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SHIRIN

NESHAT

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The eminent Iranian artist and filmmaker whose relevance extends far beyond the world of her work.

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On 20 January, the Iranian-born filmmaker and artist Shirin Neshat joined the Women's March in New York to mark the anniversary of President Donald Trump's first year in office. The week before, she was at a protest in Union Square in support of the people's uprising in Iran. Shirin is politically engaged beyond the lyrical films she makes exploring the place of Muslim women in Middle Eastern societies. Her work has been widely lauded – from the Golden Lion she won at the 1999 Venice Biennale to the prestigious Praemium Imperiale awarded last year by the Japan Art Association.

More than any artist living today, Shirin has demonstrated the place and the power of art in confronting and reflecting on political crises.

## Shirin

One day in 1983, when Shirin Neshat was 26, she walked out on her life. She left nearly all her belongings in the apartment in Marin County, north of San Francisco, that she shared with her then boyfriend – a person she was “in a hurry to get away from” – and boarded a flight to New York. In the process, she abandoned dozens of paintings, prints and collages she had made while studying at the University of California, Berkeley, where she had earned her bachelor’s and then her master’s degrees in fine art.

Shirin describes the works she left behind that day as “very bad, clichéd” attempts to merge imagery from the Persian culture of her native Iran with Western painting traditions. “I was useless at art school,” she says. “There was nothing happening for me artistically.” After she left, her ex-boyfriend threw out all her possessions, art included. The only record of the work she had spent years making was a collection of slides she’d taken with her to New York. Then she threw those out too. “An entire chapter of my life was trashed in that moment.”

Shirin had dreamed of being an artist since she was a young girl growing up in the city of Qazvin, 150 kilometres north-west of Tehran, but on the day she left California – to which she had travelled from Iran at 17 to complete her schooling, as had her siblings before her – she gave up making art for more than a decade. “I realised I didn’t have it in me to be a painter – I don’t even know how to paint – and all my romantic notions about an artistic life just went out the window.” This was a new beginning for Shirin, one of many she has made throughout her life, either through political upheavals she had no control over or by her own design.

Shirin, now 60, never returned to painting but has produced multiple series of photographs, videos and, most recently, feature films. Her works are lyrical, dreamlike reflections on the place of women in Iranian society, on the two very different cultures – Eastern and Western – that have shaped her life, and on the far-reaching impact of historic political events – revolutions, coups, uprisings – on ordinary lives. She is a masterful image-maker who delivers powerful political messages by stealth, first seducing you through the beauty of her visual style and the music that accompanies her videos and films (she has worked with composers such as Sussan Deyhim, Philip Glass and Ryuichi Sakamoto), then making you think deeply about some of the most pressing issues of our time.

Her work, which sells for between £25,000 and £100,000, has been shown in galleries the world over (a solo touring exhibition is at the Neue Galerie Graz in Austria until 22 April), and she has won numerous



A capital of the Persian empire in the 16th century, Qazvin is now famous for its calligraphy and textiles.



Last year’s Golden Lion for best artist at the Venice Biennale went to Carolee Schneemann.



Shahrooz Parsipur, author of the 1999 novella *Women Without Men*, received a prestigious Hellmann/Hannah human rights award in 1994.

international prizes, beginning with the Golden Lion for best artist at the 1999 Venice Biennale for her short film “Turbulent”, which explores the different roles assigned to men and women in Iran and shows one female singer transcending societal restrictions through music. Ten years later she won a Silver Lion

for best director at the Venice Film Festival for her first feature-length film, *Women Without Men*, described by the critic Peter Bradshaw as “a quietly tremendous film which ensnares both the heart and mind”. The same year, *The Huffington Post* named her the artist of the decade. “She is a groundbreaker who has inspired many other Iranian artists, especially women, to develop their practices and find a wide audience,” says Linda Komaroff, the head of the Middle East department at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, who has organised a show of contemporary Iranian art that will open in May and include photographs by Shirin from the museum’s collection as well as work by artists who have followed in her wake.

When I meet Shirin in early October, we are three days away from the New York premiere of *Looking for Oum Kulthum*, Shirin’s second feature-length film. Shot mostly in Morocco, it tells the story of an Iranian filmmaker struggling to make a biopic about the internationally renowned Egyptian singer who gives the work its title. It is a poetic meditation on artistic failure and the sacrifices women must make to become great artists, and is Shirin’s most overtly self-referential work since 1999’s “Soliloquy”, a two-screen video installation which shows a woman dressed in a chador, played by Shirin herself, navigating between two opposing cultures. On one screen, we see her moving through an unidentified Western city; on the other, a Middle Eastern one.

