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ARTS IN REVIEW

ART



From Shirin Neshat's "Rapture" series (1999).

Iran on the Mall

Shirin Neshat: Facing HistoryHirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden
Through Sept. 20

BY MELIK KAYLAN

Washington

The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden is having a distinctly historic moment. In the first place, with "Facing History" in the title, the new solo show dedicated to Shirin Neshat, the renowned Iranian-born female artist, is riddled with history: hers and Iran's. (Ms. Neshat shot to fame in the 1990s with photos of women's faces inscribed with calligraphy.) It has opened when the U.S. and Iran are locked in delicate, potentially epoch-making negotiations over nuclear power. And it is the first show conceived by the museum's recently appointed director, Melissa Chiu, formerly of the Asia Society in New York. The visitor gets to glimpse a pivotal juncture for the Hirshhorn, one that likely indicates the direction in which Ms. Chiu intends to take the institution she calls "the nation's contemporary art museum."

At the Asia Society, Ms. Chiu often put on exhibitions illustrating the cultural richness of regions politically alienated from the U.S., such as the Middle East and Pakistan. So her current choice is no accident, nor is its timing, which cleverly brings the Hirshhorn swiftly to the attention of Washington's chattering classes. In addition, as she told me at the show, she's "conscious that the Hirshhorn wants to remake itself for the 21st century with a more global vision. It was always international but last century that meant mostly European art; Shirin's work embodies the broadening of geographical interest to include other cultures." She also believes that the central attributes of Neshat's work—"multimedia, diasporic, gender conscious, identity focused"—represent universal preoccupations in 21st-century art. In effect, Ms. Chiu seems to feel that Washington is ready to be a global city, like New York, rather than an American city with international interests. Whether she's right remains to be seen.

The show itself clearly assumes that the visitor needs a familiarizing and cohering approach. It was the museum's decision to organize the material largely (but not entirely) around three historical moments in the 58-year-old artist's oeuvre: the 1953 imposition of the shah by a CIA-backed coup that displaced Iran's elected leader; the 1979 revolution that toppled the shah and ushered in Ayatollah Khomeini's mullahs, and the 2009 Green Revolution protests in Iran that preceded the Arab Spring upheavals. This presentation, backed up by news photos and other illustrative artifacts, suc-

ceeds up to a point for the layman, but can give the impression that Ms. Neshat primarily possesses a political imagination, chronicling or retro-evaluating grand events. Luckily, though, enough aspects of the show fall outside the guiding categories that Ms. Neshat's complex, poetic vision works its enchantment.

Even in the first rooms devoted to the 1953 coup, the clips from her black-and-white 2008 video "Munis," which was inspired by those events, come across as otherworldly—though they often precisely restage famous news stock from that time. A large American convertible glittering in sunlight, embodying glamour and power, carries paid-for pro-shah demonstrators as it did at the time. Crowds bearing banners and posters illustrate a brief dawn of free speech and open democracy before the shah's repressive rule kicks in.

A straightforward political critique, you might think, not least of the U.S. legacy in such places. But Ms. Neshat's constructions are never so simple. She made that film long after the Khomeinist regime hijacked Iran post-shah and corrupted the logic of mass demonstrations. It's impossible not to see echoes between the two revolutions—the wild rushing through the streets by crowds oblivious to history's lessons. The pent-up acceleration of history can be at once joyous and treacherous, the artist seems to say.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

In the next exhibits, from her "Women of Allah" series of the mid-1990s, featuring the renowned photos of juxtaposed guns and female bodies inscribed with poems, the complexity deepens. This sequence, inspired by the 1979 revolution, received sharp criticism down the years

A globally minded show that suggests the future direction of the museum.

for apparently glorifying women's armed support of the mullahs. But as she said to me pushed their own narrative against all odds, often in conflicted ways." In fact, it becomes cumulatively clearer through the show that Ms. Neshat's concerns go far beyond the political.

You get a firmer beat on how she layers her meanings in the following rooms of videos made before and after the century's end but indexed to no historical event. In "Turbulent" (1998) two large screens face each other, one featuring a man and the other a woman. The man sings coherently before an all-male audience. The woman, alone in darkness, unleashes a more powerful, primeval song without words, beyond language. She may be profoundly disadvantaged but is defiantly vociferous nonetheless. "Rapture" (1999) employs the same two-screen technique. Men in a fortress mill around in discernible, contained patterns. Women clad in chadors approach across a wilderness, bleakly, picturesquely, fanning out over a beach like crows in a landscape and finally draping themselves around a boat they intend to launch seaward. Ms. Neshat's depiction of women here as elemental, dark shapes,

daring the unknown and seen from a kind of eternal perspective, comes closest to her fundamental vision.

The next rooms, featuring large photo portraits of participants in Iran's Green Revolution and Egypt's Arab Spring upheavals, have disappointed some. There's a suspicion that Ms. Neshat has begun to imitate herself, that her art is fading. It rather depends on what you, the observer, discern in the faces. Ms. Neshat doesn't provide much help other than the usual inscriptions on skin. Perhaps she has moved on from the medium and doesn't know it. The last section, a video entitled "Soliloquy" from 1999, dramatizing the polarity of East and West through architecture, suggests that her imagination dwells in moving pictures more expansively. Figures drifting through ancient structures (East) and monumental buildings (West) in unearthly light offer us a deeper insight into our identity etiolated by time and space than any scripted drama or, for that matter, any portrait. At her best, as only the finest of artists can, Ms. Neshat gives us a glimpse of history from the eyes of the gods as viewed across eons.