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"Who would have thought that the Iran talks would be progressing in the way that they are?" laughs Chiu. "The idea of narrating history came to me because I think that Shirin's work has often been conflated under the idea of talking about Islam and talking about women. For me, it has always been about Iran. If you look at her historical trajectory, the way she created it, there are specific moments in Iranian history that informed the creation of her work."

"As an Iranian in exile, she has always been very articulate about the idea of a condition of diaspora and, with that, the complexity of feeling connected to a culture, but living outside it," adds Chiu. "It's a very personal approach to history, through Shirin's own eyes."

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the way for the feature film *Women Without Men* (2009), which won Neshat a Silver Lion at the Venice Biennale the same year, opens the show, spinning and out of magic realism, the work centres on one woman's experience just before the 1953 coup which, as Neshat sees it, paved the way for the 1979 revolution. "You can see the rage that developed," she says. "The embassy where the conspiracy was hatched in 1953 became what they called the House of Spies. But I think the American public are largely unaware of the US intervention in Iranian modern history."

Like many of her compatriots Neshat, now 58, was sent abroad for her education in the 1970s. She studied at Berkeley in California but did not practise as an artist until more than 10 years after graduating. Her first trip back to Iran, in the late 1980s, inspired "Women of Allah" (1995-96), a powerful set of images of veiled women with guns, their bodies inscribed by hand with Farsi poetry, through which she explored the experience of the women who had lived through the revolution and fought in the Iran-Iraq war.

The images brought her recognition as an international artist, and some notoriety. "Some people thought I was endorsing the Iranian government, the government thought I was criticising them and the critics thought I was just being provocative," she says. "At that stage, I didn't even have a career or a point of view. It was only later my work came to have a sharper focus."

Neshat is happy to define herself as a Middle Eastern artist but she is not alone in distancing herself from the label "feminist". "Many female artists in the region deal in their work with the experience of being a woman but I don't think they are dealing with those issues as explicitly as they were in the 1990s," says Omar Kholeif, a curator at London's Whitechapel Gallery. "It has shifted into more implicit critiques."

Reem Fadda, associate curator for Middle Eastern art at Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, agrees. "The artists I see do not define themselves in any one box. In the Arab world and Iran there are multiple causes that people are struggling with; women's issues are just one of many."



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From top: Shirin Neshat in her New York studio. "Untitled" from her "Women of Allah" series (1995-96). Image from her "Rapture" series (1999)

For a slideshow, go to f.com/neshat

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In the aftermath of the six-year effort involved in making *Women Without Men*, Neshat returned to monochrome portraiture: *The Book of Kings* (2012) about Iran's Green Movement; *Our House Is on Fire* (2013), about the Arab Spring; and, last year, she accepted a commission to create *Home of My Eyes*, a series of 55 portraits of Azerbaijanis for the opening exhibition of the Yarat Contemporary Art Space in Baku. Neshat asked her subjects what the word "home" meant to them and inscribed their answers on their bodies. Azerbaijan evoked the Iran of her childhood. "Baku felt old-



fashioned, in a good way," she says. "There was a poignancy to the project I had an hour's flight from Iran." Three years ago, Neshat told an audience at Oxford University: "I am a restless, anxious, nervous person. I thrive on struggle. I need to feel an growing." So portraiture will take a back seat while she embarks on a second feature film, due for release next year, this time about the famous Egyptian singer Oum Kalthoum. "She's the most significant artist of the 20th century in the Middle East, loved by Egyptians, Israelis, Palestinians, Syrians, says Neshat. "It will tell the story of an Iranian film-maker trying to find a way to make a film about a famous Egyptian singer. Neshat is not just directing—she has just completed her first script."

Another project, slated to take place in 2017, will take Neshat further into uncharted waters. This time, she will be directing and designing the sets for an opera. The details are still sketchy but preparations involve backstage visits to

the Metropolitan Opera and weekly coaching from a dramaturge. "It's thrilling," she says. "I'm a complete student." Neshat is not the only Iranian artist enjoying the limelight this year in the US. Pioneering Iranian artist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, working in glass and now 91, has a show at the Guggenheim, while Faris Tavakoli, "father of modern Iranian sculpture", has his first full US retrospective at the Davis Museum in Massachusetts.

"It's definitely the spring of Iranian art in the US," says Kholeif, who commissioned this year's Middle East-focused symposium at the Armony show in March. "We have a lot of work to do now to make sure the conversation continues."

Shirin Neshat: Facing History, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, May 18 - September 20, hm.org
The Home of My Eyes, Yarat Contemporary Art Space, Baku, until June 25, yarat.az



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