This delicate negotiation between two countries that Shirin describes as being “in complete conflict” with one another is a crucial part of her story. She has lived in the United States for almost 44 years and hasn’t returned to Iran in more than two decades. “The authorities detained me at the airport one year, and many people have told me it’s not a good idea for me to go back because of my work and some of the things I’ve said about the country.”

## Shirin

To live in exile is to harbour a permanent sense of longing, loss and sadness – emotions Shirin has learned to live with, she says. But her exile has taken its toll. For one thing, she was not able to attend the funerals of her father, brother and nephew. For another, she only occasionally sees her mother and two sisters, who live in Iran, and then only in places such as Dubai and Europe, as she can't visit them in their home and they can't visit her in hers. "It's nearly impossible to get Iranians visas for the United States, especially today," she says. The presidency of Donald Trump is "worrisome, not just for Iranian Muslims like me but also for Americans, for the freedom of speech, for the future of the world. On a daily basis, I am anxious. I really don't know what the future holds."



The role of Mitra, the exiled artist and filmmaker who sets out to make a biopic on the iconic singer Gholamhossein Alpay in Shirin's film, is played by the Iranian actress Neda Rahmani, above right, known for her parts in the TV series *The Peppercorns* and the crime film *Spirit House*.

Shirin and her long-term partner and collaborator, the Iranian artist Shoja Azari, 60, have recently moved into a spacious two-storey home and studio complex in Brooklyn. As I walk there from the subway, I pass cafés and grocery shops run by Mexicans and Ecuadorians, and a Latin American community centre with a poster which reads "Refugees and immigrants welcome here" in its window. "Everyone around us in Brooklyn comes from another place," Shirin says. "Once I leave New York, I am immediately reminded that I am an immigrant, but here I really feel at home."

She guides me through her new living and working space. Downstairs, a cavernous hall lit by a skylight will be transformed into a studio for her and Azari. Upstairs, a vast room serving as the kitchen, dining and living area opens on to a large terrace lined with roses, geraniums and lilacs. There are lemon and cherry trees and, in one

corner, a vegetable garden. ("Shoja is the gardener," Shirin says.) There is also a small office downstairs where Giulia Theodoli, a charming Italian woman who has worked as Shirin's sole assistant for six years, sits typing at a computer. I chat to Azari, who is about to take their bouncy chocolate Labrador, Achille, out for a long walk. When

I tell him that I'm an Italian citizen living in post-Brexit Britain and that the future of Europeans in the country is still unclear, he smiles sadly and says, "If you have to leave, then you'll be just like us."

Shirin is an attentive hostess, serving me Persian cakes: tiny cubes of sweetness infused with spices. She is small and slender, her jet-black hair pulled back in a tight bun and her dark eyes permanently rimmed with black kohl tapering into dramatic wings. This signature look, combined with her taste for statement jewellery, has led to comparisons with Cleopatra. The description is perfect. There is something aristocratic, almost regal, about Shirin's soft demeanour, her graceful movements and the way she perches on her chair (she has studied different forms of dance throughout her life and now takes African dance classes several times a week). She speaks quietly in lilting tones accented by the last lingering traces of an Iranian accent. On the day we meet, she sports a long-sleeved blue camouflage top, a dark green wraparound skirt decorated with abstract patterns and a wide gold rim, grey trainers and mismatched, dangling gold earrings

bought in Mexico. In a way, the individual garments are almost irrelevant – she could wear a sack to a gala and still be the most elegant person in the room. Her personal style is so uniquely seductive that many fashion labels have tried to claim her as their own. In 2004 she agreed to be interviewed by the New York ready-to-wear brand Tome for a short online film. Shirin smiles when I remind her of this. "Sometimes designers give me things to wear, but I'm not really a brand-name kind of person. I find things that appeal to me in many different places and just wear what I like."

