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## Roni Horn's 'seductively perplexing' work

Rachel Spence

### **With new shows in Italy, Britain and France, the artist explores androgyny and enigmatic doublings**

There can be few more agreeable places to interview an artist than the terrace bar of the Bauer Hotel in Venice. As the mid-afternoon sun streams over the domes of the church of Santa Maria della Salute and across the Grand Canal, Roni Horn and I settle ourselves on a pair of sofas. I am hoping that one of the immaculately dressed waiters will glide over to suggest a coffee but Horn shows no sign of needing a fix of caffeine, or anything else.

Her self-contained reticence is in keeping with a body of work whose hermeticism regularly sees her placed in a minimalist lineage spawned by 1960s practitioners such as Donald Judd. Yet, as with her sculptures, installations, drawings and photographs — which might be made from glass, or employ elliptical phrases of poetry — Horn is transparently expressive. She has no hesitation in discussing intimate aspects of her life.

"I come from a very mundane background," she says, in a voice whose gravelly undertone identifies her as a New Yorker. She was born into a Jewish family in 1955; her father ran a pawnshop in Harlem. By the time Horn was born it was, she says, "a destroyed neighbourhood" where violence was common. Yet her father built a rapport with the residents and Horn has happy memories of wandering through his four-storey emporium, where "mink stoles, cashmere coats, drum sets [and] jewellery" seemed to guard untold secrets. "All had a history," she recalls.

Her sensibility for the emotions suppressed within apparently silent objects has made her one of the most respected contemporary artists in the world. With solo exhibitions at the Centre Pompidou, the Whitney Museum and Tate Modern, she has built up an oeuvre that transcends categories of figurative and abstract. Since 1975 she has travelled back and forth to Iceland where, among other works, she has documented the landscape through a series of photographic books and made "Library of Water", a permanent installation in the coastal town of Stykkishólmur.

The setting of our interview is prompted by the inauguration of



Roni Horn

Slip of the Tongue, a show at Venice's Punta della Dogana curated by Danh Vo, in which Horn's work is included. Next month sees two solo shows open: a display of her drawings at Hauser & Wirth in London, and a major exhibition, Butterfly to Oblivion, at the Van Gogh Foundation in Arles.

Such success was never a given. Horn's creativity found no outlet in the public high school she attended and at 16, determined to get "as far away from Harlem as possible", she enrolled at the Rhode Island School of Design before winning a place on the MFA sculpture course at Yale.

Here, too, she found the environment challenging. "I'm a very private person," she says quietly. "And I've always had trouble in social settings. When I was younger, being very androgynous created a lot of problems for me. I used to be kicked out of bathrooms."

In fact, with her cropped grey hair, and wearing a beautifully cut khaki jacket over a white shirt and vest, lilac-and-green striped socks and black brogues — an outfit that would look equally hip on either gender — Horn's persona is less mannish than fluid.

"Androgyny isn't two things," she says. "It's everything. It's synthesis; not this and that. It's a state of integration."

Art, you sense, offered her the tools to explore her identity without the frustration of empirical limits. Her work is rich in enigmatic doublings and mirrorings. Even when apparently figurative — she has shot Isabelle Huppert, for example, portraying different characters from her movies, and a series on taxidermied wildfowl — it resists symbolic interpretation. When I ask Horn if she regards herself as a figurative or abstract artist, she replies laconically: "I have no use for those definitions."

'Fool's Rainbow', from the series 'Hack Wit' (2014)©Genevieve Hanson; Hauser & Wirth



©Genevieve Hanson; Hauser & Wirth

'Fool's Rainbow', from the series 'Hack Wit' (2014)

Instead, she describes her art as "experiential". In other words, its significance is determined by the viewer. "Often experience is thought of as a passive [act of] taking something in. But that's all there is." She looks directly at me, keen to make sure that I understand this cornerstone of her thought. "The experience of the work is its meaning."

