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Valdez, Amanda, "In Conversation With Shirin Neshat," *Dossier*, Issue 7 2011



IN CONVERSATION WITH SHIRIN NESHAT

(portrait on page 50)

Interview by Amanda Valdez Born in Qazvin, Iran, multimedia artist Shirin Neshat moved to the United States just as the 1979 Iranian Revolution was transforming the Middle Eastern nation from a monarchy into an Islamic republic. Influenced by her subsequent visits to her nearly unrecognizable home country, Shirin developed a distinct creative vision that first garnered international artistic acclaim with *Women of Allah*. Produced between 1993 and 1997, the photographic series features women in chadors, sometimes carrying guns, their skin covered in Islamic poetry. The series asserted themes that would come to dominate Shirin's work: the social, cultural and religious codes of Islamic societies and their impact on the political and psychological dimensions of the female experience.

Perhaps due to her duality as a Middle Eastern woman living in a Western society, Shirin was among the first Iranian artists to successfully translate Islamic feminist issues beyond the country's borders, documenting them for the global art world in a digestible way that has both illuminated damaging stereotypes and voided presumptions that these stereotypes define normative Islamic and specifically Iranian life. Appropriating orthodox Islamic iconography and visual gender codes, Shirin creates visceral but profound images, multi-channel video installations and films that bring to light a robust yet unsung tradition of Islamic female resilience, strength and determination.

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Her first feature length film, *Women Without Men*—for which she won the Silver Lion for Best Director at the 2009 Venice Film Festival and which has just been released on DVD—is possibly her most broadly accessible examination of these issues. Based on novelist Shahmush Parsipur's magical realism book of the same title, the film is set during the 1953 coup in Iran that, backed by both the British and United States governments, ousted the country's democratically elected government and supplanted it with a monarchy. Removing the enigma inherent in Shirin's conventionally artistic works, *Women Without Men* offers an unprecedented glimpse into the traditional Iranian female psyche, its constraints and its motivations; in the process, the film also divulges what makes Shirin's work so relevant in a post-9/11 world: its universality. Honoring and celebrating Eastern and Western differences, Shirin simultaneously reveals the similarities that underscore the human experience, regardless of nationality, gender or religion.

Amanda Valdez: As a successful gallery and museum artist what prompted you to make a feature-length film?

Shirin Neshat: I think my relationship to mediums is dubious, because I'm not used to doing anything for long. I started with photography before moving to video, and this attraction to the moving picture has now taken me toward cinema and, in fact, storytelling. My idea in *Women Without Men* was to see if I could really take on the challenge of a new arena in terms of setting and language, and not make a film just for the art audience but also for the general public. It took me six years to make this transition.

Amanda: Who were some of your primary influences, cinematically and visually?

Shirin: When I look at my aesthetic and the visuals, there is lucidly classical Persian and Islamic art there. However, the conceptual aspect of the work is very Western. I didn't have a hero in mind as an artist, but I do have that in film. I never saw a work of art and was blown away, but I have seen films that I was visually or narratively blown away by, like [Ingmar] Bergman or Wong Kar-Wai. These incredible masters have profoundly influenced me. Cinema is very visual and very aesthetic. I don't think it's the same in art. I love the work of Roy Andersson, a Swedish filmmaker who's very particular about his aesthetic. But in the art world, I can't say, 'Oh I fell in love with Cindy Sherman.' It wasn't like that for me. I love their work, but they were not heroes.

Amanda: What specific challenges did you face in making *Women Without Men*?

Shirin: Professionally, visual artists don't understand the complex structure of the film world, especially when dealing with distributors, producers, festivals, film critics and box office numbers. While the art world has curators, dealers, critics and museum directors, I have found a lot of freedom there. But in the world of cinema, a film has to sell. It's a commercial industry, and the work is more enmeshed in popular culture and the concept of entertainment. I really like this challenge of entering the arena of entertainment while maintaining what is true to my idea of aesthetic meaning. I wasn't comfortable with dialogue and words. My videos relied on developed stylization and surrealistic storytelling, and yet for a cinema audience I couldn't be that abstract. I had to really tell a story with a beginning, middle and end. That is one of the reasons it took me a long time to find a balance.

