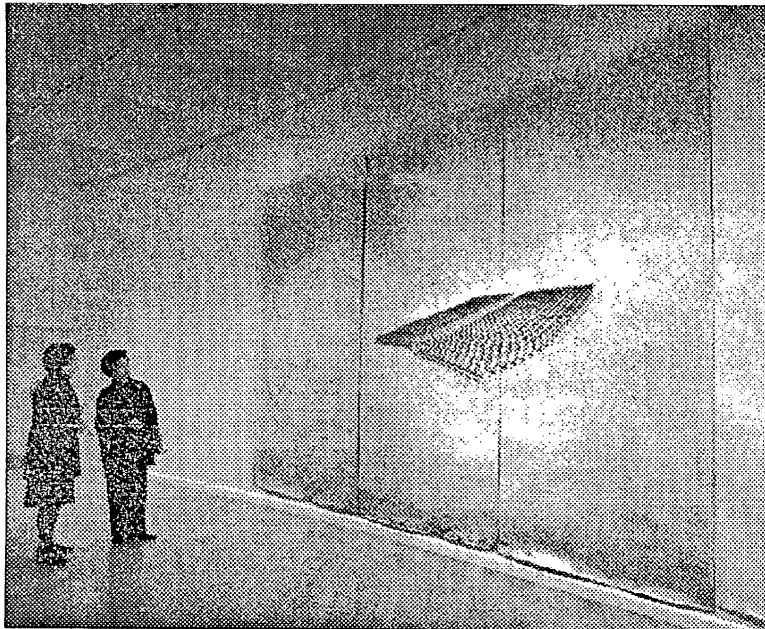


REGEN PROJECTS*

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BY JUANA ARIAS—THE WASHINGTON POST

Visitor Anne Pope, left, and volunteer Vivian Pollock put Toba Khedoori's "Untitled (seats)" into perspective.

Art

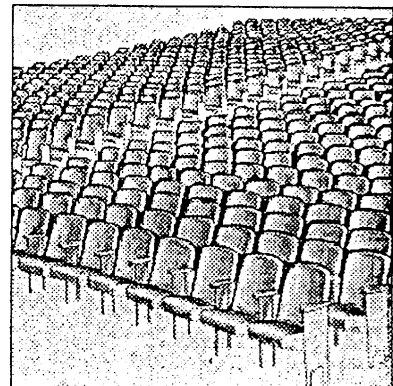
At the Hirshhorn, A Very Spatial Show

Detailed 'Directions' From Artist Toba Khedoori

By Michael O'Sullivan
Washington Post Staff Writer

Homer's "Odyssey" tells how Penelope appeased her suitors during her husband's 20-year absence with a trick: She swore to choose among them only after she had finished weaving a tapestry. By day she wove, but by night she unraveled it, ensuring she would never finish.

The young artist Toba Khedoori has created that same seductive tension in her subtle but haunting exhibition on view at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. She has not exhibited widely since completing graduate studies three years ago at UCLA, and there are only three works on display here, but their impact is deep, as Khedoori simultaneously does—and undoes—several marvelous things.

