

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Olivia Gauthier, "Shirin Neshat: *I Will Greet the Sun Again*," *The Brooklyn Rail*,
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Shirin Neshat: *I Will Greet the Sun Again*

Shirin Neshat has been negotiating her experience as an immigrant and artist in exile through art for over three decades, brought together in a harmonious labyrinth of poetry, music, film and photography in the largest survey to date of her remarkable career. *I Will Greet the Sun Again*, curated by Ed Schad, brings together over 30 years of photography, video, and film, offering viewers an opportunity to immerse themselves in Neshat's sublime menagerie of engrossing images, still and moving. Laden with a collective catharsis, Neshat's work across mediums centers a female perspective as a voice for universally experienced traumas of political upheaval, forced exile, and the diasporic condition.

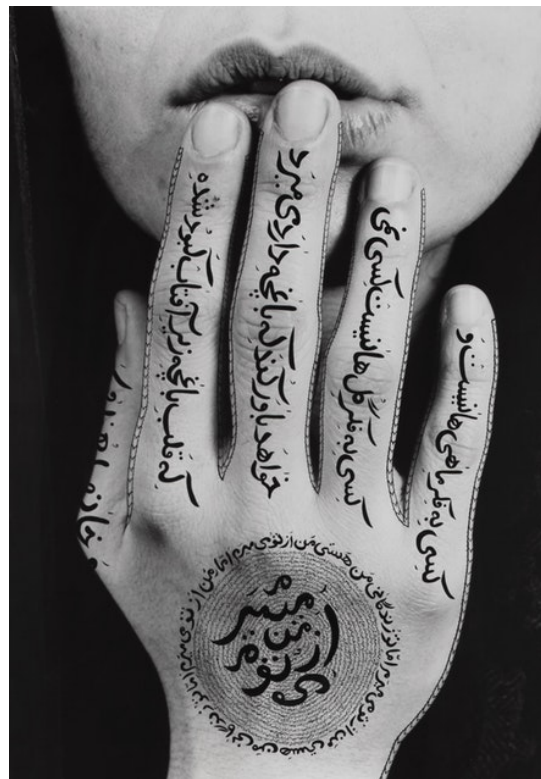
"Oddly enough, an artist such as myself finds herself also in the positional of being the voice, the speaker of my people, even if I have indeed no access to my own country." Speaking of her conflicting position as an Iranian-American artist living in exile in a 2010 Ted Talk, Shirin Neshat characterized her artistic mission as of two minds: simultaneously critical of the West and its perception of Persian culture, and of Iran's authoritarian regime. Neshat has not returned to Iran since, a self-imposed exile that has become increasingly concrete due to the Islamic Republic's disdain for her work

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Organized chronologically, *I Will Greet the Sun* begins with Neshat's most iconic body of work to date, "Women of Allah" (1993–1997). This show marks the largest presentation of this series in the United States to date, and ends with her recent project *Land of Dreams* (2019), a two-part video and photo installation which Neshat is developing into a feature length film. The juxtaposition of these two projects evidences Neshat's move from the micro/personal to the macro/universal. From 1993 to 1997 she turned the lens towards herself and Iran, but Neshat has recently shifted her camera outwards to the United States, addressing the socio-political complexities of a country she has called home for so many years.

Neshat has, since the early 1990s, focused her work on the women of Iran. "Women of Allah" was Neshat's seminal foray into what would become a multifaceted exploration of the female condition as it related to political issues situated in Iran but not necessarily particular to Iran. Neshat portrayed Iranian women in order to explore global ramifications of political unrest and war. In the same 2010 Ted Talk, Neshat discussed this series of photographs and her use of women as a mirror through which to study her home country, as well as her own subjectivity. "[T]he women of Iran

historically seem to embody the political transformation. So, in a way by studying a woman you can read the structure and the ideology of the



Shirin Neshat, Untitled (Women of Allah), 1996. © Shirin Neshat. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

country.” Melding photography with poems by Iranian women, the photographs transmute Neshat’s introspection—as she poses for the camera—into the drastic cultural shift experienced by Iranian women as a result of the Islamic Revolution.

“Women of Allah” sets the tone for this chronologically organized show, aesthetically underscoring Neshat’s use of black and white to illustrate binaries of politics and gender; the female body as both seductive and threatening, a conduit for political turbulence; poetry—and later music—as a vehicle to inscribe her works with a psychic lyricism to articulate the emotional landscape of the human condition. Poetry, music, and literature are central to Neshat’s practice. Poetry translated from Farsi populates the gallery walls to offer an English-speaking audience entry into the various poems that have influenced Neshat’s work, further drawing out the subversive content of works by Iranian poets like Forough Farrokhzad and Tahereh Saffarzadeh.

