

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Reflecting on Shirin Neshat's Career With the Artist's Words

Neshat shares why she moved away from still photography to video, and why she thinks her work feels "very relevant" today.



Shirin Neshat, "Untitled," from *Roja* series (2016) (© Shirin Neshat/courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery)

LOS ANGELES — The title of Shirin Neshat's exhibition at Los Angeles's Broad Museum, *I Will Greet the Sun Again*, is taken from a poem by Forough Farrokhzad, which appears as inscription in several of Neshat's artworks. Indeed, poetry became the thematic framing for Ed Schad, the exhibition's curator. "Forough's poetry has been undeniably instrumental in the development of my work," Neshat explains to me over email. "Her words helped shape my visual

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and conceptual vocabulary.” A leading feminist poet who rose to prominence in 1960s, Forough drew on nature to construct strikingly visual metaphors describing the complexities of her quest for independence as a woman writer in Iran. For Neshat, Forough’s poetic allegories serve as creative inspiration. “Her poetry is, in a sense, paradoxical; despair and darkness always meet hope and optimism. In my own work, my ideas have also been based on some form of opposition both visually and conceptually, between black and white, male and female, magic and realism, beauty and violence, the mystical and the political.”

These poetic paradoxes in Neshat’s art have sometimes been lost in translation. By way of example, in a 2006 article on Neshat winning the prestigious Dorothy and Lillian Gish award, the *San Francisco Chronicle* wrote that her *Women of Allah* series are “covered with Islamic verses.” By then, Neshat was an established artist and those photographs had been exhibited and written about for a decade, and yet misinterpretation persisted. In the Broad exhibition, the Persian feminist poetry inscribed onto Neshat’s photographs is made more broadly accessible through English translations featured in the diacritics on gallery walls. The curatorial gesture provides viewers a new opening to her art, but also points to the uneasy reception of her work. Neshat’s calligraphic inscriptions have become signs of the dissonance of the immigrant experience, the ways that parts of our language, cultural references, and world view remain illegible, obscure, and often misunderstood.

With the Broad exhibition, Neshat becomes the first Iranian-American artist to receive a major solo museum exhibition in Los Angeles, home to the largest diasporic Iranian community. The exhibit is bracketed with two bodies of work, each being publicly exhibited for the first time, that reflect the duality of her exilic gaze.

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Shirin Neshat, I Will Greet The Sun, installation view (image courtesy the artist and the Broad Museum, photo by Joshua White)

The show begins with a hanging of her *Women of Allah* series that includes some photographs she made in collaboration with famed photographer Bahman Jalali in 1996; these are the only artworks Neshat ever created in Iran. The exhibition ends with her most recent series, *Land of Dreams*, the first art she has created in the US. “Interestingly, while these two bodies of work are radically different in the way that one captures portraits of Iranians and the other Americans, I see many parallels between them,” Neshat remarks. “Aesthetically, they’re composed with a similar sense of minimalism, emotional intensity and intricate use of calligraphy. Secondly, I feel that these two series are my most personal work so far.” In her early work, the artist’s own body becomes the subject. In her most recent, the main character, Simin, becomes the embodiment of the artist. In both cases, Neshat explains, she’s reflecting her “own political questions and existential dilemmas.”

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Woman of Allah series, installation view (image courtesy the artist and the Broad Museum, photo by Joshua White)

In the galleries in between, the curator walks us through art Neshat has created in Turkey, Morocco, Mexico, Egypt, and Azerbaijan. Though the exhibit tends to focus on Neshat’s portraits, the centrality of landscape — of a search for a sense of place — still resonates through the art. “No matter where we’ve been filming,” she says, “we’ve always searched for landscapes that looked like Iran because of how my subjects were rooted in Iranian culture. So it sort of became my signature to recreate Iran in various countries, yet naturally each video took on the quality of the host culture and became a form of nomadic or ‘accented’ art.”