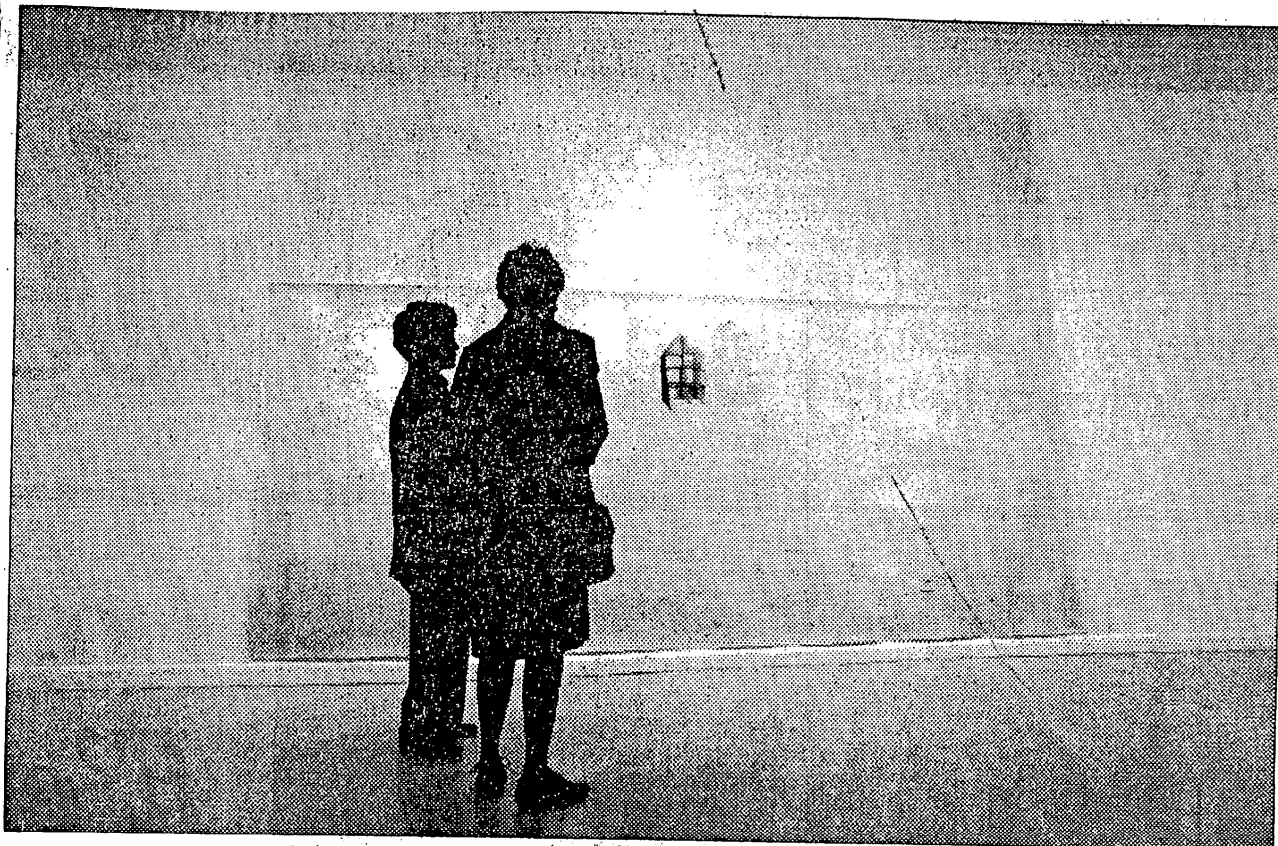


FROM THE CATALOGUE

The rows of theater seats in Khedoori's work are nestled in a background as wide as a movie screen.

The works are huge—as wide as 25 feet, and as tall as 12 feet 4 inches. Yet the images themselves—a section of theater seats, a cutaway of a house, a span of railing—are quite

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Hirshhorn volunteer Vivian Pollock, left, and visitor Anne Pope take in one of Toba Khedoori's works. There are only three works on display, but their impact is huge.

BY JUANA ARIAS—THE WASHINGTON POST

Hirshhorn's Pointed 'Directions'

ART, From D1

small, taking up no more than a fraction of the paper on which they are drawn. Meticulously, almost obsessively, rendered in pencil and oil, their near-photographic realism is devilishly undermined by Khedoori's refusal to hide or disguise her erasures and false starts. And, belying the cool, compulsive tidiness of the architectural fragments she depicts, there is nevertheless a warm and wonderful slovenliness to her finished pieces, whose wax-coated surfaces contain trapped pet hair and other debris from the artist's studio.

Although the pictures hang in the traditional vertical fashion on the pristine gallery walls (to which their smudged, torn and curling edges have been inelegantly stapled), visible tracks that can only be animal footprints give evidence that the art originated on the floor. It's there that Khedoori first spreads a thin coat of beige wax over wide sheets of paper and begins to rough out her designs. Only later does she fasten the work to a wall, fastidiously applying graphite and faint oil paint to the quietly emerging image.

Beyond these obvious dichotomies (large yet small, neat yet messy), there's something even more remarkable that happens when you stand in the presence of Khedoori's art.

Front and center in the Hirshhorn's Directions Gallery hangs the mammoth "Untitled (seats)." It's as wide as a movie screen, composed of four six-foot-wide panels mounted

side by side, yet the central drawing of auditorium chairs is no more than an arm span across.

Draw nearer, as the intimate details of the rows of folding seats entice you to do, and the edges of the painting will recede beyond the range of your peripheral vision. Suddenly, as you admire her drawing technique, you're no longer looking at a picture of chairs, but at a three-dimensional illusion of chairs hovering in space. But just as Khedoori invites you to believe for a moment in the reality of that image, she teasingly betrays your trust by reminding you of her artifice as the dirt, sweater lint and hand prints come into equally sharp focus.

Step back slowly, as the museum guard will inevitably warn you to do, and don't be surprised if the *painting* seems to be pulling away from *you*, instead of vice versa. As in a carnival ride, the loss of equilibrium is at once exhilarating and disturbing, but undoubtedly as deliberate as a Hollywood special effect.

Similarly beguiling is Khedoori's "Untitled (railing)," a deceptively simple painting of what appears to be the edge of a roof surrounded by a banister. Coincidentally (or perhaps not so), the light-brown floor of the museum closely matches the color of the "roof," while the painting's expansive off-white background blends in easily with the paint on the Hirshhorn's walls. Standing within about 10 feet of the wall, you may start to get the dizzying sensation that you are standing *in* the painting, looking out from Khedoori's bare promontory into a cloudless void—until again the vestiges of her process intrude and remind

you: It's only a picture . . . it's only a picture.

Space—exterior and interior, literal and metaphorical, what's between our ears as well as what's between our walls—this is what Khedoori's work is all about. Her seats may be empty, her architecture uninhabited, but a human presence (yours?) is always implied. Her contextless works ask: Where's the rest of it? Where is the lecture hall that housed these seats? And if this is a scenic overlook, what happened to the scenery?

In "Untitled (house)," we see the shell of a three-story residence with unfurnished rooms, adrift in a vacant cosmos. But we see something else as well. We see the dust-flecked paper on which the likeness is drawn. We see the illusion at the same time that we see the reality. We see something, then we look 15 degrees to the left, and we see nothing.

For Khedoori's art is concerned not just with the idea of space—and the spatial tricks played by Barnett Newman and his fellow Color Field painters, whose minimalist work can be seen as a precursor to hers. It's also about the very idea of art itself, about the sanctity and the almost-sacramental nature of image-making.

Like Odysseus's Penelope, Khedoori has remained ever faithful to a romantic ideal—the notion that it is sufficient accomplishment to be purely creative. Thus does the double-edged nature of her enigmatic work simultaneously seduce the audience even while playing very hard to get.

Directions—Toba Khedoori through Feb. 22, 1998, at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Independence Avenue at Seventh Street SW. The museum is open daily (except Christmas) from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Call 202-357-2700.