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Alina Cohen, "How Shirin Neshat Got Her Start as an Artist," *Artsy*, March 1, 2019



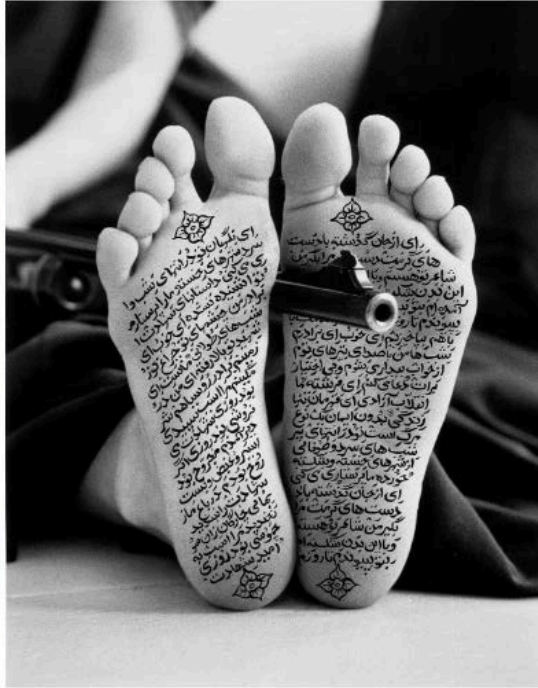
Art history is filled with stereotypes of artists that mostly sit at the extremes—the starving artist who can barely afford her or his paints, and the artistic genius whose body of work goes on to influence generations to come. The stories of what happens along the many stages of an artist’s career in between those extremes is too often glossed over. In this new series, we hope to change that by getting the stories behind the rise of some of contemporary art’s greats, hearing the struggles and ultimate triumphs that led them to change art as we know it.

Iranian artist Shirin Neshat, 61, is perhaps an unusual place to start this series: After graduating from art school in 1982, she gave up. Yet despite abandoning artmaking for 10 years, and working at an arts nonprofit in New York City, she eventually returned to Iran and to her art practice. She soon generated a career-making aesthetic: Since 1993, she’s created black-and-white films and photographs that examine political conflict and Muslim culture via a feminist lens.

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Shirin Neshat, *I Am Its Secret*, 1993. © Shirin Neshat. Photo by Plauto. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.



Shirin Neshat, *Allegiance with Wakefulness*, 1994. © Shirin Neshat. Photo by Cynthia Preston. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

Her most famous photographic series, “Women of Allah” (1994), features images of the artist’s body overlaid with Arabic text. A gun appears in many of the images, poking out from between Neshat’s feet or lying over her forearms. More than 20 years after their creation, the pictures remain jarring critiques of violence and traditional gender roles. Neshat’s 1998 film *Turbulent* features a split screen with a man singing in front of an audience on one panel, and a woman standing alone on the other, addressing Iran’s prohibition of women singing in public. It won the Venice Biennale’s Golden Lion—among contemporary art’s highest honors.

Neshat is represented by Gladstone Gallery (New York, Brussels) and Goodman Gallery (South Africa), and has exhibited around the globe at major institutions such as the GEM museum of contemporary art in the Netherlands, the British Museum, and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. She has received awards from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Venice Film Festival, and the World Economic Forum. This October, the Broad Museum in Los Angeles will open a major survey of Neshat’s work.

But before she was successful, Neshat reveals below, she was just an art-school outcast.

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How did you become interested in art? Were there any artworks or artists that were particularly influential?

It's a funny story. You know, I come from Iran. I lived in a very small, religious, conservative town, Qazvin. I was never really exposed to art as a child. No one in my family was artistic. We didn't visit museums. Art was considered decoration or craft. It was a foreign idea to become an artist in the way we understand it today. Still, I developed an interest in becoming an "artist"—more romantically so. I never understood this tendency. But ever since I was seven or eight years old, everyone called me an artist because I did drawings at school.

I occasionally went to Tehran, where there were pockets of cultural activities, but I didn't know anything about it. I did have a lot of interest in literature. In Iran, we studied poetry. We read a lot. That eventually became a part of my artwork, when I started writing on photographs.