Shirin grew up with two brothers and two sisters in what she describes as a warm, loving family in Qazvin, a provincial capital and "a weird, conservative city", she says, which was nevertheless opening up to Western culture. Hers was a religious Muslim household, but more out of tradition than dogmatic belief. In fact, Shirin prayed more than some members of her family; "as a child, I was very drawn to religion." (She describes herself today as a secular Muslim.) The family was proud of its Persian heritage. "We celebrated all the festivities that were rooted back to our ancestors," she says. "I represent a generation of people who lived with this double identity of Persian and Muslim. And we were at peace with that."

She credits her father, a doctor and farmer whom she describes as a dreamer who read a lot, with teaching her how to become an individual. From her mother, a housewife, she inherited "endless energy".

At school, she was encouraged to read widely. In particular, she remembers two teachers who made a huge impact on her. "They made us read books by French existentialist writers like Sartre; we were exposed to some incredibly important modern literature." A stint at a Catholic boarding school in Tehran where "the nuns were

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Here, Shirin wears a 24-carat gold and rhodium-plated vermeil and Japanese silk ribbon necklace by ERICKSON BEAMON and blue Arc Drop patina-finish earrings by ANNIE COSTELLO BROWN.

On page 223, she wears Silver Mika earrings by ANNIE COSTELLO BROWN and her own necklace.

On pages 228 and 233, Shirin is wearing a Swarovski crystal, rhodium-plated vermeil and vintage bead necklace by ERICKSON BEAMON and blue-oxide Rain Dusters patina-finish earrings by ANNIE COSTELLO BROWN. Production: VLM Productions.

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Shirin



"Everything I have ever done has generated a lot of debate, and not all of it has been praise."

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## Shirin

very strict – it was like being punished for not having done anything wrong” is the only blot on Shirin’s otherwise happy memories of this time.

In 1975, Shirin was sent to Los Angeles to complete her schooling at University High School in Westwood, even though she barely spoke English. It was a profound culture shock. “I just couldn’t imagine how much I would miss my family and friends and the lovely little town I had grown up in.” At first, she lived with her older sister in an “ugly apartment” in Los Angeles, and for “the first two years, I really tried to find ways of going back to Iran. I felt completely alienated, especially when my sister returned home.” After finishing school, Shirin moved to San Francisco and started at Berkeley.

Then, in 1979, the shah of Iran was overthrown in what became known as the Islamic Revolution, and the hard-line regime of Ayatollah Khomeini was established. A year later, Iraq invaded Iran, launching the Iran-Iraq war, which continued until 1988. “The walls came down,” Shirin says now. She was stranded in a place where she had few Iranian friends and there was, she tells me, a heavy anti-Iranian sentiment. She was traumatised, in “emotional and artistic paralysis. I was a psychological mess. I eventually had to get professional help.”

So when she escaped California for New York, she did so with no regrets. New York in the early 1980s was the city of Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat, of graffiti art, hip-hop, break-dancing and Studio 54. Shirin embraced it all. “It was such an exciting time,” she remembers. She lived in the East Village, dated a graffiti artist, and did a succession of menial jobs before finding work at the Storefront for Art and Architecture, an experimental space then in Prince Street, SoHo, where she helped its founder, the Korean artist and activist Kyong Park, run the programme. She went on to marry Park, now a professor of visual arts at the University of California, San Diego, and together they had a son, Cyrus, 28, named after the great Persian king. It was a fascinating time, Shirin tells me. She met artists such as Vito Acconci and Mel Chin and architects like Zaha Hadid, Peter Cook and Jean Nouvel – “so many interesting,

Though Studio 54’s founders, Ian Schrager and Steve Rubell, loved an early logotype sketch by Halston, they opted for Gilbert Lesser’s art deco-inspired design.



In 1961, the year the above photograph of Jean-Paul Sartre was taken by Lee Ker, a bomb planted by opponents of the writer’s pro stance on Algeria self-determination exploded at the entrance to his apartment building.



“Turbulent” (1999) is installed on facing screens, so the viewer can’t watch both at once.

creative people.” But “there was a moment after I had the baby where I thought, This is it; this is going to be the rest of my life, working at the Storefront.”

And then the unexpected happened. In 1990, Shirin visited Iran for the first time in 12 years. In her absence, the revolution had transformed the country into a repressive, ideologically driven nation that Shirin no longer recognised. Once again, she experienced an indescribable culture shock. “Iran had been turned upside down,” she says. She met old friends and discovered that “they had been a part of the revolution. My generation was the one responsible for it.” Even her own mother and sisters had “undergone a tremendous change from being quite European or Westernised in their style of fashion” to all wearing veils. “It didn’t seem to be a big issue for them any more.”

