

**Artist Roni Horn: 'I love ambiguity, I love paradox — it's a total turn-on'**

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"I think of myself as off-brand — I'm not the Coca-Cola, I'm like the local brand — and I'm comfortable with that," says Roni Horn. The artist is sitting in the restaurant, Tina Turner blaring in the background, at the Renzo Piano-designed Centro Botín in Santander, Spain, where she has installed her latest exhibition, *I Am Paralyzed With Hope* (a line borrowed from a sketch by American stand-up comedian Maria Bamford). It is a concise survey of her best-known works alongside new pieces.

Though American and based in New York, Horn is at home in Europe, where her photography, sculptures, drawings and performances found an attuned audience early on — her first solo exhibition took place in Munich in 1980. "The regard Americans have for something like culture [is] that it has to be about profit, period, end of story. But I found in Europe I was respected just for being an artist and there was a place for me," she says. Her approach to art-making is akin to a lone explorer: collecting observations about the elements and environment, taking close-up photographs of people and topologies, making cartographic drawings in graphite and charcoal (in fact, consisting of dozens of fragments of pigmented paper). Her process is electric with curiosity, though Horn says simply: "I would call it play."



*'Untitled ("The tiniest piece of mirror is always the whole mirror")' (2022)*

© Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

"There are artists who have extraordinary skills — I don't have any of that," she remarks. "I'm not seduced by skills. When I was in college I talked my teachers out of making me learn to draw — I told them I would do my thing and bring it to them, but I didn't want to be taught. My work is basically a workaround — there's skill there, but it's not my hands." The skill, she adds, is in the concept.

The exhibition at Centro Botín, curated by Bárbara Rodríguez Muñoz, picks up on themes that have preoccupied Horn for the best part of 40 years: the mutable chemistry of identity, evoked through motifs such as water and weather; the instability of perception, explored in repeated actions, juxtapositions and pairs. We also see this in her love of vernacular language, such as the idioms and colloquialisms in a series of drawings titled *"Wits' End Mash"* (2019), where Horn asked 300 people to write commonplace phrases ("smell a rat", "happy as a clam"), then screen-printed them, turning word into image and dissolving meaning along the way.

Horn's amusement at the absurdities of language and binaries is partly connected, she says, to her experience of androgyny. "I have so-called male qualities and so-called female qualities, and I want them both, I like them both. I really don't care if I'm addressed as a man or a woman." Throughout her career, Horn has resisted labels — applied to either herself or her works.

But a refusal to conform to expectations has, at times, come at a cost for Horn, personally and professionally. "There's been a lot of difficulty in my life," she says, including a troubled relationship with her father, which prompted her to leave home. "I was glad I left, but it was extremely difficult — I was very depressed. When I hit 40 I knew the worst half of my life was over, no matter what would come." The entry point to the exhibition is *"a.k.a."* (2008-09), a poignant work of 15 pairs of photographs of Horn taken at different ages, some pulled from old family albums.



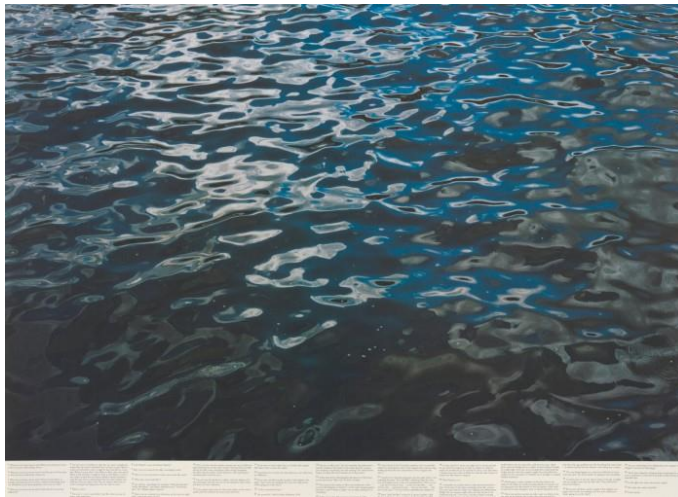
Details from *'This Is Me, This Is You'* (1997-2000)

© Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

Horn's photographic grid installations are among her most popular and acclaimed works; included here are *"Portrait of an Image (with Isabelle Huppert)"* (2005-06), 100 confronting photographs of the French actor's face as she impersonates herself in her own film roles and, in dialogue with it, *"This Is Me, This Is You"* (1997-2000). This consists of 96 playful photographs of Horn's niece Georgia, taken between the ages of six and nine: "I had a specific idea about being a girl, and checking out different options for the future."

Drawing — or Horn's version of it — has, ironically, remained an integral part of her practice. At Xavier Hufkens in Brussels, Horn's recent drawings are showing until May 6, while a solo exhibition centred on a new body of drawing work will open at Hauser & Wirth during Zurich Art Weekend in June. Four of her vast, collaged paper drawings hang at Centro Botín, resembling maps but of imagined terrains. A diaristic work, *"LOG"* (2019-20), consists of 406 pages of sketches, news clippings, pictures, notes and anecdotes. LOG introduces a different take on draftsmanship and "a language I'm less experienced at". It is nonetheless unmistakable Horn — meandering, enigmatic, and moving from the lugubrious to the hilarious.

Humour is important to Horn, but she thrives on the frisson of ambivalence. "I love ambiguity, I love paradox — it's a total turn-on! I love things that don't take you anywhere. You've got to figure out where you're going — you've got to be active or you get nothing."



A detail from 'Still Water (The River Thames, For Example)' (1999)

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For all their playfulness, there is also a dark undertow to many of Horn's works. "*Still Water (The River Thames, For Example)*" (1999), one of Horn's most acclaimed installations, presents 15 close-up photographs of the river. A creeping sense of foreboding in the images is confirmed by footnotes that include accounts of suicides that have taken place in the Thames. At the opposite end, opacity, darkness and grief are balanced with light and transcendence in a meditative new series of 10 large-scale, cast glass sculptures, "*Untitled (The tiniest piece of mirror is always the whole mirror)*". Horn spent six years developing an annealing process whereby highly purified glass could retain its viscous quality, appearing fluid and solid simultaneously. Mesmerising hues of purple and blue were achieved by adding neodymium and cobalt to highly purified glass. The sculptures glint like giant gemstones, vying with Piano's architecture and the dramatic panorama of the Bay of Santander beyond.

Horn offers the viewer finite objects, but they are all up for grabs in terms of perception. "It's just an armature for something — and the something is in you, or me. That's the way I see my work."

*I Am Paralyzed With Hope* is an invitation to laugh, to inquire and to be suspended in the present — but not for too long. "I've learnt to keep moving, because I've noticed when I stop it's much more difficult to live. I've tried it, because it was so difficult to move. The easiest thing for me to do is work — my work."

April 1-September 10, [centrobotin.org](http://centrobotin.org)

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