Shirin Neshat (left) at Berkeley circa 1979. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

My art education really began when I came to the U.S. for my last year of high school, when I was 17. I went to UC Berkeley, where I studied art. Before that, it was just this blank. So it's hard for me to talk about the artists who influenced me, because I didn't have that until I was in my early twenties.

In Berkeley, out of all the artists we studied from Western culture, I remember gravitating toward Frida Kahlo. To this day, I find her fascinating—who she was as a woman and a political figure. Her relationship to Diego. Her style, which became an extension of her artwork. I was more drawn to women artists for sure. I remember being really taken by Eva Hesse, her minimalism and the way she died. I was really saddened by her story when I was

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in school. I remember Judy Chicago was doing a lot of things that many other women students and I were following. To this day, I'm drawn to women artists who have had interesting, sometimes tragic lives. I've even made films about them—*Women Without Men* (2009), for example, was based on a novel by a woman (Shahrnush Parsipur) who was imprisoned for many years.

Tell me about your first attempts to make art.

In my classes in Iran, the teachers used to ask me to do murals on the blackboard or the walls. There was another strange thing, too: I used to draw women and then design clothes for them. I'd dress them up in certain ways. My cousin told me recently that when I left Iran, she took my book of my drawings. I don't know what that was about, but I had this fascination with women and dressing them up. My cousin still has that book and I haven't seen it for 40 years. Maybe I was influenced by magazines—fashion, modernity. As I discovered my own body, I became fascinated (along with the rest of my generation) with a Western look we saw in the movies, television shows, and publications. *Gone with the Wind* was massively popular in Iran. We watched *Peyton Place* and *The Flying Nun*. We were just mesmerized by Hollywood.



Shirin Neshat, *Soliloquy Series*, 1999. © Shirin Neshat. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

At UC Berkeley, I was totally lost. I immediately realized that my idea of art and being an artist was stupidly romantic. In order to be an artist, you have to have ideas that are more than intuitive. You have to know what you have to say. For the first several years of school, I was trying to come up with ideas that bridged my Persian and Islamic heritage with what I was learning about Western art. That's so typical of non-Western artists who study at Western schools: trying to build an identity by building a bridge. I was making paintings, prints, and works on paper with Persian iconography. Lots of surrealistic shapes and female

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figures (which, ironically, eventually resurfaced in my more recent art practice). I don't think the other students felt they could tap into what I was making.

It was really terrible—I destroyed evidence of all this work. Honestly, I had to be one of the weakest artists at the school. I applied to Berkeley's graduate program, and my professor told me that I just barely got in.



Shirin Neshat with one of her paintings circa 1980s. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

While I was at Berkeley, there was the Iranian Revolution. Horrific things were going on in my life—I lost my immigration status, couldn't go home anymore, and was separated from my family. My studies took a backseat. I wasn't blossoming like some of the other students. After I graduated, I didn't make art for 10 years. I thought, "Okay, you're not a good artist, move on with your life."

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artists at the school."**

When I moved to New York, I did show slides of my work to some prominent galleries. They were charmed by me as a person, but when they saw my art, they looked at me like, "You must be joking." One gallerist, though, wanted to have coffee with me. I felt embarrassed. It was horrible, and I thought, "I'll never do this again." Instead, I worked at the Storefront for Art and Architecture. I was the co-director with my ex-husband, Kyong Park, who founded it. We worked together for 10 years, cultivating this grassroots, not-for-

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profit organization. We made exhibitions, conferences, panels, and publications. I interacted with artists and architects such as Vito Acconci, Mel Chin, Mary Miss, Kiki Smith, Zaha Hadid, Jean Nouvel, Judith Barry, and Alfredo Jaar. My true art education came from Storefront.

What encouraged you to get back into art?



Shirin Neshat in front of the exhibition space, Storefront, in downtown Manhattan circa 1980s. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.



