

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Schorr, Collier, "Turbulence and Rapture," *Harper's Bazaar*, June 1999

art



rapture

turbulence and

In two new videos, Iranian artist Shirin Neshat explores femininity in Islam—and explains why it cannot be reduced to black and white. By Collier Schorr

It is hard not to be drawn to the work of Iranian-born artist Shirin Neshat. Graphically dense portraits of women's tips and hands, or sections of faces (sometimes her own), are revealed beneath heavy black chadors (veils); the barrel of a gun peeks out from between a woman's feet. Adding tension to these charged images are layers of handwritten text. In the decorative swirls of her native Farsi, Neshat quotes a host of Iranian female poets who speak both of resentment toward, and salvation in, Islam.

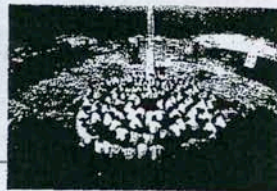
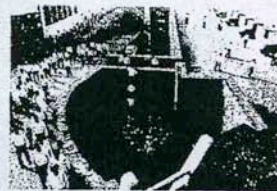
"In the past, the West was fascinated by the Orient and vice versa. Now this has been replaced by fear," says the Manhattan-based artist, who was a student at Berkeley during the Islamic revolution of 1979. Cut off from her family for more than 10 years, she enjoyed a brief respite in the early '90s but was recently advised against further travel to Iran, where her images have been tagged "antirevolutionary."

While her photographs resist reduction to a simple political position, her recent video installations are clear in their aim to endow Iranian women with a vocal as well as a physical presence. *Turbulent* (1998), a two-screen projection currently touring the United States and Europe, is a study in musical repartee. First, a male singer in a crowded auditorium sings a traditional song while a woman on the opposite screen stands silent. Though it is illegal for a woman to sing in public in Iran, as he fin-

ishes the man leans toward his mike as if to listen for the woman's reply. On cue, she answers with an original sound composition that melds warning cries and celebratory shouts into one gorgeous tangle. The contrast between the staid man and the wildly expressive woman says less about the state of Iranian policy than about the clever methods women in oppressive societies find to break free. "Iranian women are enormously resilient," says Neshat. "Their protests are manifested in subtle yet powerful ways. They have come up with ingenious ways to look beautiful and sexy without directly breaking the codes."

Rapture, Neshat's latest, most ambitious video, on view this month at D'Amelio/Terras Gallery in NYC, the Art Institute of Chicago and Patrick Painter in L.A., was shot on location in Essaouira, Morocco, with a cast of hundreds. A group of men gather and mill around an open-air fortress (the same one used by Orson Welles in his *Othello*), while veiled women wind through the desert, forming abstract patterns against the landscape with the epic grandeur of Cecil B. De Mille's *The Ten Commandments*. As the men wave obviously, the women eventually reach the sea, where they struggle to launch and board a wooden boat.

With *Rapture's* lyrical use of allegory, the sense of resistance captured in Neshat's earlier photographs gives way to renewal, leaving the women, who appear so restricted, with the possibility of flight. ■



Above: Men huddle and women range free in Neshat's 1999 video *Rapture*. Below: *Speechless*, a 1998 photograph inscribed with Farsi poetry.

