

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Shirin Neshat, "The other Egyptian crisis" *Reuters*, March 5, 2014.

The other Egyptian crisis

By Shirin Neshat | MARCH 5, 2014



Like most artists, I often wonder what art's place is in a world that seems consumed by violence during these times of social upheaval.

It frequently seems like hell is breaking loose in the world while I work in the serenity of my art studio in New York. Like most people, I'd rather believe that what takes place outside of my comfort zone is only a fiction, that the terrible images and footage of people suffering are all fabricated. However, my daily conversations with my mother in Tehran are my constant reminder of how removed I am from reality. Indeed it is I who lives in a fiction, not them.

When the Rauschenberg Foundation invited me two years ago to develop an art project with a humanitarian focus, and donate profits to charity, I jumped at the challenge. I assumed I would make another conceptual project with some footing on socio-political reality.

I chose Egypt because it is a country I have grown to love, both from afar and in person. I have observed and experienced its journey into a revolution with great promise, and then a devastating aftermath of violence, bloodshed and tremendous human loss.

I arrived in Egypt in the fall of 2012 and set up a studio with my American friend and long-time collaborator Larry Barns and our Egyptian assistant Osama Dawod. We worked out of Townhouse Gallery, the only internationally prominent Egyptian art organization, in downtown Cairo.

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I was not entirely clear where I was going with this project. My most recent series, *The Book of Kings* (2011), had emerged as portraits of the courageous youth who helped engineer the Arab Spring. Now, I realized, I wished to capture very different images — elderly, impoverished Egyptians, men and women. Their facial expressions supply a narrative to Egypt's recent history: the hardship of life under poverty, political injustice, corruption, chaos, violence and loss of loved ones.

The challenge became how to recruit my subjects and gain their trust. For we wanted them to share their most personal experiences of grief with an Iranian artist and her American collaborator.

We turned to Sayed, the building superintendent — and himself an elderly, low-income worker. We began reaching out to his friends and community, offering a modest compensation to each. Sayed was able to convince more than 30 men and women — including street peddlers, mechanics, teachers, grandmothers and housewives — to briefly leave their daily lives and be photographed.

For one week we welcomed them one by one. Over tea and sweets we talked about their lives and the Egyptian crisis. We showed them examples of my past work, and shared with them our own personal histories, including Larry's recent tragedy, the devastating loss of his young daughter.

Our interactions soon grew into a form of trust and friendship. Sessions always ended on an emotional note — each person was asked to recall a memory of personal tragedy while gazing into the camera. As their eyes swelled up in tears, we shed our own tears on the opposite side.

These encounters created an intense human bond that seemed to eradicate all our differences of class, age, gender, religion and race.

Yet when they left our studio and returned to their daily lives, there seemed little promise for them of a better future. I held on to their images of sorrow and felt deep sense of shame. These dignified men and women had graced me with their humility and generosity despite their difficult lives.

Today, again in the comfort of my sanctuary in New York, I look back and wonder how they are. What is the future for Egypt? Is there any hope for return of that revolutionary fervor which seemed so pure, beautiful and powerful? Who will care for Egypt's poor?

Does peace have a chance?

