there is “a truth that is at once personal and universal.”\textsuperscript{13} It “includes a perception of grandeur in the world at large, which cannot help but strike one as sacred,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 285.
\textsuperscript{11} Lynn M. Herbert, \textit{The Inward Eye: Transcendence in Contemporary Art} (Texas: Contemporary Arts Museum, 2002), 14.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 15.
\end{flushright}
quite beyond oneself and yet there to be witnessed and even shared in.”\textsuperscript{14} Houshiary’s works exemplify this postmodern idea, and show “how our deepest questions unify us, creating a kind of universal we.”\textsuperscript{15} Houshiary exemplifies Wassily Kandinsky’s argument of 1931 that “today a point sometimes says more in a painting than a human figure,” and an artist “needs discreet, silent, almost insignificant objects…How silent is an apple beside Laocoon. A circle is even more silent.”\textsuperscript{16} Through simplicity there is unity, and no one is better at creating that elemental universality than Houshiary.

Edmund B. Lingan from the \textit{Performing Arts Journal} also recognizes this “surge of interest in spirituality that currently informs the creation of art across a wide range of disciplines” and how “numerous contemporary artists are directly engaging with dimensions of the spiritual.”\textsuperscript{17} As we shall see, he mimics Jean François Lyotard’s sentiment of the metanarrative collapse, noticing that “contemporary artists not only draw from the iconography and teachings of mainstream religions…but they also turn to religious and spiritual systems” that are not the norm.\textsuperscript{18} Lingan goes on to mirror the idea of postmodernity by stating that contemporary artists “work comparatively, by blending elements of several religions in their art.”\textsuperscript{19}

Now that we have entered into a postmodern era, it is becoming more difficult to

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 40.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 40.
categorize artworks by a particular religion or spiritual thought. But throughout diverse cultures and beliefs, art has continued to draw on metaphors and images to give form to invisible forces, or as Houshiary herself puts it, to "give form to formlessness."²⁰

Early Life and Works

In many respects, Shirazeh Houshiary’s intermixtures of religious traditions mirror her own history. Born in 1955 in Shiraz, Iran, Houshiary was raised in an Islamic household, but left for London in 1973 to pursue her education at the Chelsea School of Art and has remained there ever since. She carried with her, however, knowledge of Persian art and Islamic influences, to which she would add an understanding of Western art traditions and religion. It is in her combining of these elements, along with the influence of Sufi mysticism and other varying spiritual practices, that Shirazeh Houshiary is able to achieve the originality of her vision.²¹

Houshiary almost strictly deals with the spiritual in her art. In a recent interview, Houshiary has alluded that she “seeks to embody spiritual principles” and, more specifically, create a manifestation of the “invisible processes or the dematerialization” related to different religious practices.²² From the beginning of her career, Houshiary was interested in spiritual themes and subject matter, her earlier sculptures having titles such as *The Angel with Ten Thousand Wings* and *The Earth is an Angel* (Figures 1 & 2). Made of copper, zinc and sometimes combined with brass, these massive floor sculptures are

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²⁰ Morgan, “From Form to Formlessness,” 25.


²² Morgan, “From Form to Formlessness,” 24.
abstracted forms that interweave and curve, and have been suggested to represent calligraphy, floral or vegetal forms, and even “vulval traps” or “erotic struggles.”

Her mysterious metal icons instantly won over critics and only elevated her popularity. Houshiary’s art became very well known in London and throughout Europe, particularly her sculpture. She was included in the 40th Venice Biennale in 1982, and the 1989 exhibition of world art at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, “Magiciens de la Terre”. The Center for Contemporary Art in Geneva organized a solo exhibition for the Musée Rath in 1988, which then toured to the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford in 1989.

In his 1988 article reviewing this solo exhibition, Pier Luigi Tazzi affirmed the sense of awe that was created by Houshiary’s early works, describing the scene in the gallery as “a valley of temples dedicated to alien divinities” or “ornaments that bespeak an investigation of signifying unities.” He suggested otherworldliness about the sculptures, calling the exhibition an exploration of “nodes and interweavings…the apparent and the hidden…the invisible forces that determine the substantiality of matter, the fluxes of energy.”

Critics of the 1980s claimed Houshiary would pave the way for new British art, but then also assumed her to be the new voice for Iranian art in the 1990s. The pressure from different sides to pick a specific niche or platform only caused Houshiary to reject them all equally. In apparent disapproval of categorization, she eschewed identity-driven

24 Ibid., 96-97.
25 Ibid., 97.
exhibitions and removed herself from events that would have cast her in any specific light.\textsuperscript{27} Attempting to shed all trace of origin or label, Houshiary stated, “I set out to capture my breath…(to) find the essence of my own existence, transcending name, nationality, cultures.”\textsuperscript{28}

