

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Karmel, Pepe. "Art in Review-Shirin Neshat." The New York Times. October, 1995.

The New York Times

Art in Review

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 20, 1995

Shirin Neshat

Annina Nosei Gallery
100 Prince Street
SoHo
Through Oct. 28

Shirin Neshat, sent to college in the United States, left Iran in 1974, not long before the Islamic revolution that brought the Ayatollah Khomeini to power. When Ms. Neshat returned to Iran in 1990, she was initially appalled by the changed status of women, who were restricted to the domestic sphere and compelled to cloak themselves in the chador. While skeptical of contentions by some Iranian women that the chador was actually a liberating garment because it freed them from being looked at as sex objects, Ms. Neshat found herself attracted to the revolutionary fervor of Iranian society and to the chador as "a symbol of rebellion against imperialism."

On her return to the United States, she began making photographs in which she herself — sometimes alone and sometimes accompanied by other women — appeared wearing the chador, exposing only those parts of the body (eyes, hands, feet) allowed by Islam. The photographs are exhibited in the form of 3-by-4-foot black-and-white prints: over the exposed areas of her body, Ms. Neshat has inscribed snaking lines of Farsi script, reproducing poems by Iranian feminists.

In her more recent pictures, Ms. Neshat often shows herself holding a rifle, its phallic barrel protruding incongruously between opened palms or the soles of her feet. The guns are apparently meant to express her sense of solidarity with her Iranian brothers-in-arms: an inscribed poem by Tahereh Saffarzadeh reads (in translation): "O my brother/O watchful one/as your bullets in the air/break my sleep/as if by reflex, I pray for you."

Is this a reference to Iran's long

and bloody war with Iraq or to the bullying Revolutionary Guards who enforce the Islamic Government's restrictive rules regarding personal behavior? Ms. Neshat's imagery seems tainted by a 1960's-style glorification of revolutionary violence: radical chic comes back, in her pictures, as radical sheik. The heavily mascaraed eyes, the sensuous play of shadow across skin (in the manner of Richard Avedon's fashion photographs) and the elegant Farsi script create an aura of "Oriental" seductiveness seemingly at odds with Ms. Neshat's nostalgia for fundamentalism.

PEPE KARMEL