

Press Release

Shirazeh Houshiary *Pneuma*

22 June – 31 July 2021
22 Cork Street, London

For the artist's 13th exhibition with Lisson Gallery and her first on Cork Street, Shirazeh Houshiary presents a new body of work: the first presentation in 15 years to focus exclusively on her paintings.

The five new paintings – *Pneuma* (2020), *Forgetting the Word* (2020), *Enigma* (2020), *Pieta* (2021) and *Loci* (2021) – manifest an abstraction that is at once haptic and optic; their surfaces taut with a connective energy that holds pigment and fine skeins of pencil-work in mesmerising suspension.

The works arise from a meditative practice that takes breath as its medium and conceptual framework. For Houshiary, the physical manifestation of breath is the word. As is the case in each of the paintings the artist has produced over her forty-year career, at the basis of these works is a web formed from two words, superimposed onto one another and inscribed with focussed repetition. Houshiary uses words to approach something wordless, the interconnectedness of all things.

Houshiary's process is inherently physical. To produce these finely wrought surfaces and their depths, she must inhabit her canvases. Placing them flat on the floor of her studio, she moves across them, building layers of inscriptions on top of the sediments formed from pouring water mixed with pure pigment. Concentrating on dynamic movement, the mind and body unify.

The paintings in this exhibition each have the same dimensions, an extended human scale. They present a space that is at once intimate whilst seeming to move indefinitely outwards. Formally, they play host to a correspondence between parts – all five works explore a dialogue between two fields, making visible the oscillation between visibility and invisibility, existence and non-existence, darkness and light.

The title work, *Pneuma*, manifests as a continuous current of energy running down the centre of the canvas, extending out in liquescent threads of pigment that permeate the white ground. Here, the areas of absence appear as two worlds drawn together, held by the charge of the central intervention that is not a fracture but a frequency.

In *Pieta*, a penetrating tissue of markings moves between form and formlessness, the potency of the ink-blue pigment taking on a visceral quality, drawing the viewer into an interior space where growth and decay are enmeshed.

Where *Pneuma* and *Pieta* have a liquid presence that concentrates in deep pools and limpid boundaries, *Loci* is vaporous, its surface billowing and layered. *Forgetting the Word* takes this vaporous quality to a new register, the pigment rendered so nebulous as to become vibration.

The spaces described are each formed from a synthesis of blue pigment and white ground. In contrast, *Enigma* emerges from darkness: its winged specter appearing like a phosphorescent flare. The multilayered structure of the painting is held together by a scribed membrane, oscillating between soft, subtle, flexed movements and brittle cleaves. It folds and crumbles as if it has fallen out of time and space to leave no definable boundary.

About the artist

Since rising to prominence as a sculptor in the 1980s, Shirazeh Houshiary's practice has swelled to encompass painting, installation, architectural projects and film. "I set out to capture my breath," she said in 2000, to "find the essence of my own existence, transcending name, nationality, cultures." Veils, membranes and mists are leitmotifs in work that tries to visualise modes of perception, spanning the scientific and the cosmic while drawing on sources as wide-ranging as Sufism, Renaissance painting, contemporary physics and poetry. Houshiary finds succour in the transformation of material: Arabic words, one an affirmation the other a denial, are pencil-stroked onto canvas so lightly, and clouded over by finely wrought skeins of pigment, that they morph in front of the naked eye and defy reproduction. So too, aluminium armatures and elliptical brick towers, charged with dynamic tension, appear different from every angle, as if negating their own presence; her commission for the East window of St Martin in the Fields, London, presents a cross, warped and spanning from a circular motif, as if reflected in water. "The universe is in a process of disintegration," she says, "everything is in a state of erosion, and yet we try to stabilise it. This tension fascinates me and it's at the core of my work" (2013).

Shirazeh Houshiary was born in Shiraz, Iran in 1955, where she attended university before moving to London, UK in 1974. She has a BA from Chelsea School of Art (1979) and lives and works in London, UK. She has had solo exhibitions at Lisson Gallery, New York (2017); Singapore Tyler Print Institute, Singapore (2016); The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, Ireland (2007); Tate Liverpool, UK (2003); Museum SITE Santa Fe, NM, USA (2002); Islamic Gallery, British Museum, London, UK (1997); Magasin-Centre national d'art contemporain, Grenoble, France (1995), University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA, USA (1994), Camden Arts Centre, London, UK (1993), Musee Rath, Geneva, Switzerland (1988), and in 2013, her exhibition 'Breath' was a celebrated Collateral Event of the 55th Venice Biennale in Italy. Major group exhibitions include Jesus College, Cambridge, UK (2017); Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini, Collezione Burri, Citta di Castello, Perugia, Italy (2016); University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, MI, USA (2014); Dayton Art Institute, Dayton, OH, USA (2011); Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, USA (2007). She has also participated in numerous biennials including Cartagena deIndias, Colombia (2014); Kiev Biennale, Ukraine (2012); the 17th Biennale of Sydney, Australia (2010); and the 40th Venice Biennale, Italy (1982). She was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1994.

About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of more than 60 international artists across two spaces in London, two in New York, one in Shanghai, as well as temporary spaces opened in 2020 in East Hampton and London's Mayfair district. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists as well as others of that generation from Carmen Herrera to the renowned estates of Leon Polk Smith, Ted Stamm and Roy Colmer. In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Susan Hiller, Tatsuo Miyajima and Sean Scully. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists led by Cory Arcangel, Nathalie Djurberg & Hans Berg, Ryan Gander, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes and Wael Shawky.

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