In the 1990s, Houshiary artwork took an obvious shift towards geometry, the curving, organic-like forms of the 1980s replaced by hard lines and angles. This shift represents Houshiary’s more reductive means of representing spirituality, and the desire for a more universal depiction of the sublime. Works such as \textit{Licit Shadow} (1993) and \textit{The Way to the Unseen} (1994) use simple geometric shapes to form Houshiary’s emblems of spirituality (Figures 3 & 4). Houshiary’s metals also transformed, from copper and zinc to lead with platinum or gold leaf. Exhibitions of this period are where we first begin to see works accompanied by quotations from the thirteenth-century Sufi philosopher and poet, Rumi. In his 1993 article reviewing these works, art critic Richard Cork confirmed that Houshiary’s works from this period had “a profound spiritual dimension.”\textsuperscript{29} He also perceived that “no religious knowledge is needed” to appreciate Houshiary’s art.\textsuperscript{30}

These works also earned her a nomination by the Tate Gallery for the Turner Prize in 1994, and were included in the 1993 Venice Biennale and in the XXIII Bienal de Sao Paulo in 1996. The spiritual nature of Houshiary’s 1990s sculpture was recognized

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 183.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 183.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
by the public and critics alike, and gained her access into group exhibitions with themes such as *Negotiating Rapture* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in 1995 and *Meditation* at Medersa Ben Youssef, a refurbished Islamic college, in Marrakesh, Morocco in 1997.
CHAPTER 2

LYOTARD’S POSTMODERN CONDITION

Houshiary's work, like that of many other contemporary artists, might better be understood through the lens of Jean-François Lyotard, a twentieth century French writer and philosopher. Lyotard wrote *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* in 1979. The book presents Lyotard’s highly influential formulation of postmodernism and defines postmodernity as “an age of fragmentation and pluralism.”¹ Although *The Postmodern Condition* is essentially an analysis of the position of knowledge in computerized societies, it is also a philosophical examination of the effects of this “fragmentation and pluralism” on all aspects of society, including spirituality.

One of Lyotard’s more prominent definitions of the postmodern is its “incredulity toward metanarratives”; those grand, totalizing stories that influence a human's every thought, goal and practice.² He describes the modern age as being one that legitimized these metanarratives, while this postmodern age leaves them bankrupt.³ Simply stated, modernism held to conventions of culture, religion and other metanarratives, while postmodernism begins to reject these conventions, causing a ripple effect of disbelief. For our purposes here, we will use the example of the religious metanarrative and how Houshiary, a postmodern artist, epitomizes Lyotard’s theory and has used the religious metanarrative’s disintegration to create the new spiritual art.

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Lyotard wrote extensively on the postmodern era, and claimed that one of the key elements of postmodernism is the “crisis of narratives.”\textsuperscript{4} The metanarrative, according to Lyotard, is what influences all other thoughts and is the determinant by which we measure what is truth and fiction.\textsuperscript{5} Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism are all examples of metanarratives, these all-encompassing schemes upon which all other ideas of their practitioners are formed. All ideas, thoughts and feelings serve the function of reinforcing the metanarrative. He goes on to say that “it [the metanarrative] then produces a discourse of legitimation, with respect to its own status.”\textsuperscript{6} For example, Christian art is, of course, a result of Christianity, but also serves the function of legitimizing the metanarrative of Christianity, or reinforcing Christian ideology.

The postmodern “crisis”, therefore, is the collapse of metanarratives, such as religion, and what Lyotard calls an “incredulity” toward them.\textsuperscript{7} Essentially, postmodern man has developed a kind of disbelief in metanarratives and no longer operates their whole life around a single one. Lyotard suggests that metanarratives such as these are “losing [their] functors, [their] great hero…[their] great goal” and instead are being “dispersed in clouds of narrative…elements.”\textsuperscript{8} These “clouds”, according to Lyotard, contain combinations of elements from the original narratives and, because of our

\textsuperscript{4} Lyotard, \textit{The Postmodern Condition}, xxiii.

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., xxiii.

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., xxiii.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., xxiv.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., xxiv.
postmodern society, “each of us lives at the intersection of many of these.” In a word, the metanarratives of religion are disintegrating because of postmodern society’s desire to dissect them in order to create a new, more hybrid spirituality.

Prior to postmodernity, art would have been an aspect of its metanarrative and served the role of reinforcing that metanarrative. But with the breakdown of metanarratives, no longer does art come from or support a single metanarrative, but allows for the adoption of multiple narratives, creating a new narrative unique to the individual. All of this disintegration may seem divisive to society, but on the contrary, it creates a more universal atmosphere. No longer is there a clash between metanarratives (East and West, Islam and Judaism) because they are combining, creating the inevitable postmodern result of universalism.

Shirazeh Houshiary is one such artist whose art exemplifies Lyotard’s breakdown of metanarratives because of its abstract representation of spiritual content that represents no single idea or single narrative. In short, she, as a postmodern individual, has created her own personal narrative from the rubble of the collapsed metanarratives. As we shall see, Houshiary’s combination of cultural and spiritual narrative reflects her own experience of negotiating ethnic boundaries.

Because Houshiary rejects creating a spiritual art that is representative of one metanarrative, it might seem like her art would be too personal, too specifically her narrative to appeal to a larger crowd. However, because of her abstracted representation of an amalgamated theology, the result is a spirituality that is actually more universal to a postmodern audience. She demonstrates Lyotard’s theory by transcending a singular

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9 Ibid., xxiv.
religious narrative to create and express a deeper, more globalized narrative of the postmodern era.