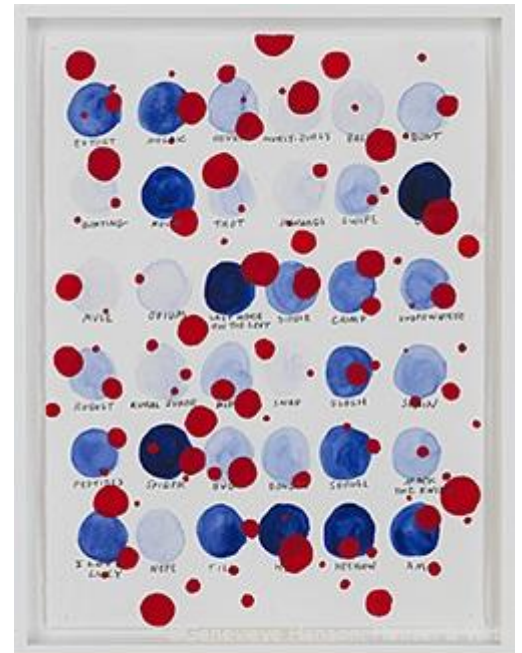
In her Hauser & Wirth show, her 2014 series of drawings, "Or", reveal by their title alone that doubt is intrinsic to their being. "They start as two drawings, similar but not the same," she tells me. "I do the second looking at the first, and those two drawings get connected up. [Then either] they are dismembered or they evolve into one thing, or [they become] things in proximity."

Sometimes this results in swarms of pigment markings that recall microbes or insects trapped in a Petri dish; others are airy meshes suggestive of maps drawn in an indecipherable code.

Roni Horn's 'Drive-in' from her 2013 series 'Remembered Words'©Genevieve Hanson; Hauser & Wirth

Her sculptures share the same seductively perplexing anima. At the Van Gogh Foundation, her new show centres on ice-blue cast-glass cylinders whose form and material will be familiar to all who have followed her career. However often I see variations on these pieces, I am always entranced. They resemble nothing so much as ancient, mysterious wells with surfaces that, though hard, give the illusion of water thanks to their transparency.

Horn loves the deceptiveness of a material that seems so straightforward. "You have a state of transparency and people are still sceptical!" she chuckles when I express my own amazement that the interiors are glass, not liquid. "The eyewitness account is a fragile interface. It's rarely what it appears to be."



Roni Horn's 'Drive-in' from her 2013 series 'Remembered Words'

Inevitably, such utterances seem references to the ambiguity of gender. "I think the primal stuff is there," she agrees, when I ask her if that is her dominant metaphor. "But I have streamlined it quite a lot. That's pathologically in my temperament. I would love to be sloppy." We both grin, as her lack of this quality is manifest in her every gesture. "But I'm not going to fake it!"

Horn's dislike of obfuscation is key to her rapport with Iceland, a country she loves for its geology. "It's the youngest landscape on the planet; [some parts of it are] just 10,000 years old," she enthuses. "So there's very little erosion; the forms seem untouched [and that gives] a visual continuity in time."

It is also prone to dramatic environmental conditions that Horn finds inspirational. "Often the most memorable parts of my life are accompanied by extreme weather. I take a great deal of pleasure in it." Through photographs, often taken in treacherous circumstances — "I spent a couple of months in a lighthouse and by the end the ice was entirely wrapped around it and the bluff it was on had become an island" — she has documented Iceland with poetic attention to its lighthouses, sheepfolds, glaciers and freezing, vaporous seas.



Roni Horn's 'Fat' from her 2013 series 'Remembered Words'

“ Androgyny isn't two things. It's everything. It's synthesis; not this and that. It's a state of integration ”

She also uses the weather as a psychic metaphor. In the mid-1990s, for example, her first photographic installation "You are the Weather" featured 100 images of a young woman, Margret, captured in geothermic pools as her face experienced subtle changes in climate.

Iceland's meteoric mood swings tap into something profound in Horn's own core. "Extreme weather has always helped me to experience myself more deeply," she muses. Judging by both her work and her company, it must take her a long way down.

*'Butterfly Doubt', Hauser & Wirth, London, June 5-July 25, hauserwirth.com*

*'Butterfly to Oblivion', Van Gogh Foundation, Arles, June 12-September 20, fondation-vincentvangogh-arles.org*

*Photographs: Genevieve Hanson; Hauser & Wirth*

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