

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Saad, Shirine, "Exodus," *City Magazine*, 2011

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CITYISTS: Shirin Neshat

EXODUS

IRANIAN FEMINIST AND ACTIVIST SHIRIN NESHAT SEEKS BEAUTY AND POETRY IN HER PHOTOGRAPHS

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We are not only emigrants but also nomads of a peculiarly modern or postmodern kind," writes Marina Abramovic in a letter to Iranian-American artist Shirin Neshat, who left Iran at age 17 for California and observed the Islamic Revolution from a distance a few years later. Exile, culture clashes and a search for meaning in a globalized world: Neshat's work embodies the malaise of the 21st century.

"Exile for Neshat is a very important theme," explains Hamid Dabashi, an old friend of Neshat's who teaches Iranian studies and literature at Columbia University, "but I think the category exile is no longer a theme today. We are all in exile and no one is in exile. Exile assumes a home that you can go back to, but you can't. The home that we imagine is no longer there."

Homesickness struck Neshat at childhood, when her father sent her to a boarding school in Iran. Later, as an art student at Berkeley, she suffered as the 1979 Revolution paralyzed her country. She struggled to reconcile tradition and modernity, conceptual art and Persian art, which led to her abandoning art for ten years. A trip to Iran inspired her to create the provocative *Women of Allah* (1995-1997) series, where black and white images of veiled women holding rifles were covered in mystical poems and revolutionary texts.

Neshat is a feminist and activist who seeks beauty and poetry in her art. Her photographs and videos draw from both contemporary and ancient art to explore power structures and a universal sense of displacement and alienation. One day when they were discussing paradise gardens Dabashi suggested to Neshat that she adapt Shahrnush Parsipur's magic realist novel *Women Without Men*, where the garden is a recurrent image, for the cinema. The artist had been working with photography and video for twenty years; in 1999 her videos *Rapture* and *Turbulent* won the first international prize at the Venice Biennial and she became one of most successful contemporary women artists. But Neshat felt the need to explore

a new medium; she chose film because its realist dimension could allow her to explore burning political issues. *Women without Men*, which paints the lives of four women in the midst of the 1955 Anglo-American-backed coup d'état that toppled Mohammed Mossadegh's government and established the dictatorship of the Shah, won the Silver Lion for Best Director at the Venice Film Festival last year. The artist is now working on a second feature film based on Albanian writer Ismail Kadare's book *The Palace of Dreams*, a tale of bureaucratic nightmare in the Ottoman Empire.

Few artists successfully shift to cinema and many colleagues warned Neshat that her new endeavors could fail, but the artist is not afraid to take risks. "I've rebelled against every system, every identity, every language," she explains, frail and petite, massive silver Moroccan earrings shining against her all-black uniform, pulled-back jet hair, honey eyes highlighted by a thick streak of Cleopatra-style kohl. "I've broken many, many taboos."

The first being politics—a subject mostly reserved for men and risky in the hyper-commodified art world. In *Women of Allah*, the phallic rifles, held between shiny feet or resting on the calligraphy-covered palms of the veiled subjects, evoke both violence and eroticism. When they were first exhibited, *The New York Times'* critic Pepe Karmel dismissed Neshat for what he interpreted as an endorsement of the revolutionary discourse. "Neshat's imagery seems tainted by a 1960s-style glorification of revolutionary violence: radical chic comes back, in her pictures, as radical sheik," he wrote. While Karmel's reaction wasn't unanimous, it reflected unease with Neshat's

images in a world dominated by the simplistic political rhetoric of a cold war with Islam. But the artist forced the viewers to face their discomfort, between lust and repulsion, aesthetic contemplation and moral judgment.

After *Women of Allah*, Neshat was never allowed into Iran again. But that didn't stop her from exploring Islam's oppression of women in the series that followed. In *Turbulent* (1998-1999), she projected two videos on facing screens: on one side, a man sings a love song in front of a full audience; on the other, a woman performs an improvised vocalization to an empty room. While in Iran women are not allowed to sing, the performer in the video ultimately reaches a state of ecstasy, mesmerizing the male singer and his listeners.

Turbulent, like all of Neshat's work, expresses the ultimate power of beauty. Her compositions, stark, dramatic and sculptural, give the images a dreamlike dimension. In *Rapture*, veiled women moving through the desert resemble a flock of black birds; a group of men, sitting in a circle near the sea and shot from above, become an abstract composition reminiscent of land art.

While conceptual art generally remains visually minimalist, Neshat likes to challenge the myth that beauty and ideas don't go together. "The dialectic between provocation and sensuality is what makes Neshat's work so important," explains Kathy Battista, director of the contemporary art program at the Sotheby's institute in New York. "Her work is very seductive but then once you're in, there's quite a powerful message. That what makes her work so sophisticated. Beauty has been a taboo subject in contemporary art, but she's not afraid of beauty."

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