This philosophy also parallels Lyotard’s statement that the “traditional narrative… requires… no cumulative progression, no pretension to universality.”\(^\text{10}\) Lyotard is suggesting that no single metanarrative explains everything or is universal; therefore, artists like Houshiary must combine them to make an ideology that is applicable to their beliefs. Houshiary’s sculptures attempt to cross cultural and religious boundaries in order to create an art that is primordially and intrinsically spiritual, a universal depiction of the divine.

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 30.
CHAPTER 3

INFLUENCE AND IMPACT: SUFISM EXPLORED

To fully appreciate the spiritual power of Houshiary’s works, we must first understand the principles and concepts of Sufism, that religious filament that runs through all of her works and is the trunk that other religious influences are able to branch from. Sufism is a mystical branch of Islam that is thought to have existed since the beginning of the eighth century, although some believe that it developed at the time of the Prophet Muhammad.¹ The central figure of Sufism is the 13th-century poet and mystic philosopher, Jalaluddin Muhammad Balkhi, or Rumi, as he is known in the West.

In his book, Rumi and the Sufi Tradition, professor emeritus and Sufi scholar John A. Moyne discusses how all orders of Sufism have the main belief and goal of achieving union with God. Moyne thinks that it is this unification, or as he also describes it the elevation to the level of godhood, that is one of the most “troublesome and confusing debates in the Islamic orthodoxy.”² Early Sufi saints such as Hallaj and Bistami were reprimanded and even executed for “claiming unification with Allah” because for orthodox Muslims, attributes of God such as Truth (haqq), One-and-only (ahad) and Eternal (samad) cannot be achieved by mortals.³ It is this belief that Moyne says is directly opposed to Sufism; Islam advocates “returning to God or coming into the presence of God after death” while Sufis “aspire to union with God in this life.”⁴

In order to experience this unification, or the Truth (haqq), Sufis adhere to life-

¹ Houshiary, Lewison and Santacatterina, “Isthmus,” 65.
³ Ibid., 22-23.
⁴ Ibid., 23.
long study, self-discipline and meditation. Meditation, and the regulated breath that goes with it, is really what the Sufis describe as the way “in,” into the soul and its connection with God. Often times Sufis will repetitively recite passages from the Koran, the holy book of Islam, in order to achieve a trance-like, meditative state, believing that the voice they hear in ecstasy is not their own, but that of God united with them.

This idea of a journey to the Truth is often called “the Path or the Way,” which is strikingly similar to the Tao, or “the way,” and the 8-fold path of Buddhism. The belief in union of self with divinity, as well, is a major principle of Hinduism, adding yet another theology that Sufism relates to. This melting pot of influences is not surprising, considering that much of the area where these religions originated (ancient Persia, India and the Mediterranean states) was at one time controlled by Islamic forces, giving the peoples of the different regions influence on the development of the culture and Sufism itself.

Roger Gaetani, Sufi scholar and collaborator of the book *Sufism: Love and Wisdom*, agrees with Moyne that “esoteric” traditions, such as Sufism, often “reveal universal spiritual principles more readily than the exoteric frameworks of their respective traditions.” For example, one of Rumi’s principle parables is about his search for God, and demonstrates the open-minded and multifaceted nature of Sufism’s spiritual

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5 Ibid., 49.
6 Ibid., 25.
7 Ibid., 35.
8 Ibid., 39.
practice. His poem tells us that he “looked in vain at the Cross; he visited the Hindu temple and the pagoda; God wasn’t there…Nor was he to be found on the mythical mountain of Kaf, or even in Mecca.”\textsuperscript{10} Finally, Rumi says, “I looked into my own heart. In that, his place, I saw him. He was in no other place.”\textsuperscript{11} This parable exemplifies the common notion that Sufism is without dogma, emphasizing instead those experiences that might lead to enlightenment and which can speak to people of all backgrounds or theologies.\textsuperscript{12} Moyne agrees that Sufism in general, and Rumi in particular, are creedless, saying, “Rumi’s goal is to transcend religious doctrine, and he extends ecumenical parity to all religions.”\textsuperscript{13}

As previously mentioned, there are many convincing theories that the origins of Sufism’s theosophy go back to the pre-Islamic era and maybe rooted in the ancient Indo-Iranian dogma. Moyne states that the early Sufis were also touched by Hellenic and Roman influences, as well as influences of Christianity, Buddhism and other creeds.\textsuperscript{14} Moyne also contends that once Sufism developed itself further, it diverged from early Islamic mysticism in many ways and was effected by contacts with Gnosticism,


\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 7.

\textsuperscript{12} Shirazeh Houshiary and Anne Barclay Morgan, \textit{Turning Around the Centre}, (Massachusetts: University Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1994), 10.