Shirin Neshat, *Untitled*, 1996. © Shirin Neshat. Photo by Larry Barns. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

There was no diplomatic relationship between the U.S. and Iran for a long time. I feared that if I went back home, I wouldn't be able to return to the states. Finally, after about 11 years, I got my American citizenship and felt confident enough to make the trip. Those travels were very moving and shocking. When I came back, I felt an urge to make something that kept this relationship alive again between me and Iran. But I knew that I needed time and space to make something.

I applied for this residency at Henry Street Settlement—and I got it. I had a son by that time. I'd leave Storefront two days a week and think about my experience in Iran and ideas for artmaking. At first, I was making drawings of my hands and writing on them. Then I thought, "Wait a minute, I should photograph them." Slowly, with the help of my photographer friend Plauto, I started to take photographs of myself: my hands, my feet,

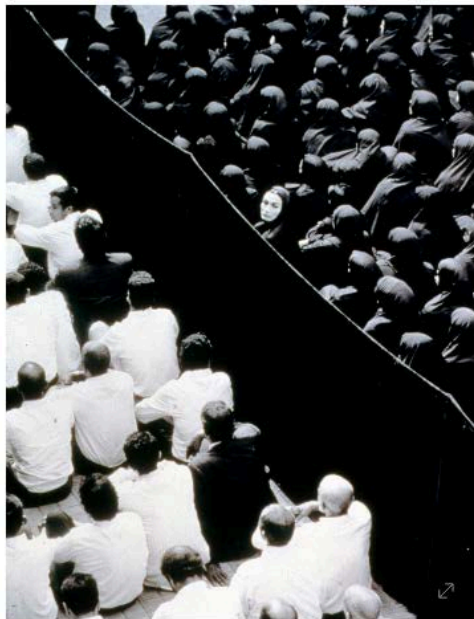
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everything that's allowed to be shown in Iranian culture. I began to write on Xeroxes of the pictures—lines from the poetry I'd brought back from Iran. It was totally playful. I had no goal of showing the work. These were from my "Unveiling" series, which became part of "Women of Allah."

"Playing a role, being a performer, I was the master of my own ceremony. I was in control. I felt like, 'this is me.'"

Then this exhibition space called Franklin Furnace, which was run by the artist Martha Wilson, was asking for proposals. I made up this statement for a show devoted to the female body and literature. They called me and said, "You have a one-person show for next spring." That became the impetus for me to crystallize my ideas. I showed my photographs and a Super 8 film. This was in 1993. That was my absolute first body of work. I was in my thirties.

I remember Kiki Smith came, bought one of my works, and gave me some good advice. She told me that the way I was making the pictures, writing on Xeroxes, they'd be ruined. She advised me to use photographs. I realized I wasn't thinking about the long term. I started to teach myself photography.



Shirin Neshat, *Fervor* (film still), 2000. Photo by Larry Barns. © Shirin Neshat. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.



Shirin Neshat, *Offered Eyes*, 1993. © Shirin Neshat. Photo by Plauto. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

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When I made the show at Franklin Furnace, I put everything out there. I felt such a passion for what I was doing. Without any plan to be successful or have a career, I just purely desired to make art. My ideas were unstoppable, shaping naturally. I realized I had this aesthetic that was minimal, highly stylized, poetic, and layered with meaning. Using my body. Playing a role, being a performer, I was the master of my own ceremony. I was in control. I felt like, “This is me.”

Were there early instructors or mentors that really encouraged you?

UC Berkeley, when I was there, was known for these super-macho male teachers who taught a lot of sculpture. But there were two particular teachers I remember.

Harold Parris was an extremely poetic, sensitive artist. Easy-going, non-macho. He let us come to his studio—he really opened up to the students. And Silvia Lark, who taught me printmaking. She was native Indian and later died from cancer. A very tragic life. I was attached to her, and that devastated me.

I gravitated toward instructors who were female or had a more feminine touch. School was not a complete failure. It was just the political climate, and my English wasn't good. I was a bit of an outcast and didn't relate very well to other students.

How did Iranian culture or cultural expectations affect your desire to be an artist?



