

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Dalal, Pradeep, "Thoughts in Exile: Shirin Neshat," *Ego*, Winter 2005, pp. 47-53.



Neshat photographed in her home in New York

Thoughts in Exile: SHIRIN NESHAT

Controversial, thoughtful, and iconoclastic, Iranian-born artist Shirin Neshat discusses the inspirations and anxieties of creative work, including her upcoming film, *Women Without Men*.

Interview by Pradeep Dalal. Portrait by Jamie Isala

Internationally-acclaimed photographer, filmmaker, and video artist Shirin Neshat has been interpreting boundaries in Islam—boundaries between men and women, between sacred and profane, between reality and magic realism—through her work for many years. She came to New York to study art, but the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 made it impossible for Neshat to return for over eleven years. Returning to Iran in 1990 after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, Neshat found that the Iran of her childhood was smothered under a layer of conservative, fundamentalist Islamic tradition. Feeling that she had something to say, Neshat came back to New York and began working on a series of extraordinary photographs and video installations through which she explored her relationship with Islam and Iran. In particular, she is known for a unique and stirring visual discourse on the place and identity of women in Iran, and on the complex relationship between genders in Islam.

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Neshat, *Women Without Men (woman knitting)*, 2004. C-print 35 3/4 x 92 1/4 inches

IN A LOT OF WAYS, THE WOMEN IN MY WORK ARE OUTCASTS—THEY ARE CONTINUOUSLY RUNNING AWAY... I AM REALIZING THAT THERE MUST BE SOMETHING ABOUT ME THAT VERY DEEPLY IDENTIFIES WITH THEM.

Neshat's biculturalism allows her to see the story "from both sides of the wall," so to speak, and lends an authenticity to her portrayal. This sense of dual perspectives is enhanced by Neshat's use of dual projections: by projecting images on opposing walls, the viewer finds himself standing in the middle of a visual conversation, and feels the impact of the opposing tensions in the narrative far more intimately than he would otherwise. No wonder viewers at exhibitions find themselves transfixed in front of the emotional intensity of Neshat's sequences and the political questions they raise about Islam, modernity, and women. Her videos, beautiful in their imagery and dance-like choreography, are accompanied by haunting original musical scores by frequent collaborator Philip Glass. Neshat is the winner of many awards, including most recently the Infinity Award for Visual Art from the International Center for Photography in New York and the First International Prize at the 48th Venice Biennale. Her films include the trilogy—*Turbulent* (1998), *Rapture* (1999), and *Fervor* (2000); and *Soliloquy* (1999), *Passage* (2001), and *Tooba* (2003). Neshat is currently working on a feature length film called *Women Without Men*.

What is the current project you are working on?

I have been working on a feature-length film for the past two and a half years, *Women Without Men*. It is based on a book by the Iranian novelist Shahrnush Parsipur known for her outspoken portrayal of the treatment of Iranian women. The book was banned in Iran, and Parsipur was imprisoned for five years. She now lives in exile in the US. The book is an allegory of life for contemporary Iranian women,

and touches on issues such as politics, philosophy and feminism—themes that I wanted to blend together in my work. The film should be released by the end of 2005 or early 2006.

So do you begin each project with a feeling or an idea?

We always start with a clear concept. Even though the concept gets stronger and sharper as we film and edit, we never compromise the main premise of the original idea.

What is the time span for your projects? For example, your earlier projects were done one per year.

It is amazing how long it takes to make a ten-minute installation. Editing a film of that length can take up to four months. And sometimes, we spend a number of months just scouting a location. The music for the film is always original, which also means that it takes time to compose it. In essence, the process of making a short film is very much like a cinematic production except that it is presented finally as a video installation.

You have lived in New York for a long time. Is there a sense of belonging, or do you see yourself as world citizen?

New York is a great city but ultimately, I do not belong a hundred percent to New York, nor do I belong a hundred percent to my homeland. If I go to Iran, I will feel like an outcast, and this sense of hesitation, disappointment and doubt is a feeling I will have for the rest of my life. It is not my idea to live in exile. I don't romanticize it. It is a bit of a punishment but I try and use it to my advantage.