\textsuperscript{13} Moyne, \textit{Rumi and the Sufi Tradition}, 25.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 31.
Neoplatonism and, once again, Buddhism. Gaetani agrees that “the practices of some Sufis may have been influenced by some Buddhist practices” and that “Sufis…such as Rumi…readily claim a unity with those of other faiths.” These theories demonstrate the broadmindedness of Sufism’s narrative, which makes it perfect for Houshiary to embrace other religions and, as Lyotard would say, create her own narrative:

**Houshiary’s Spiritual Narrative**

In an artist statement with husband and collaborator Pip Horne, Shirazeh Houshiary declares that she wants her art “not to relate to any particular place or religion” and that her “interest is to discover and reveal our common origins and humanity and to transcend the confines of name and nationality.” John Hutchinson, in the catalog for Houshiary’s 1993 exhibition “Dancing Around My Ghosts”, states that Houshiary believes that art is “an activity that is located in an intermediary realm between body and spirit, a realm that is connected with the true self.” She seeks to exemplify Rumi’s idea of “the inseparability of aesthetics and metaphysics, where art unites with the Divine.”

Sufi philosophy suggests, “the Divine exists in everyone and that access to it is

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15 Ibid., 21.


gained through the heart, the notional center of the human being.” Therefore, in order to access it, one must journey inwards, through meditation, prayer and focus. This idea of penetration of the self, or transcendence of self, is similarly found in Christian belief.

This could be an influence of Houshiary’s familiarity with the writings of Albertus Magnus, a Christian Mystic, who wrote: “He who penetrates into himself, and so transcends himself, ascends truly to God.”

Houshiary’s attraction to Sufism, to traveling inwards and, as she puts it, the desire to “know herself,” are influenced by her Iranian origin from which she has been geographically exiled since the mid 1970s. But because of Houshiary’s investment in Sufism, she does not consider the separation from her home country an exile worth mentioning. For Houshiary, geographical exile is merely a “loss of national status, being a stranger in a foreign land, a rootlessness that is determined by factors extraneous from the self.”

That sense of otherness and separation is what Jeremy Lewison calls “more of a spiritual exile”, and the only one which Houshiary acknowledges. She believes that her exile is “from the universal point of origin or the Divine, not from a nation.” However,

22 Ibid., 71.
23 Ibid., 71.
24 Ibid., 92.
25 Ibid., 92.
26 Ibid., 92.
Houshiary believes that one can also feel a sense of exile and isolation in their home country. “We are all capable of inner exile,” she says, and “if we are aware of that, we can make contact with our inner spaces…then you can learn about yourself not as an individual but as a universal being.”

Therefore, Lewison states, Houshiary’s art is not concerned with cultural differences, but with commonality because it emphasizes the universal links between cultures, not disparateness.

This interest in commonality is what makes Houshiary implement minimalistic forms for her sculptures. She considers this reductionism a kind of process of unveiling and revealing, of reaching the essence of the problem, stating, “All we are doing is unveiling knowledge. The knowledge already exists in the Universe. I am just trying to find it.”

For Houshiary, abstract art is the perfect metaphor for spiritual transcendence. In Sufism, and many other world religions, one must be removed of the worldly characteristics they have developed since the moment of separation from the celestial point of origin in order to regain wholeness with the Divine. We see this belief played out in Houshiary’s sculptures shifting from more depictive representations of angel-like forms to geometric abstraction. In the catalog for her 1996 exhibition, Isthmus, she discusses the universalism of geometric forms and how her intention is “not to describe

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27 Ibid., 92.


29 Ibid., 8.

30 Houshiary, Lewison and Santacatterina, Isthmus, 87.

31 Ibid., 87.
the nature of the experience but its quality,” which, she feels, can only be done “by alluding to its underlying forms, which are universal.”

In describing her identity as an artist, Houshiary articulates this sense of postmodern spirituality by saying, “An artist is someone who is capable of unveiling the invisible…someone who can put themselves in a ‘transforming’ dimension…this transformation is distancing oneself: the further we go away from ourselves the more space we leave for what exists above us.” “I feel that my work captures some very sublime moments of those experiences.”

By merging the aesthetics of her cultural heritage with those of contemporary art in the West, and then expressing them through the concepts of Sufism that welcomes many religious ideas, the sculpture of Shirazeh Houshiary acts as an example of the kind of art that a postmodern society needs. Although she represents what Jean-François Lyotard would call the disintegration of the religious metanarrative, Houshiary does not leave spirituality in pieces but rebuilds an art that simultaneously honors the diversity of the postmodern age and yet transcends it to remind humanity of its ultimate unity.

By creating a more universal representation of the divine and creating the possibility to affect a wider range of people, Houshiary has broken down the exclusive metanarrative and affords everyone the opportunity for divine communication and transcendence, to create their own spiritual narrative. Houshiary shuns the classification

32 Ibid., 89.
33 Houshiary, Lewison and Santacatterina, “Isthmus,” 111.
34 Morgan, “From Form to Formlessness,” 28.
35 Houshiary and Morgan, “Turning Around the Centre,” 22.
of her artwork as representing a specific belief system. When asked about religion she avoids specifics, always opting for more all-encompassing inspirations, contending, “When you touch humanity in its essence it all connects, it’s one.”

Through ambiguous shapes and unrestricted significance, Houshiary urges viewers to free themselves of what Lyotard would call antiquated metanarratives, and open themselves up to postmodernity. “The only thing that I relate to,” she says, “is that I’m a member of human consciousness and that’s why all cultures are a mirror to understanding myself and all things.”

