

The University Gallery is pleased to present Shirazeh Houshiary: Turning Around the Centre, an exhibition of recent sculpture and drawings by an Iranian-born artist who has lived in London since 1973. One of the key figures of the group of young British sculptors who emerged in the early 1980s, Houshiary has directed herself toward exploring the resolution of material form with spiritual concepts. The artist's self-imposed challenge is to transpose personal contemplations into a visual language that does not dematerialize form, but attempts to make a physical object bear the tension between being and thought. The exhibition is on view from November 6 through December 17, 1993 with an opening reception on Friday, November 5 from 5 to 7 p.m. The artist will give a presentation about her work on Thursday, November 4 in the University Gallery at 5 p.m.

From her early biomorphic forms made of clay and straw, to her "mechano-morphic" sculptures in various metals, to her more physically simple, yet conceptually complex, recent work, Houshiary's course equates art-making with soul-making. For her, the art object is a manifestation of an intermediary realm--the "imaginal" realm--that exists between body and spirit. Imagination, as defined by the artist, does not signify fantasy, which constitutes thoughts and desires tied to the finite world, but, rather, signifies the pure and infinite vision of the soul. Art, then, is the creative by-product of the soul's journey.

The significance of the unsustainable moment of transformation is one of the basic themes of Houshiary's work. Drawing upon her interest in such a variety of fields as physics, comparative mythology, mathematics and psychology, the artist embraces the beliefs of Sufism as a guiding structure in approaching her art. Sufism (Tasawouf) is the esoteric branch of Islam and is based upon the teaching of the Koran and the instructions of the Prophet Mohammed. As a philosophy, it concerns itself with a discussion of the reality of Being; as a religion, it attempts to provide a pathway to recognizing the fundamental unity of all things both physical and spiritual.

Similar concerns, though on a cosmological level, are addressed by alchemy, the medieval science of metallurgy which has a speculative philosophy at its core. Alchemy is thought to have had its beginnings in ancient Egypt, with many of its ideas taking their form in the Platonic language of Greek philosopher-scientists. The tradition reached its full flowering in Islamic thought of the 8th century entering that of Western Europe



through Arab-dominated Spain. Throughout its history, alchemy simultaneously adopted and influenced the beliefs, rituals and imagery of Christianity, Judaism and Islam so that a number of correspondences among these spiritual systems can be identified. Most of these pertain to what the rational mind views as being antithetical--the continuous interrelationship between mortal and immortal, finite and infinite, beginning and end, flesh and spirit. Alchemy has as its ultimate goal the transmutation of matter into spirit and spirit into matter, symbolized by the transmutation of lead into gold. The contemplative aspect of alchemy associates the nature of gold to that of the sun recognizing the 'essence' of both to be the same--the light of wisdom, the attainment of which can turn the soul's knowledge of earth-bound forms toward an undifferentiated vision of knowing. Often misinterpreted, comically and sometimes fatally, by certain opportunistic individuals as being a means to actually turn lead into gold, alchemy was a process by which man could begin to approach a level of comprehension that recognizes a Divine Center, around which all things turn and within which all things are contained.

Turning Around the Centre consists of a group of four lead and gold leaf, one-meter cubes whose content reflects the artist's ongoing involvement with the nature of light as a symbol of spirit. At an angle to and embedded within the tops of the lead sculptures are square trays, three of which are faceted into a grid with contours that gently slope towards a central square or point. The facets of the first tray have been surfaced only with lead; those of the second and third show symmetrical patterns of lead and gold leaf, while the tray of the fourth sculpture is an unfaceted square veneered in gold leaf. The dull opacity of the lead and the reflective brilliance of the gold combines with the receding and rising contour lines of the facets to create an effective but discreet optical pulse. A circular movement, as well, is implied by the skewed placement of the trays in relation to the sculptures' tops. Prior to 1992 Houshiary's work manifested sweeping arcs or undulating shapes that approximated motion. The artist now gives her forms the appearance of being static with movement being suggested not solely by what the eye sees as obvious gesture, but by what the mind envisions with subtle perception.

Whereas her past work has consisted of abstracted references to things suggestive of this world, Houshiary has steadily developed her forms in pursuit of visual depictions of abstract thought. This development is evident not only from the manner in which motion is expressed, but in the increasingly important role played by number systems and geometric proportions in her work since 1992. The predominant use of the circle, square and their 3-dimensional extensions, the interrelationship of lines and planes, and the intricate configurations of symmetrical patterns reveal Houshiary's attraction to simplified forms and elements that have become powerful symbols in the sciences and in the visual schematics of philosophy and religion. As the



mathematical apprehension of matter in space, geometry is one of the practical ways to know and sense our world. It also has provided a fundamental basis of the most sophisticated theories dealing with the origin, structure and nature of the cosmos--from a particle of infinitely small dimensions came a universe approaching infinite expansion. As scientists further propound such theories, the relationship between the rational and irrational, the known and the unknown, becomes blurred. This area of blurring, where the elements of paradox co-exist, is the artist's interest.

Houshiary utilizes both the scientific approach, which strives toward an understanding of the multiplicity of worldly appearances, and the spiritual approach, which, by assigning symbolic significance to those appearances, searches for the place where they all meet. The two attitudes represent the phenomenon of duality that the artist carefully considers in her exploration of the momentary, indistinguishable state of changing. On a religious level, such a state is often characterized as divine; on a level of human psychology, it is often regarded as deliverance.

The Enclosure of Sanctity, 1992, includes five large-scale pastel and mixed media drawings inspired by the writing of Rumi, a Sufi poet of the 13th century. The imagery of the series consists of various patterns of circles and squares that subtly expand and contract within deep shades of green and gray. Open Secret, 1992-93 is a set of four paintings on paper rendered in acrylic and graphite that have been mounted on aluminum. This latter series collectively describes the orbit of a hidden source that simultaneously emanates light-bearing words and word-filled light.

Shirazeh Houshiary was born in Shiraz, Iran in 1955 and came to England at the age of 18. She has exhibited her work widely since graduating from London's Chelsea School of Art in 1979. Examples of her work were most recently included in the Venice Biennale, 1993, and group exhibitions at the Rijksmuseum Kroller-Muller, Otterlo, 1990; the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1989; and as part of the "Skulptur Projekte 87" in Munster, 1987. One-person exhibitions of her work have been presented at the Camden Arts Centre, London, 1993; the Galleria Valentina Moncada, Rome, 1992; and the Centre d'Art Contemporain, Musee Rath, Geneva, 1988-89 among other institutions. The artist is currently preparing work for a one-person exhibition at Le Magasin, Grenoble to be held in 1994. Following its venue at Le Magasin, the exhibition will travel throughout Europe.

Although her reputation has grown significantly in Europe, Houshiary has received relatively little attention in the United States. The University Gallery's presentation of Turning Around the Centre will be the artist's first one-person exhibition held in an American museum. The exhibition and its accompanying catalogue have been made possible by the generous support of the



Lannan Foundation, the British Council, and, on the campus of the University of Massachusetts, the UMass Arts Council and the University Alumni Association. The University Gallery is pleased to be co-sponsoring the exhibition with the Art Gallery of York University, Ontario where it will be on view from January 12 through February 13, 1994.

The University Gallery would like to acknowledge David Loomis of Williamsburg for his fine craftsmanship and for the dedication that he showed while fabricating the four sculptures that compose Turning Around the Centre.

The University Gallery, located on the lower level of the Fine Arts Center, is open to the public Tuesday through Friday from 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday from 2 to 5 p.m. The Gallery is also open during evening performances held in the Concert Hall of the Fine Arts Center.