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Shirin Neshat, detail of *Fervor (Couple at Intersection)*, 2000. Triptych 3 Gelatin Silver Prints, 47 x 59 inches each framed

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BUT I TRY TO USE IT TO MY ADVANTAGE.

In *Soliloquy*, the viewer sees two scenes projected on walls on either side of him. A woman moves through old Arabic architecture on one screen and through a New York borough on the other. The two screens juxtapose different worlds—modern and traditional. What was your motivation for making that film?

When I made *Soliloquy*, I was traveling back and forth from Iran. At that time I was interested in exploring the conflict between the individual and the collective, and the isolation that one feels in the modern world.

In *Tooba*, it seems you moved beyond issues of personal displacement to addresses larger political issues such as the notion of immigration to the metaphorical garden of paradise. What caused this shift in narrative and focus?

After 2001, I could not go back to Iran so I began to explore more existential questions in my life. I wanted to address global issues in

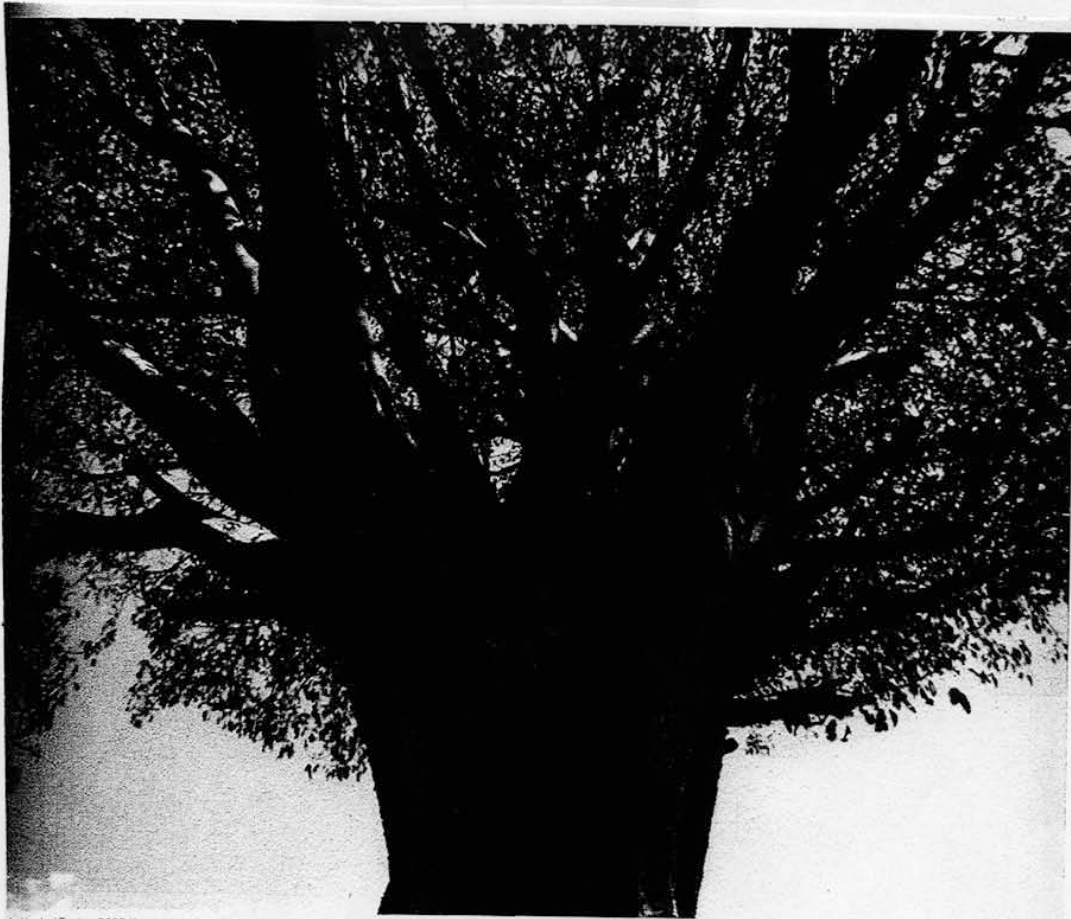
my work, to move beyond the individual to a more universal level. I used to feel invaded every day when I walked down the street, fearful of being threatened or attacked. So I used a poetic visual language in *Tooba* to convey these deeply personal and yet universal feelings that people were feeling after 2001.