By looking through the lens of Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*, we see that Houshiary is the beginning of the postmodern shift away from austere religious metanarratives to a more flexible interpretation of spirituality. Her sculptures are a fusion of influences, representing the hybridity of postmodern society. Houshiary’s work does not illustrate a singular spiritual narrative, but a multi-faceted one that encourages us to look within and create our own transcendence.


37 Ibid., 29.
CHAPTER 4

SELECTED WORKS

1. Shirazeh Houshiary, *Turning Around the Centre*, 1993. Four lead and gold leaf cubes. 100 x 100 x 100 cm.


Turning Around the Centre

Houshiary’s *Turning Around the Centre* sculpture installation from 1993 exemplifies postmodernity, presenting a kind of spirituality that is a hybrid of Islam, Sufism, and alchemy (Figure 5). It is composed of four lead cubes, on the top of each being an imbedded square inset, covered in gold leaf. The alchemical operation of turning lead into gold is a metaphor for inner transformation. Sunlight is the catalyst for the work, causing the gold leaf to glow and reference the inner light of the spirit while the human body is the dark, cold lead. The size of the gold-leaf area gradually increases with each sculpture, suggesting the progression from darkness to complete light. This alchemical transformation, like inner transformation, leads to complete illumination of the spirit. The soul, enveloped in light, may now be set free in the transcendent experience of oneness.

Each of the squares on top of the lead cubes is also skewed at a different angle, suggesting a rotation from one sculpture to the next and implying a movement that creates an invisible circle. Many cultures adapt the design of the square symbolizing the Earth and its four elements of earth, wind, fire and water, while a circle represents Heaven. For Houshiary, this suggested motion from square to circle symbolizes “the ultimate quest of human existence…the unification of Heaven and Earth.”

The spinning motif is also important, being one of the most frequently recurring patterns in Islamic art. Rotation or spinning is also fundamental to Sufism. Pilgrims to Mecca walk around the Ka’bah, the black stone shrine, seven times in two rhythmic patterns. The Ka’bah is seen as the terrestrial center, which is symbolic of the Divine, and

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1 Houshiary and Morgan, “Turning Around the Centre,” 10.
by walking around it or spinning, one is supposed to remove themselves from the world by losing their geographical and physical bearings. It is a metaphor for leaving the physical body and entering into the spiritual body, the container for Divine essence.

One of the roots of Sufi metaphysics, and the sacred art of Islam, is a principle from the Quran called the “Doctrine of the Unity of Being.” This is a belief in Islamic art that the Divine originates from a single point, and that lines can be drawn from that point to create a specific pattern of geometric shapes, evolving from circles to triangles to hexagons to squares. This single point, or “the centre”, becomes a point of origin and oneness. Laleh Bakhtiar, an Islamic Scholar, writes: “Through this concept one comes to see ‘multiplicity in unity’; to recognize the centre of the circle as a unity containing all the multiplicities...possible in the material world; to know that multiplicity exists only because the unity within subsists.”

While this concept of Sufism gives insight to Houshiary’s use of geometric shapes in Turning Around the Centre, it also eerily resembles Lyotard’s notions of postmodernism. Houshiary’s desire to create a sense of spiritual unity from a multitude of influences is distinctly postmodern, and even more specifically a direct reaction to the collapse of metanarratives that would only divide us further.

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2 Houshiary, Lewison and Santacatterina, “Isthmus,” 68.
3 Ibid., 68.
4 Ibid., 68.
Isthmus

Houshiary’s *Isthmus* from 1990, as discussed earlier, is essentially a large copper box (11 x 23 feet), vertically split in two (Figures 6 & 7). The sections look as if they have been slightly pulled apart to create a kind of narrow passageway. The copper exterior is stained dark, while the copper inside has been burnished to give it a luminous, fiery glow that brilliantly reflects the lights of the exhibition space. This invoked sense of light and fire conjures the Christian belief of fire being a Biblical metaphor for God.

The viewer participates by entering the narrow crevice, and is disoriented by the almost blinding luminosity of the brilliant interior. It is also difficult to perceive the width of the passage because of its highly reflective nature. The experience of light, disorientation and uncertainty does, nevertheless, create a sense of tranquility about the viewer, and he or she is left to transcend confinement and feel the presence of the infinite. This demonstrates Houshiary’s multi-influenced belief of introspection evoking the spiritual.

The title itself, *Isthmus*, is taken from the Arabic word “barzakh”, meaning a bridge or gateway, in this case, between the human and the divine. Passing through *Isthmus* is the first step in the journey towards the divine, presenting viewers with the possibility of leaving behind the physical world and entering into a transcendent, sacred

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5 Houshiary and Hutchinson, *Dancing Around My Ghost*, 10.


7 Ibid., 90.

8 Ibid., 90.

9 Houshiary and Hutchinson, *Dancing Around My Ghost*, 12.
space. Hutchinson claims that *Isthmus* is also a metaphor for the heart, stating that “the contraction of entry leads one to withdrawal and solitude, while the expansiveness of its interior space conveys an impression of what, in western aesthetics, might be called ‘the sublime’…a feeling of hope and majesty, tinged with awe and fear.”

