

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Haley Weiss, "In Dreams," *Interview*, August 18, 2016.

# Interview

## IN DREAMS



Shirin Neshat invites you into her dreams. As a photographer and filmmaker, she embraces the surreal and allegorical, crafting black-and-white, non-linear worlds that immerse the viewer in her subconscious. She likens her video installations to poems, and leaves her personal history bare, translating her experiences as an Iranian who moved to the U.S. into works expressing broader fears. She uses no script. The works are guided, rather, by a mutable storyboard and their subjects. The results are stunning, nightmarish, ecstatic tales.

On August 20, Neshat will present two new video works, *Roja* and *Sarah*, as an exhibition titled "Dreamers" at Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, South Africa. It's her first solo show in Africa, and takes its name from her "Dreamers" video trilogy, which began in 2013 with *Illusions & Mirrors* starring Natalie Portman. Collectively, these works mark a return for Neshat to an earlier mode of production; she began her career as a photographer before creating video installation works, and later, feature films (*World Without Men* at Venice International Film

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Festival in 2009 earned her the Silver Lion Award for Best Director). For *Roja* and *Sarah*, she even used the same team she collaborated with for her first videos between 1998 and 2002.

"In reality, my heart is really with video installations," Neshat tells us when we meet at her studio in New York. "My whole artistic motivation in these three pieces was, 'Am I capable of coming back to the simplicity of my earlier video work?'"

*Roja* and *Sarah* feature non-actors. In the case of *Roja*, Neshat has known the subject, Roja Heydarpour, since she was 19, and for *Sarah*, she met the protagonist, Sarah Issakharian, only a few years ago. "It was a risk that I took and they took," Neshat says. The risk paid off; their inexperience before the camera reads as sincerity, and their naivety lends credence to the confusing nature of dreams. They each find themselves within nature at an emotional crux, faced with what they fear. For Neshat, nature is at the core of it all.

"You're faced with creation, you're faced with something very mysterious and very mystical, whether it's looking at the ocean or being alone in a forest, or sometimes looking at the stars," she says. "There's really something very powerful about nature that's endlessly mysterious and a reminder of our humanity, our mortality, of more existential things that we usually manage to not get involved with very often because of daily activity."

HALEY WEISS: What made you return to the "Dreamers" trilogy and create these new works?

SHIRIN NESHAT: First of all, I have to say that dreams have been a really big part of my work and I only realized that lately. I made a feature length film, *Women Without Men*—it was a magical realism film—and there were many moments in the film that we were in a dream. So when I first started to make *Illusions & Mirrors*, I was very fascinated by surrealist filmmakers, like Man Ray, Jean Cocteau, [Luis] Buñuel, and Maya Deren; in their work they even used the camera in a way that was very dreamy. It's kind of the logic of a dream that you are faced with references of reality, but nothing makes sense. If you know Maya Deren from the '60s or even Man Ray, who used glass in front of the camera, where everything was so painterly—I like the freedom you have in that way of storytelling, because I'm always interested in more allegorical, surrealist ways of storytelling.

With this work I felt that aside from being able to be more surrealist visually, I could be more psychologically potent. For example, with *Illusions & Mirrors*, I felt that especially because it was Natalie Portman, who's an amazing actress, this was a piece that demanded a kind of performance from her. I tried to come up with a story that although there was no language involved, it required really her to perform, in fact, as multiple characters, where she went to that haunted house and she saw herself in many facets. Also, to make the story even more surrealist, we used that device that Man Ray used, which is the glass, and infrared in the camera where things go white and become visually very crazy. For me, all of these were strategies of making work that is reminiscent of the logic of dreams, both visually and narratively. I think every one of us dreams, and we know what the quality of a dream is. In many ways, the reason dreams are so—mine are a little bit nightmarish, is that it's when you're really naked and can really face the things you don't face in reality, your darkest anxieties. When I made that video with Natalie Portman, I tried to question, "Can I come up with a concept for a Western woman?" She's from Israel, but that somehow didn't have any relationship to Iran, and somewhat of a more existential point of departure. With *Roja* and *Sarah*, they regained a cultural specificity—at least you know they're Iranian, or they're Eastern.

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WEISS: I'm curious, have you had any recurring dreams throughout your life? Are you someone who writes your dreams down when you wake up so you don't forget them?