There is a wonderful sense of texture—in the lines on the face of the Mexican-Indian woman in *Tooba* or the opening scenes of *Passage* with the rocky landscape—does this have anything to do with your childhood in Iran?

My tendency has always been to find landscapes that are spare and minimalist—like the desert. In *Tooba*, I found an amazing relationship between the wrinkles on the woman's face and the landscape of the paradise garden. Landscape is very important to me. I am not sure how I can rationalize it but if I have to choose a landscape, it will inevitably be a desert.

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Shirin Neshat, Tooba, 2002 Production Still. Photo taken by Larry Barris

RECENT FILMS BY SHIRIN NESHAT

Women Without Men (2005)

Neshat is currently working on a feature film based on the novella, *Women Without Men*. A political commentary on the treatment of women in contemporary Iran, the book follows the interwoven destinies of five women—including a schoolteacher, a housewife and a prostitute—as they arrive, by many different paths, to live in a garden on the outskirts of Tehran. Its frank and defiant exposition on women's sexuality resulted in the book being banned in Iran. Neshat has commented, "I find this book incredibly important in the way that it brings together the issues of politics, feminism, and mysticism in a very powerful way."

Tooba (2003)

Neshat's film, composed of two facing screens in a darkened room, centers on the sacred Tooba tree depicted in the Koran. Villagers scramble to get to Tooba, which is isolated on a hilltop. The tree has a woman, symbolizing the female spirit of the tree, embedded in it. The villagers finally converge on Tooba, only to watch the female spirit disappear. The journey to the garden mirrors the experience of immigration to a foreign land, which is a paradise for those running away from their native land. But the garden is not as welcoming nor is it the ultimate paradise that they had imagined. Made after 2001, this is Neshat's strongest examination of a global, political state of affairs.

Soliloquy (1999)

Neshat both directed and acted in *Soliloquy*, a film in the form of dual video projections. The camera follows the artist as she moves through old Arabic architecture on one screen and through a New York borough on the other. The woman wears a chador in both, and the two spaces are related by sounds and rhythms but the split between the images is a metaphor for her conflicted inner life—she is caught between East and West, between tradition and modernity.

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Shirin Neshat, *Unlilled (Rapture Series: Women Scattered)*, 1999 Gelatin Silver Print 42 1/2 X 67 1/2 inches

In your installations there is a sense of geometry, of spatial meaning. Could you describe the craft of making your films?

We usually start with a storyboard. For example, in *Tooba*, we had a clear plan to connect the woman to the crowd of men, despite the wall separating the two. The architecture of the wall becomes very important as a boundary between her and the crowd as the men approach. I wanted to reiterate the act of aggression. I loved the idea of the black figures surrounding the wall, seen both from the inside and the outside, forcing the viewers to see both. I was paying attention to the choreography of the imagery and its relationship to the architecture of the wall. I really loved the geometry of it.

In your work, do you explore situations that are outside of you or are the concerns more internal and personal?

A little of both. In the film *Women Without Men* (and the other films I have made) the characters—all women dealing with madness—are not images of myself. But the women in my work are often also outcasts—they are continuously running away. And in that sense, they are very close to me. I realized that there must be something about me that deeply identifies with them. I don't know, perhaps my sense of isolation and being an outcast from my own country.

Your films have a kind of tempered pacing. They are almost meditative.

When you make a film that is so reliant on the imagery, you need to give the viewer time to digest the images. My films are not about action. I am always acutely aware of the audience. I like to start slow and then very consciously take the film to the climax. So you'll see that something really dramatic happens in the middle or at the end. I believe that in a short film, you can only have one climax.

As your work has become more renowned, do you find that expectations have also increased? Is that something you are conscious of when producing new work?

My projects are not strategic but simply what I feel most strongly about. Every time you change, you may be taking a lot of risk. I know what is ultimately important to creativity is my own anxiety and vulnerability as a human being. For example, I have made my name as an installation artist and photographer, but my new venture is a film—a genre with which my name is not associated. It could end up being a disaster, but I am willing to take the risk, since I am fascinated by the characters and the story. And the experience of working and writing with Shahnush Parsipur has taken me psychologically to new place as an artist.