The hollowness or emptiness of *Isthmus* is also spiritually symbolic, relating to Islamic ideology and that tradition of the late eighteenth century and early 19th century art of the sublime. Because Islam forbids the depiction of divinity or spiritual concepts through images, the idea of the void is a particularly powerful artistic device. Correspondingly, Islamic mosques can be seen as decorated voids, empty of images and objects in order to reflect the idea of spiritual poverty and the identification of the invisible as the divine. Houshiary is influenced by this doctrine and its belief that any kind of icon would stand between man and the invisible presence of God. Similarly, in the tradition of the Sublime, the void created belief in the “infinite magnitude and awesomeness of God and Nature.”

*Isthmus*, like many of Houshiary’s works, is more about the experience rather than a physical object; the form of the object is only to serve the experience. In this way,

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11 Houshiary and Hutchinson, *Dancing Around My Ghost*, 12.


13 Ibid., 90.

14 Ibid., 90.

15 Ibid., 90.

16 Ibid., 91.
Isthmus is a great example of how Houshiary addresses the problem of, assuming that one can find direct access to some kind of primordial and universal spirituality, how the immediacy of that experience can be communicated and shared. She has stated: “The Sufi, through creative expression, remembers and invokes the Divine Order as it resides in a hidden state within all forms.”

Isthmus demonstrates Houshiary’s combining of different religious influences to create an experience that is mystical for all. It is a perfect example of Lyotard’s vision of postmodernity; through the dissolution of specific metanarratives, Houshiary is able to create an amalgamated interpretation of divinity.

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17 Ibid., 87.
Breath

Light and darkness as aspects of the sublime are explored in Houshiary’s *Breath* of 2004 (Figures 8 & 9). This work also deals with another set of dualities, being and not-being. The form of the sculpture, Houshiary says, “is in a state a flux.”

The spiraling form of the sculpture can be related once again to the Sufi idea of spinning or rotating into Divine essence. Some critics have also related the spiraling form to the minarets of Islamic mosques, such as the Great Mosque of al-Mutawakkil in Iraq. *Breath* engages in these principles, but focuses more on the idea of breathing as a spiritually related or meditative act. In meditation, concentration on the breath is the way in which to enter inwards. According to Sufism, it is also a way in which to get in touch with the inner self, to connect to Divinity.

In the Tradition of the Prophet, “God created the universe through the Breath of the Compassionate.” The way the form seems to rise and fall is akin to the act of breathing, but is also symbolic of the act of opening in the presence of the Divine and contracting in its absence.

When asked about her tower sculptures, Houshiary states that the thousands of blocks that constitute it are a “repetition of an element” which, in her opinion, “is how

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19 Ibid., 25.


21 Ibid., 74.

22 Ibid., 74.
our universe is made.”

She calls the simplicity of the material and form “quite incredible” and says that “from that simplicity something very complex and moving evolves.”

By creating the sculpture tower out of hundreds of highly reflective white blocks, the form itself appears to disappear and then reappear, only to disappear again. Once again the form serves the function of representing something as ephemeral and transient as breath. It is also an attempt to give a shape to the action of chanting or singing, which is what the sounds effects it makes are meant to suggest.

The choice of location for this site-specific piece is especially powerful and, at the same time, controversial. Although more than a decade has passed since the World Trade Center attack, Ground Zero is still an emotionally charged place for citizens of New York and all passersby that would happen upon this sculpture. But Houshiary believes that the significance of this cite makes it a perfect place to draw attention to our collective humanity and achieve this sense of “unity and connection” through the commonality of the sublime. On her official website, Houshiary discusses the choices that she and husband/collaborator Pip Horne made to create these works and their spiritual implication:

Created in the vicinity of Ground Zero in lower Manhattan, this sculpture tower is constructed in glazed white bricks chosen to dissolve in the intense light. The surface of the tower is perforated. Sound emanates and reverberates from its interior with chants of four different cultures…Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism and Islam. These chants interweave from dawn to dusk. They are the call for unity and connection.

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24 Ibid., 88.

As previously mentioned, *Breath* emits sounds from attached audio equipment, such as a traditional Jewish song, an Islamic call to prayer, meditations of Buddhist monks and a chant of Christian mysticism. This hybridity of religious influences, or by having the religious metanarrative be “dispersed in clouds of narrative…elements,” she is displaying Lyotard’s notion that “each of us lives at the intersection of many of these” deconstructed metanarratives.²⁶ Houshiary’s *Breath* brings light to the fact that no matter how specific one’s image of the Divine may be, it cannot be divisive because of its shared narrative of the sublime. Her art serves the new, multi-faceted narratives of the postmodern public wherein its universalism leaves no room for a clash of ideologies.

