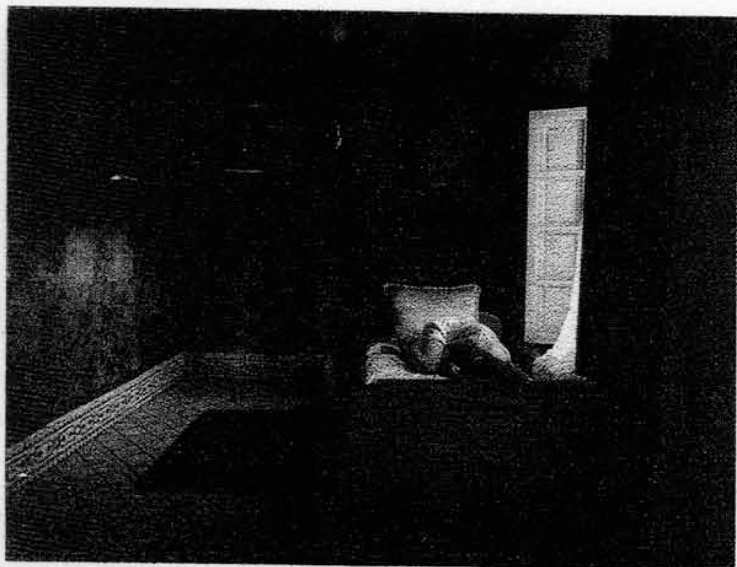


## GLADSTONE GALLERY

Guy-Nichols, Matthew, "Shirin Neshat at Barbara Gladstone," *Art in America*, March 2006, pg 152, ill.



Production still from Shirin Neshat's film *Zarin*, 2005; at Gladstone.

### Shirin Neshat at Barbara Gladstone

The video installations of Shirin Neshat often employ stylized formal devices to poetically address social relations in fundamentalist Islamic societies. Since their first appearance in 1997, Neshat's dual-screen projections of stark, black-and-white imagery have invited discussion of polarized gender roles in her native Iran. The presentation at Gladstone of *Zarin* (2005), a 20-minute color video projected on a single wide screen, departed from the artist's earlier formula of opposition to achieve greater subtlety.

*Zarin* is extracted from a feature-length film that Neshat plans to release in the near future. The longer film derives its title and premise from *Women Without Men*, a 1989 novella by Shahr-nush Parsipur that chronicles the struggles of five Iranian women. Inspired by one of these protagonists, *Zarin* begins with several scenes inside a brothel, where the titular heroine is engaged in

obligatory sex. When she opens her eyes during one of her assignments, Zarin sees her john as a faceless monster, his eyes and mouth sealed over with skin. Fleeing the brothel, she first seeks refuge in a crowded bathhouse, and then amidst the prayers of a group of chador-clad women. Despite her efforts at physical and spiritual cleansing, Zarin's vision continues to haunt her, as every man she encounters is similarly deformed.

While presenting this linear narrative on a single screen, Neshat also uses color to signify meaning beyond the black-and-white dualities of her earlier work. For example, color dominates the opening brothel scenes, where the vibrant hues of the walls, pillows, clothing and cosmetics may connote the prostitutes' sensuality. Yet a few scenes later, when Zarin desperately scrubs down her body in the gray-toned bathhouse, the appearance of deep red blood on her chafed skin is equally striking, and seems to represent the character's painful descent into madness.

A simplistic, binary reading is also frustrated by the iconography of *Zarin*, especially as seen in the seven related photographs that accompanied this screening. Three large stills of the steamy bathhouse, replete with voluptuous women lounging around a fountain, strongly echo the Orientalist paintings of Jean-Léon Gérôme. Indeed, the repeated view of a naked boy's buttocks in the foreground seems a direct quotation of Gérôme's famous *Snake Charmer*. In three portraits of the video's prostitutes, the women address the viewer with

the seductive candor of Manet's *Olympia*, reminding one that fallen women have long been a dominant trope of modernism. By invoking these Western pictorial traditions in a video about an Iranian woman, Neshat seems to challenge our presumptive distance from the lopsided gender relations we readily attribute to the Islamic Other. Her new work reminds us that things are not so black and white.

—Matthew Guy Nichols

152 March 2006