Shirin Neshat, *Rapture* (still), 1999. © Shirin Neshat. Photo by Larry Barns. Courtesy of Galerie Jérôme de Noirmont, Paris.

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I always felt like if I wasn't a visual artist, I would have been a poet. Someone who lived in her imagination. I think about living in Iran, in conservative villages and political environments. We relied on literature. That's where you could find a lot of freedom of expression. Emotionally, I was always a dreamer.

When I came alone to this country, there was a lot of sadness in being isolated, in exile. My best friend was my imagination. I couldn't completely relate to the American dream or the Iranian community here. In my art, I could create a universe where I felt at home. The New York underground art scene became my haven, what allowed me to persevere.

What were the biggest obstacles to becoming an artist?



Sherin Neshat (right) with a film extra while shooting *Rapture* circa 2000. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

Finding an identity. I'm very glad I left art when I did. There's nothing worse than mediocrity. Many of us go to school, and we're content even if the work isn't great. I needed to find what I had to say, what people should pay attention to. What makes good art? What do I want to communicate? I figured this out after my experience in Iran.

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“Eventually, I made a little money from my artwork, and I couldn’t believe that I had a little bit of luxury. Struggling was an important experience for me.”

I became obsessed with understanding the Islamic Revolution, what had transpired in the country, and how women fit in. I took it upon myself to make a grand project of exploring militant women who were faithful to the revolution and fundamentalism. I was like a person who wants to write a book, then finds a premise. I just created a body of work that raised questions. It was like a sociological study, looking at interesting, contradictory viewpoints.

I never thought of art as a career and a way to make money. At Storefront, we never made any money. My husband and I were the only staff members, and we and our son were living hand to mouth on a shoestring budget. Sometimes there was a struggle to pay bills. I gave up a job at a textile company, making stupid things, for living this way—on the edge, making something out of nothing. Art was an extension of life: a set of questions and circumstances that you experience. We struggled in New York, but we lived richly, meeting the most fantastic artists and architects. Eventually, I made a little money from my artwork, and I couldn’t believe that I had a little bit of luxury. Struggling was an important experience for me.

What would you consider your breakthrough work?

I started making “Women of Allah” in 1994. The series became somewhat known. But I think my breakthrough was the video *Turbulent* (1998), really. That was at the Venice Biennale in 1999. It got the Golden Lion Prize. What happened was that once people discovered the film, they started to recognize my photographs. I became known as a video artist, and people forgot I was a photographer.

The inspiration for *Turbulent* is a funny story. I was in Istanbul one day, and I saw this young blind woman singing on the street. It was so powerful—this beautiful, guttural voice not intended to please any audience. Yet there were mobs of people surrounding her. I wanted to make a counterpart. In New York, I met my current husband, Shoja Azari. He’s a filmmaker. He ended up being the singer in my film. The piece changed our lives—it turned into an incredible romance.

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Shirin Neshat (center, left) at the opening of her exhibition "Turbulent" at the Whitney Museum in 1998.

How did you deal with any rejections you faced early on?

My first serious gallery exhibition was with Annina Nosei (in New York) in 1995. I showed "Women of Allah." People paid attention because it was strange work. They were completely puzzled by it and taken aback. There was a writer at the *New York Times* who was particularly confused: Was it sensationalizing violence, or making fundamentalism radical chic? Was I being controversial for the sake of being controversial? What's the point? Even Iranians wondered if I was supporting the government.



Shirin Neshat, *Rebellious Silence*, 1994. © Shirin Neshat. Photo by Cynthia Preston. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.



Shirin Neshat, *Speechless*, 1996. © Shirin Neshat. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

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I was just asking questions, questioning martyrdom. I was excited by the fact I was getting a reaction, but I did feel rejected in some ways. I wasn't sure whether my career would continue, but I think the work raised a lot of eyebrows. While it was controversial, it was also praised. A lot of people wanted to buy it—and show it. By 1997, I felt like a tailor, making editions of my “Women of Allah” works. It was boring! I decided to make video. I rebelled against my own successful signature. But to this day, my “Woman of Allah” photographs are my most popular images.