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White Shadow

White Shadow, of 2005, is another of Houshiary’s collaborative sculptures with husband Pip Horne (Figure 10). Houshiary says that White Shadow displays an “absence of form, absence of mass and presence of shadow.”27 This presence is a very important aspect to Houshiary and her work. She says that true formlessness, divine or otherwise, is presence, and that “this presence is very elusive…” and “for that reason, the experience of presence has to take the form of formlessness. It is the most beautiful thing I have ever come in contact with.”28 The actual form of White Shadow soars into vertical space only to seem to remove itself and disappear in the same moment.29 It reveals itself through light, only to once again conceal itself in shadow.30

This interplay of light and darkness shows us Houshiary’s understanding of “fanā” and “baqā”, the duality of the Divine. She makes parallels to Sufi ideas of light and darkness. Sufism tells us that darkness and light are both parts of the self-expression of the Divine.31 Darkness, or the withdrawal from the world of light, is when the lower self dies. This is called “fanā”, or annihilation.32 As this withdrawal, or darkness, takes place, the light always reappears to dawn once again. This is “baqā”, or the point where

27 Ibid.
29 Daftari, Without Boundary, 25.
30 Ibid., 25.
31 Houshiary and Hutchinson, Dancing Around My Ghost, 12.
32 Ibid., 12.
the mind reawakens to the spiritual world, now a manifestation of the divine.\(^{33}\)

Houshiary’s use of black and white, representative of the relationship between light and dark, is something that she has been exploring for over a decade. She states that looking into black and white are two very different experiences, and explains how “white is an experience of boundlessness, it opens in front of you…whereas the black closes, or collapses like the experience of falling, which is another kind of infinity, but in reverse.”\(^{34}\) “Each of us carries these stages,” she says, “…we carry these patterns of light and dark, our knowledge of self and non-self, knowing and not knowing.”\(^{35}\)

*White Shadow* is inherently similar to Houshiary’s other tower sculptures, such as *Breath*, previously discussed in this essay. The breath is something that interests Houshiary on many levels, and *White Shadow* is another way for her to explore its transcendent possibilities. In an interview, Anne Barclay Morgan comments on the irregularity of *White Shadow*’s rippled oval form. Houshiary’s reply was as such:

> The irregularity of ripples is just the nature of breathing. Your breathing is constant expansion and contraction, but at the same time the breath is incredibly mysterious; it has no symmetry, no regularity, nothing. The reason I am doing this work is that I set out to capture my breath. Breath is equated to life, it is energy, it is life force. Yet how can you describe breath? I have set out to find the essence of my own existence, transcending name, nationality, cultures. The breath transcends everything there is in this world, every kind of invention of the human mind.\(^{36}\)

Similar to *Breath*, *White Shadow* brings different religious narrative together to create a hybridity that calls attention to the spiritual collective. By discarding

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\(^{33}\) Ibid., 12.

\(^{34}\) Morgan, “From Form to Formlessness,” 26.

\(^{35}\) Houshiary, Lewison and Santacatterina, “Isthmus,” 76.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 28.
imagery that could be categorized as distinctive to the metanarratives of Sufism, Islam or Christianity, Houshiary has created a narrative that is at once all her own and not uniquely hers. Through reduction of form and accumulation of spiritual components, she demonstrates that spiritual art should function to legitimate the multi-layered narratives of its postmodern viewers.
Once again crossing the boundaries of religious thought, Houshiary was commissioned to create the *East Window* for the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London (Figures 11 & 12). The church was originally completed in 1726, and Houshiary, along with husband/architect Pip Horne, was commissioned for the final stage of a renewal project. Her work replaced windows installed after the building was damaged in World War II. St. Martin-in-the-Fields is a kind of Unitarian church, welcoming people of all faiths, and also serves as a community center and architectural landmark in Trafalgar Square.

Because so many different people from all walks of life view the building, Houshiary wanted to create a work that “resonates with all people…secular and faithful, rich and poor.”[^37] The proprietors of St. Martin-in-the-Fields approved of her desire to create a more abstracted, universal image, saying that “as long as it had a spiritual dimension” the window didn’t need to be specifically Christian.[^38]

In order to remain true to this vision, Houshiary decided against traditional stained glass, instead opting for a design of monochromatic etched glass whose central oval echoes the shape of the church ceiling.[^39] The etch marks quote Houshiary’s paintings, and when sunlight hits the etched glass, Houshiary describes it as becoming


[^39]: Ibid., 22.
“filled with transparent white flux.”40 She also says that the unaligned etching on both sides of the glass allows “light to move between the marks and animate the surface,” which in turn changes the appearance of the window over the course of the day.41 The central oval form is more densely etched than any other section of the window, making it the focal point and giving it a greater sense of reflectivity.42

Houshiary describes the composition as a “warp and weft” structure, which “creates a vertical energy echoing the agony of the cross. Here, the mundane and the sacred…merge.”43 While some critics contend that the design of the window is singularly a Christian cross, Houshiary says that it is more universal than that, closely reflecting her belief that “by touching the universal, one can connect to all humanity and transcend time and place.”44 In her article, “Common Humanity,” Pauline Bache discusses the universality of the East Window and Houshiary’s avoidance of having it categorized in any particular way, citing an accelerated globalization as the impetus. Houshiary agrees, stating that now “more than ever we are linked” and that the commonality between us is our humanity.45 She speaks of the project in this way:

I feel that St. Martin’s, which is open to people of all faiths and does so much social work, has a philosophy not shared by all religious places. I’m afraid I think that religions as they grow old are much like people: for all those that acquire wisdom there are plenty who descend into senility…We wanted to choose

40 Ibid., 22.
41 Ibid., 22.
44 Ibid., 22.
an iconography which was not prescriptive and free of narrative. It is a universal image that belongs to everyone.\textsuperscript{46}

This statement echoes Lyotard’s sentiment of the growing “incredulity” towards metanarrative such as orthodox religions and because of its attempt to breakdown any kind of spiritual element to its most basic, intrinsic form in order to unite us through a hybrid metanarrative. Of the \textit{East Window}, Houshiary contends that “all the particular religions can be found in it because you are touching the whole not the fragment.”\textsuperscript{47} This is an appropriate demonstration of Lyotard’s message that “a collectivity that takes narrative as its key form of competence has no need to remember its past.”\textsuperscript{48} Because Houshiary has created a collective spiritual narrative, the original metanarrative from which it is formed, or the past, does not matter. All that remains is the common thread of humanity, woven into a shared mystical experience.


\textsuperscript{47} Bache, “Common Humanity,” 29.

\textsuperscript{48} Lyotard, \textit{The Postmodern Condition}, 22.
CHAPTER 5

BIOGRAPHY


Education:

1980 Cardiff College of Art, Wales
1979 Chelsea School of Art, London

Solo Exhibitions:

2010 Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York.


Turning Around the Centre. University Gallery, University of Massachusetts Amherst. Traveled: Art Gallery of York University, Toronto; Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida, Gainesville.

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Group Exhibitions:

2010  Sydney Biennale

2009  *Between Metaphor and Object*, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin.


\textit{Thinking Big: Concepts for Twenty-first Century British Sculpture}. Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice.


1998  *10 Intensità in Europa*. Centro per l’arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato.


1996  Sao Paulo Bienal


1993  Venice Biennale

Public Collections:

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford

Tate Gallery, London

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

Guggenheim, New York

The British Council Collection, London

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Prato
IMAGES
Figure 1:

Copper and brass with induced patina. 16 x 124 x 78 in.

Kröller-Müller Museum, Netherlands.
Figure 2:

Brass and zinc over plywood. 194 x 180.5 x 233 cm.

Tate Collection, London.
Figure 3: Shirazeh Houshiary, *Licit Shadow*, 1993.

Lead, copper and gold leaf. Six parts, dimensions varied.

Weltkunst Collection, Switzerland.
Figure 4: Shirazeh Houshiary, *The Way to the Unseen*, 1994.

Lead and platinum leaf. Three parts, dimensions varied.

Lisson Gallery, New York.
Figure 5: Shirazeh Houshiary, *Turning Around the Centre*, 1993.

Four lead and gold leaf cubes. Each: 100 x 100 x 100 cm.

Lisson Gallery, New York.
Figure 6: Shirazeh Houshiary. *Isthmus*. 1990.

Two patinated and polished copper sections. Left section: 340 x 220 x 90 cm.

Right section: 340 x 500 x 90 cm.

La Magasin Bonnefanten Museum, Netherlands.
Figure 7: Shirazeh Houshiary, *Isthmus* (alternative view), 1990.

Two patinated and polished copper sections. Left section: 340 x 220 x 90 cm.

Right section: 340 x 500 x 90 cm.
Figure 8: Shirazeh Houshiary with Pip Horne. *Breath*. 2004.

Glazed limestone brick and audio equipment. 650 x 119.9 x 100.1 cm.

Battery Park, New York.
Figure 9: Shirazeh Houshiary with Pip Horne, *Breath* (detail), 2004.
Figure 10: Shirazeh Houshiary with Pip Horne, *White Shadow*, 2006.

Powder-coated aluminum. 405 x 47 x 65 cm.

Lehmann Maupin, New York.

Etched mouth blown clear glass and shot peened stainless steel frame.

Trafalgar Square, London.
Figure 12: Shirazeh Houshiary with Pip Horne, *East Window* (detail), 2008.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Houshiary, Shirazeh. Artist Website. Shirazeh Houshiary.


VITA

Aubony R. Chalfant was born on May 6, 1987 in Hill City, Kansas. Educated in the local public schools, Aubony graduated from Hill City High School in the top ten percent of her class in 2005. She received the David and Mary P. Rush Scholarship, the Ralph and Lucille Hunter Scholarship, the Miller Black and Gold Academic Award and an Art Department Academic Opportunity Award for Fort Hays State University in Hays, Kansas. She was a member of the Alpha Lambda Delta honors society and the Phi Kappa Phi honors society. Aubony graduated Summa Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 2009.

In 2009 Aubony moved to Kansas City, Missouri to begin a Graduate Degree in Art History at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. She was awarded a Graduate Teaching Assistant position in the Art History department, and she was president of the Graduate Art History Association from 2010 to 2011.

Since August 2011, Aubony has been an Adjunct Professor at Missouri Western State University, in St. Joseph, Missouri, where she teaches Introduction to Art. She plans to complete her degree requirements for a Master of Arts in Art History at the University of Missouri-Kansas City in the Spring of 2012.