Out of her profound bewilderment at the fate of her country and her attempts to understand it, Shirin’s artistic vision began to take shape. Her first series of black-and-white photographs, “Women of Allah”, which she worked on from 1993 to 1997, focused on female martyrdom and was inspired by what she says were “shocking, highly sexualised images of veiled women holding weapons” she had seen in Iranian books. The faces, hands and feet of the women in Shirin’s photographs are inscribed with modern poetry written in Farsi, in a neat visual summation of revolutionary Iranians’



dual identities as both Persians and radical Islamists. But these ambiguous pictures also reveal something else: the revolution simultaneously oppressed women and empowered them. The photographs were first shown in 1995 at the now-defunct Annina Nosei Gallery in New York. Controversy immediately followed – some accused Shirin of romanticising violence and terrorism, and the accusations continue to this day. “Everything I have ever done has generated a lot of debate, and not all of it has been praise,” Shirin says.

Her real breakthrough came in 1999, when she began to make black-and-white two-screen video installations examining the place of women in the radically changed society she had found on her return to Iran. One of the first, “Turbulent” (1999), shows on one screen a man singing a love song by the 13th-century Persian



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The Storefront for Art and Architecture opened its doors on 18 September 1982.



"Gardians of Revolution" (1994), from Shirin's series "Woman of Allah", is a black-and-white print inscribed in ink with Farsi calligraphy by Fohimeh Gooran.

poet Rumi in a theatre full of other men (the singer is played by Shoja Azari, who is credited as a writer, director or editor on every video or film Shirin has

made since), while on the other a veiled woman faces an empty hall. When the man's performance, beautiful but constrained, is over, the audience applauds. On the second screen, the woman starts her wordless song (women in Iran are forbidden to sing in public), consisting of guttural cries, syncopated chants and soaring melodies. This haunting track was devised and performed by the Iranian composer and musician Sussan Deyhim, a fellow exile in the United States who worked with Peter Gabriel on Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* and sang on the soundtrack to Ben Affleck's *Argo*. The song in "Turbulent" was, Deyhim explains by phone from Los Angeles, intended to be "almost primordial, to recall a time before language existed."

The effect is electrifying. When the installation was shown at the 1999 Venice Biennale, it won a Golden Lion, the exhibition's top prize. Suddenly, at 42, Shirin had become one of the most talked-about contemporary artists in the world. "It was like my whole life was starting all over again, and it was something wonderful, which I didn't expect," she tells me. "That moment was really the beginning of my career."

Shirin was now in a hurry to make art. She continued to collaborate with the group of Iranian expatriates she had assembled for "Turbulent": as well as Azari and Deyhim, they included the cinematographer and writer Ghasem Ebrahimi (who went on to be a director of photography on *The South Bank Show*) and other producers and directors. The more time Shirin spent with this group, the more she "grew apart from the Storefront world," she says. (She and Park had divorced in 1998.) "We had all been away from Iran for

a long time and were extremely nostalgic for it. We felt the need for a community we could relate to artistically and culturally." Deyhim remembers the collaboration the same way. "We had finally found a loving group of people," she says, "and we could share an understanding of the culture and the poetry of Iran."

One of the recurring motifs of Shirin's videos from this time - and of much of her work since - is women's search for freedom in repressive societies. In "Turbulent", the female singer finds it through music; in other works, women find it in nature - floating in water, for example, or near trees, in gardens, on beaches. They even find it through madness. Shirin's 2001 video "Possessed" shows an unveiled woman in a mentally disturbed state wandering through the streets of an Iranian town (the film was actually shot in Morocco). Her appearance in a public square sparks an argument between those in the assembled crowd who believe she is exempt from wearing the veil in public because of her mental state and those who do not. "When people watch this video, they always have such strong reactions," says the Italian collector Patrizia Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, who owns an edition of the work which she has shown in her Turin gallery and also screened at home for friends. "Shirin's videos never leave you indifferent," she says. "They raise so many questions; they spark conversations, debate, even arguments. They open your mind."

People in the West, Shirin says, "have this idea that all Iranian women are poor, suffering victims. Actually it's the opposite: the women in Iran are the most radical, the most confrontational, the most vocal, the most challenging individuals in the community. The more you're against the wall, the more creative and inventive you become in how to break the rules." She continues,

## Shirin

"Iranian women do not have a sense of competitiveness with men, they feel they have a distinctive role in society."