In talking about her art, Neshat often uses “we” — her video work and films are fundamentally collaborative. Her partner in life and work, the filmmaker and artist Shoja Azari, often works with her in various capacities. Composers Susan Deyhim and Mohsen Namjoo, the artist Shahram Karimi, and the cinematographer Ghassem Ebrahmanian have worked with her on numerous projects through the years. When you visit Neshat in her studio, she’s rarely working by herself in quiet solitude.

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“Beginning with ‘Turbulent’ in 1998, I surrounded myself with a group of Iranian artists who to this date are my closest friends and collaborators,” she recalls. “Our relationship has developed over the years very organically; some have moved on, while new members have joined in. Without a doubt the core of our attraction has been that we are all Iranian artists living in diaspora. Most of us don’t return to Iran or have been living in exile, so we share the need for a community that is productive, vibrant, and gives us the security of a home.”

Several of these videos made with her team of collaborators are included in the Broad show, providing an opportunity to see Neshat’s parallel developments as an artist and a filmmaker. She is the only person to have won both the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale (for ‘Turbulent’ in 1999) and the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival (for her first feature film, *Women Without Men*, in 2009). Her shift to making film was a deliberate response to the muddled reception of her earlier photographs. She was searching for a medium that was less static, less didactic, more creatively liberating in its conceptual apparatus. “I gravitated toward making video installations, which allowed far more freedom, ambiguity and lyricism that was lacking in my still photography,” she explains.



Land of Dreams series, installation view (image courtesy the artist and the Broad Museum, photo by Joshua White)

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After *Women Without Men*, where she discovered magical realism, Neshat delved into the territory of dreams — a concept she more fully articulates in her latest project *Land of Dreams*, on view at the Broad as a series of photographs and diptych video installation. Shot in the American southwest, the film's main character, Simin, is an art student who takes photographic portraits of various Americans and asks them to speak of their dreams. Simin, it turns out, is working for a secret Iranian colony that collects and interprets dreams as a way to spy on Americans.

“Obviously this was a satirical approach to hint at the longstanding and unresolved antagonism between Iran and the United States, as well as the power of fanaticism which considers people’s subconscious as a way to read through a society,” Neshat comments on the premise of the film. “The more Simin gathered dreams, the more that boundary between dreams and reality was blurred. She found herself entering people’s dreams, which ultimately became the source of her crime and punishment.”



Shirin Neshat, *Land of Dreams* (2019), video still (© Shirin Neshat/courtesy the artist, Gladstone Gallery, and Goodman Gallery)

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Some scenes from *Land of Dreams* recall Neshat's earlier works, like the video installation "The Last Word" from 2003 and the play "OverRuled," written by Shoja Azari and Behrang Azari, that Neshat directed for Performa in 2011. Images of an artist being interrogated are woven through all three works. The thematic thread of artistic freedom is pronounced, as the same actor Mohammad Ghaffari, plays a ruthless inquisitor in all of the works.

"All of the three different projects stem from same theme, the 'fear of authority,' an inescapable force that seems to live inside of Iranians' psyche, whether living inside or outside of the country," Neshat tells me. "Forty years of living under dictatorship, censorship and lack of freedom of expression has hit the creative community hard. Some artists tend to self-censor their own work, others constantly battle with the regime and face arrest and imprisonment, while others like myself and thousands of other artists simply leave the country."

The video diptych, "Land of Dream," begins and ends with the main character getting into a car and driving down a dirt road that winds through a vast, barren landscape. It recalls a common trope in the photographs and films of Abbas Kiarostami, who was an influence and mentor to Neshat. "While location scouting, especially traveling through the 'lonely roads' of Nevada and New Mexico, it was impossible not to recall Kiarostami's famous photographs and films," Neshat says.

Like Kiarostami, Neshat makes art that is rooted in local cultural concerns but resonates more universally. That her Broad exhibit has been well received by audiences and critics alike may be because her art is particularly relevant in these times. "I think some of the core subjects of my work," she says, "for example, the notions of tyranny, political injustice, fanaticism, displacement, and immigration are some of the issues that feel very relevant considering what's going on everywhere in the world today."