There is a distinct shift in the exhibition from the conclusion of “Women of Allah” and Neshat’s work of the early 2000s. *Soliloquy* (1999–2000) presents a visceral evolution in Neshat’s practice. Completed after what would be her last trip to Iran, Neshat turned her focus toward a poetic representation of the psychological and physical boundaries experienced by exiles like herself. In *Soliloquy* Neshat used buildings and landscapes in Mardin, Turkey and Albany, NY to imagine Iran, a tactic she continues to use to the present day. Interestingly, *Soliloquy* is the last work which Neshat appears in as herself, marking another divergence in the work as her lens shifts further outward.

From 2000 on, Neshat’s camera begins to encompass communally experienced loss and longing. Her videos and photographs of the

GLADSTONE GALLERY

proceeding decade—*Tooba* (2002), *Book of Kings* (2012), *Our House is on Fire* (2013)—are as melancholic and beautiful as the earlier works, including more male figures and ruminating the ways in which individual lives intersect with and call attention to political realities and existential crisis. The work of this period deals with political events that extend outside of Iran, particularly the Arab Spring. Portraiture, as in *The Book of Kings*, *Our House is on Fire* and later *The Home of My Eyes* (2015) uses sitters as a tool to represent a population, focusing on the individual in each photograph and the idea of community as they are grouped and intentionally presented en masse in sweeping installations. Neshat again toggles between the micro and the macro, imbuing her work with a powerful representation of individual and communal pathos.

The final videos, part of the Dreamers Trilogy, offer the most recent pivot in Neshat's career and in the exhibition's narrative, leading up to her newest work. Both filmed in the US, *Illusions and Mirrors* (2013) and *Roja* (2016) are dream-like short videos representing surreal confrontations of young women as they navigate strange landscapes devoid of a specific time or place, the videos are ethereal and work in the space of dream-logic, blurring fact and fiction to exposing truths of human experience. These works mimic dreams, our most vulnerable state, and portray women



Installation view: Shirin Neshat: *I Will Greet the Sun Again*, The Broad, Los Angeles, 2019. Photo: Joshua White / JWPictures.com

GLADSTONE GALLERY

seeking themselves in an unfamiliar landscape where time, place, and in this case, their mothers, are nearly unrecognizable. Anxiety ripples through the works as one watches the women navigate an illogical space, processing an unknown trauma.

Continuing her exploration of the metaphoric potential of dreams, Neshat's most recent project concludes the exhibition. Comprised of two videos filmed primarily in the desert of New Mexico, *The Colony* (2019) and *Land of Dreams* (2019), and a photographic installation, *Land of Dreams* (2019) presents a poignant, symbolic analogy of our current political moment in the U.S. A diptych presented in separate viewing rooms, the videos are separated to tell the story of a young woman named Simin as she poses as an art student to collect people's portraits and dreams, documenting them for a strange bureaucratic operation, which looks like a bunker, nestled in a remote mountain side—part one focuses on her work outside of the bunker and part two takes place inside the bunker, highlighting the separation of inside and outside. In the first video, Simin goes door to door in an unnamed town presenting herself as a student on assignment collecting portraits then asking her subjects to recant their most recent dreams. Among those she visits are an ex-military man who has recurring nightmares of the nuclear apocalypse and a woman who dreams of her family being forcibly removed from their homeland by soldiers. Simin returns to the strange mountain scape in the second video, and through its doors is a sterile, factory-like office space where others like Simin record and compile the strangers's portraits and dreams into dossiers of dream interpretations. As in so many of her other videos, the central female character is rebellious and defiant; when an alarm sounds and the rest of her coworkers line up diligently, Simin sneaks into the library stacks and pulls a page out of a book that states "When the dream catcher enters the

GLADSTONE GALLERY

dreamers' dream, self-identity will collapse, if the dream catcher enters the dreamers' dream it will go mad, no punishment will be necessary because of this." Simin, who can be interpreted as a doppelganger of Neshat, questions the logic behind the work she is doing, searching for the truth beyond her immediate dystopian reality.

Upon exiting the gallery, the final room is held by an epic salon-style hang of black and white portraits, the most racial and gender diverse group Neshat has photographed to date. As in the video, many of the portraits are overlaid with text that documents their dreams. Neshat's project, which is to be a feature length film, meditates on a universally human experience, dreams, to portray an

allegory for the current political administration and its efforts to expose, document, categorize and control individuals. A final quote from Abbas

Milani's *Tales of Two Cities*:

A Persian Memoir (1996)

concludes the exhibition as

one exits the gallery: "Exile

is when you live in one land and dream in another." Neshat's enduring career represents such a state through cinematic devices and magical realism, offering viewers a visible depiction of exile that only an immigrant could remind us is so deeply connected to the history of the United States.



Shirin Neshat, *Land of Dreams*, 2019. © Shirin Neshat. Courtesy the artist, Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels, and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, Cape Town, and London.