Shirin was a guest of Miuccia Prada's at the annual Miu Miu Women's Tales dinner held last September during the Venice Film Festival. Shirin's film *Looking for Oum Kulthum* had just had its world premiere at Venice Days, and her exhibition *The Home of My Eyes* was at the Museo Correr in Piazza San Marco for the 57th Venice Biennale. "What I really appreciate is that Shirin addresses central human themes in a universal way," Prada tells me by email. "Of course everything she does is reminiscent of her upbringing in Iran, and her work is widely known for depicting Islamic society. But at the same time, she presents those themes in deeper, archaic ways that speak about everyone's life - women and men, individual and society, social rites and political power."

Shirin's first feature film, *Women Without Men* (2009), developed these ideas further. Based on a magical-realist novel by the Iranian writer Shahrnush Parsipur, it tells the story of four women in Tehran during the 1953 British- and American-backed coup which ousted the democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, and returned the shah to power. One woman, Munis, dies to realise her political ambitions. "The only freedom from pain is to be free from the world," she says. She jumps off a roof, and her ghost then joins a group of communist rebels. Just as Shirin had seduced the critics 10 years earlier with "Turbulent", she seduced them again with *Women Without Men*, her first attempt at an entirely new art form - it won the Silver Lion for best director at the Venice Film Festival.

Shirin continues to challenge herself: she accepted an invitation to direct Verdi's opera *Aida*, conducted by Riccardo Muti, at last year's Salzburg Festival. "I am terrified of repetition and stagnation," she says. "I have rebelled against every signature work I've done." Yet when she was first approached by Markus Hinterhäuser, the festival's artistic director, she thought, "He must be crazy." Like so much of her work, Shirin's *Aida* divided the critics. *Forbes* said she had "triumphed in telling the tale of a torrid love triangle"; *The New York Times* said the production "didn't let Neshat be Neshat".

Three days after our first meeting, I join Shirin, Azari and their assistant, Giulia Theodoli, in a hotel bar in Midtown

Manhattan. Shirin's new film, *Looking for Oum Kulthum*, is being shown nearby, and she is waiting - anxiously - for a post-screening question-and-answer session. Her son, Cyrus, joins us. He sits opposite Azari and shows him pictures of dogs on his phone. "I'm trying to persuade Shoja to get another dog," he explains. "I always refer to Achille, the Labrador, as my brother," he jokes. Then Fahimeh Gooran arrives. She is an Iranian graphic designer who has worked with Shirin for more than a decade, inscribing the Farsi calligraphy on Shirin's photographs. Shirin is assembling her team around her. "I have butterflies in my stomach," she says. "I don't mind giving lectures, but giving talks after screenings is frightening because I cannot control the public's reactions."

Their response is enthusiastic. Shirin explains that she made the film because "I've been obsessed with Oum Kulthum for the longest time. She was a nontraditional woman who never had children; her sexuality was unclear." And yet the singer never had a moment in her career when her reputation dipped. "How did this woman survive and prosper in this male-dominated society?"

Shirin says the struggling Iranian director in her film is "a projection of myself. Seeing artists who always feel like they're really good at what they do, it's always a problem for me. The world expects one masterpiece after another, but artists are incapable of it."

In early January, I talk to Shirin one last time. In the days before we speak, popular protests have swept through Iran, and Shirin has just talked to her mother in Qazvin to check that she is OK. "We never talk for long because she's convinced our conversations are being monitored," Shirin says, giggling. She thinks the current uprising is "very different from what's gone before. People on the streets are insulting the Ayatollah; that's never happened. The levels of anger are so high. It's exciting but also frightening. There's so much uncertainty."

Shirin has chronicled many pivotal moments in recent Iranian history, but she says her next project, a feature film entitled *Dreamland*, will focus on the United States and tell the story of an Iranian woman living in a lower-income suburban town in the Midwest where people worship Trump. "When they meet someone like me, they don't know what to do with me, and I don't know what to do with them." She does not know any Iranian women living in Middle America, but the thought of such extreme cultural displacement amuses her. "I really hope this film will be a political satire - tragic, but also absurdly funny."



Among the guests who attended the premiere of Shirin's *Aida* at the Salzburg Festival last August were the German chancellor Angela Merkel and her husband, Joachim Sauer.

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