NESHAT: *Roja* is based on my own dream. I always write down the dreams that are really powerful, but what's really interesting is, and I've been thinking a lot about it, is that in all of my dreams there's a mother figure. ... I realized that in my life, my mother has been my last connection to Iran. Also, I always feel that my mother is the only one that always worries about me, cares about me, and is my security, even though I don't see her very often. She's my last point of security in relation to my past, and if that breaks, I will not ever have that type of pure love or pure attachment. That dream that I had, was exactly like [*Roja*]*—not in the theater, but I remember coming out of this fantastically modern building and then I saw my mother coming as a little dot from a distance, and I ran toward her, and she ran toward me, and as we got closer I couldn't even stop myself. I noticed that she's not really my mother, she's a monster, and she pressed me and I lifted off [into the air]. I thought, "This is amazing," and tried to interpret this dream, and I realized that it's without a doubt this idea of nostalgia and a need for a motherland. What it means to be levitating or flying, I guess, is it's the only time you're free. It's a more mystical death—flight.*

WEISS: In the videos, there are moments where they're a bit nightmarish, but they each sort of come to terms with what they're wrestling with. Is it important to you that they come to a—

NESHAT: A resolution? Yes—with Natalie Portman, she was first outside and she saw this figure that she followed and took her to the deepest, darkest part of her soul, and there she saw all of these people that look dead, and it was very frightening, but out of the bottom of the angst she came back to the outside. By going to her deepest fears and anxieties she was able to see clearly—literally see clearly. With *Roja*, just like with the other ones, where all their perspective was always blurry and weird, there was a clarity once she was able to levitate above and beyond other cultures. It was the only time that she felt that she could cope with both, and lose the anxiety of not belonging to either or. I guess my thing is that nature has the most powerfully healing effect. With *Sarah*, it was a different thing because I felt that she was in this nightmare of a space, this entrapment of a forest, there is this residue of devastation, atrocity, genocide, and death, and she's really looking to see if she's dead or alive and at the end, she faces her own death. From the beginning to the end you see that this whole thing was just her imagination, seeing herself, so in a way it's realization of her own mortality.

WEISS: It felt a bit like a pilgrimage, the way she was led through the film. It's interesting that you mention nostalgia, because I think people have a tendency to make the past seem like this better, brighter place because it's distant. But to think about your films in relation to nostalgia, it has both sides; you can have this love and attachment for something in the past, but you can also see it for what it is, that it has negative aspects too.

NESHAT: Yes, and I think that it's interesting, because I see dreams like that. Even the nightmares—they're kind of reassuring at the same time. We're either awake or we're sleeping. During the time that we're awake, we work very hard at denying things, mainly because we have to function as people. We have to control and repress everything that we're fearful of, because it doesn't make sense to go crazy on the streets, but in reality we hide and we hide, repress and repress, our fears of the world of violence, of separation, of death, and sometimes hopes, and some things that are very joyful, reunions or all of those good things. It's only in dreams that we're really truthful with whatever hurts most; they're really very real. That is positive and negative. That's why I think in every one of these videos, although they come across as slightly scary, they're also very positive and very reassuring. It's life and death always coexisting and

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nature has a big part—the ocean, the forest, and the desert. There's something when you're always immersed in the natural landscape where it becomes your healer, in a way, at the same time that it also becomes sort of frightening. I guess that's how I see things, in that form of duality.

WEISS: How do you decide when a piece is done? Is it just a feeling?

NESHAT: We edited these two short films since last September, for nearly a year. ... I really am a strong believer that with editing, it should take a long time. Even you yourself are not capable of making the right decisions; sometimes you need a distance. We would edit, and then stop for two or three months, come back, and then stop. Even in the last days, when we were finalizing the sound, I realized that I should snip here and there, which I had never thought about before. So time is of an essence. To me, editing is not something you can do in a rush because the artists themselves are not always their own best editors. Time is absolutely everything.

WEISS: You consider these two videos a return to your roots in their medium, and you mentioned that they deal more with Iran than the Natalie Portman video *Illusions & Mirrors* did. How do you see them connecting to your earlier works thematically speaking?

NESHAT: All of my works, from the beginning to today, have been very personal, meaning that they've always been a reflection of some of the issues I have gone through as an Iranian, as an Iranian living in the U.S., as someone who's had to deal with the [Iranian] Revolution, separation from their family, and life in exile. All of that has been a big in defining my point of view. At the same time, my work has never been autobiographical. Although the subjects are driven on a personal perspective it's sort of elevated above me. I try to express something that is more a collective expression of crisis. I think, for example, *Sarah* really speaks to me about every one of our nightmares as we see so much violence, being surrounded with atrocity, in a way where you feel scared of your own death and encounter with violence. The soldiers come and go and the mourners come with it. It's something that's a collective anxiety.

With *Roja*, to me, it has two significances. One is about the refugees. The image of Roja's mother, struggling to get through the water to reach her daughter—it never dawned on me but subconsciously, that image has to have some connection to the people who are reaching for some safety, and some connection to other human beings. The idea of feeling displaced, and never feeling safe anywhere in the world, where you always feel like you're safer if you're over there, is not just my experience. If you went to Iran today or an Iranian came here today, or the fact that there are bombs exploding everywhere, there's just a tremendous sense of fear and feeling a desire for security.

*"DREAMERS" WILL BE ON VIEW AT GOODMAN GALLERY IN JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA FROM AUGUST 20 THROUGH SEPTEMBER 14, 2016.*