Amanda: You use the word entertainment, which I feel is such a taboo in the art world. Was there freedom knowing that you were shifting from a specific art audience to larger cultural audience?

Shirin: Yes, for example, I never had a sense of humor in my work, and I realized that especially when you're making a very dark story you need two things: music and humor. In working out the script with the book, we infused areas with humor. I really enjoy seeing people laugh. With the music, when someone is singing in the movie, people are really entertained and it keeps them longer.

I think that there's purity in the art practice. In the arts you go right to the core of the thing, abstraction and enigma are part of that language so the audience entering your work is

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coming from an educated background in that language. In my case, the film audiences were mostly people who had never been to a gallery or museum and they had to be entertained and taken to other places. The producers really wanted a film that wasn't going to belong to just galleries and museums but would also be distributed to regular cinemas, something that I also wanted. However we had to battle a lot; sometimes I felt like they were pushing me to be too commercial. But I look at it now and I think I left it in a good balance.

Amanda: The first scene opens with the character Munis alone on a roof, clearly having an introspective personal crisis, but it's so quiet. It's very striking and sets the tone, so that as I continue to watch I'm conscious of spaces being created for the women to be alone. Central to the film is an orchard that becomes a place of rest and defiance given the tumultuous times during which the film is set. How do these spaces become vehicles to tell the story of these women?

Shirin: The way we worked it out, the orchard becomes, in the end, a place of life after death. They were all looking for a place to be safe and this garden became a place of exile, for refuge, for sanctuary. Being a person that's very interested in poetry and allegory, I really visually and metaphorically tried to play up the orchard as an ambiguous place. The geography, speed of the camera and sound all changed when you came from the outside. We really tried to convey that this is a space that gives the women a second chance, but is by no means an ordinary space. Even the gardener was not a normal man. I love that because it sort of played up the allegorical aspect of the story, not allowing it to be a realistic story. It's just not my style.

Amanda: In that regard, poetry carries a high currency in your art; how do you choose the texts that you work with?

Shirin: My use of poetry can't be looked at outside of the fact that I'm Iranian. Poetry has always played a big role in our culture—whether visual poetry or verbal poetry. We are a culture of mystics and poets. To this day we have more poets than we know what to do with. The Iranian people have an affinity with the poetic language that's really authentic, so it comes naturally to me. Poetry is also dangerous. For me and I would say the Iranian people, it's more than just sentimental. It's philosophical and reflective, which is borderline about an idea of mysticism and spirituality. The part of my work that relies on poetry through visual imagery also comes in counter to the question of politics, which is also a part of our culture and our political history. So my film and work navigates between the odd and conflicting forces of poetry and politics.

Amanda: What is the current artistic climate in Iran? Who are some of the key players?

Shirin: In the last ten years, there has been an incredible renaissance in terms of contemporary art in Iran, partially because of the political climate. It's created a lot of subjects that were urgent for the young people. The world also became interested in Iran because the artists were pioneering such great work and the curators were opening up the doors by sending them out and bringing people in. At this moment, one of the best known in the young group is Farhad Moshiri. He is considered the "pop artist" of Iran, someone who thinks more like Andy Warhol, but in an Iranian context. Then there is the older generation that belongs to more classical modern art, like Parviz Tanavoli. Outside of Iran there are [also] a lot of artists doing really amazing work. You have the young artist Kamrooz Aram at the Perry Rubenstein Gallery in New York. One of my favorite artists from Iran is Laleh Khorramian, who is showing at Salon 94. I really admire her work. There's a lot of movement inside and outside of Iran so the few that I mentioned are quite prominent.

Amanda: Do you have relationships with these artists in creating a dialog with each other?

Shirin: I'm very much involved in the Iranian community and I practically know all these people because I travel a lot. I don't go to Iran, but for instance Dubai is a headquarters for Iranian artists. I've met them there, in London, Paris, New York, Berlin... So I know every one of these people that I've mentioned and many are good friends.

Amanda: Since your exile from Iran in 1996, how has your relationship with the country changed, and its role as an artistic catalyst?

Shirin: My position is an interesting one. The people really respect me because I care a lot about the Iranian community wherever I go; I'm always in the middle of it. I'm not an arrogant artist. My subject matter is about Iran. The Iranian people hugely embraced the film I made. I've been

active politically. They understand that I don't have a big head on my shoulders even though I show at blue-chip galleries. People appreciate the grassroots person that I am. That's really important because an artist's number one quality is their humility and ability to not get too caught up in their image. Being politically active has really taught me to calm down and be real. Then filmmaking is so community based. I've gotten used to getting close to people and not sitting on some kind of pedestal. My husband Shoja [Azari] and I are constantly helping and communicating with other artists, looking at their work and writing about their work for their



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catalogs. Our home is like a meeting place. I think the image that we have among the Iranian community inside and outside [of Iran] is that we are very accessible.

Amanda: What role does religion play in your life? What is your view on Islam and religion in general?

Shirin: I'm this person who always feels the need to believe in something because I'm often walking around like a chicken with my head cut off, and I'm always sitting on the edge like, "God help me. God help me." I'm always talking to God, and I hope to believe that there is always something looking over me and helping me. This idea that I'm born to be on my own is a scary thought and there are times I feel so miserable. I like to believe the old-fashioned way that my mother taught me: that there is such a thing as God, and I pray. Mosques and churches excite me emotionally and I believe in the value of those spaces giving you moments of spirituality. I'm profoundly moved by those kinds of places. This is not about a kind of organized religion. I talk to God when I'm in trouble and it helps me spiritually.

I think Islam is a wonderful religion and the issue is separating the religion from the state and secular Islam. The Islam that my mother and her friends practice is very different from what you see the government of Iran doing. I believe that the biggest mistake of the world is generalizing what it is. In that sense, I feel very offended very often when I see a kind of sadistic reading and stereotype of Muslims. For example, religion in Iran is very different than in Egypt, than in Syria, than in Morocco. Islam came to Iran because it was invaded by Arabs and Egypt. In another way, it's more authentic [there]. They were born with the religion; it is something imposed on the Iranian people by the government. Women are forced to wear the veil. In Egypt, it's what women like to do—it's not the government forcing them. Religion is not a problem in Egypt. It's what people love. But for us it's ideological and forced on the people. Unfortunately in the West there is not the ability to separate these.

Amanda: During the Green Revolution two years ago in Iran, women participated in street protests; we saw this again in Egypt in the past month: What does this say about contemporary female status and freedom in Islamic society, in general and in Iran?

Shirin: Another perception is that all women from Iran, because of the oppressive situation, are very victimized and passive and inactive. To the contrary, Iranian women today are so educated. There are more Iranian women educated in university than men. This education has widely mobilized them and made them aware [and] they have turned from the government, so they have become the biggest threat to the government. If you look back at images from 1979, women have always been part of protests. In 2009, the women were there with their slogans and not only that but with their makeup and their hairdos. They are making their images of their revolution and it's a phenomenon. I'm inspired by pictures of this generation that's so confrontational. It's a beautiful image. They are not trying to be Western and they're not going backwards to traditional ideas—they are inventing their new image. The Iranians are clearly making a statement.

Amanda: How do you see your own practice evolving?

Shirin: I tend to take a lot of risk and this can be good or devastating. I have found that the audience, art critics and curators are not so receptive to it. They are very uncomfortable when you change and they always say, "Oh I like the earlier work better." I get a lot of resistance when I'm not willing to stay within the model of identity that they build around me. That's something I've noticed since I started out. The actual art world, the audience and the critics are very resistant to seeing artists being very daring. That means they have to redefine you because they're much more comfortable saying, "You are about calligraphy over the photograph." But when I go into double-channel videos, it throws them off. Then I suddenly go to performance or to a feature film. Right now, I'm preparing a big performance for Performa and my explanation is: I have all this anxiety and fear, but excitement at the same time. When I first started making work, I was at this junction between terror and fear, "What are you doing? You've never done this before." Yet there's courage and excitement you feel for taking that step, even if you fail.

Amanda: Is this a common risk you take in your work?

Shirin: That's my personality. I have a lot of fear but I also have some courage.



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Portrait by Jess Rotter