

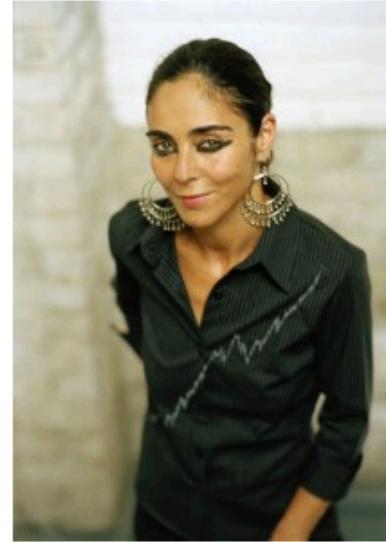
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Ruth Tam, "Exiled Iranian artist Shirin Neshat looks at the Egyptian revolution,"
The Washington Post, January 31, 2014.

Exiled Iranian artist Shirin Neshat looks at the Egyptian revolution

BY RUTH TAM

Shirin Neshat is an Iranian visual artist who was born in Qazvin, Iran, educated in Berkeley, California and is currently based in New York. Her earliest work as a photographer was born out of a trip back to Iran in 1993 where she explored concepts of exile and identity under a feminine lens. In the late nineties, she devoted herself to a series of stark, black and white video installations that referenced contradictions of gender in society. Breaking away from photography, she turned to cinema and directed her first feature-length film, "Women Without Men," which won the 2009 Venice Film Festival Silver Lion award for best directing. Most recently, Neshat was honored by the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland with a 2014 Crystal Award. The award is given annually to artists who have made contributions to improving the state of the world. On January 21, she shared the stage with fellow recipients actor Matt Damon, singer Juan Diego Florez and conductor Lorin Maazel. She spoke to She The People from New York after her return from Davos.



Shirin Neshat. (Photo by Lyle Ashton Harris. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels)

Congratulations on winning one of this year's Crystal Awards.

Thank you, I was so nervous. The awards ceremony was in front of political and economic leaders who have never heard of me before. Matt Damon is a known figure but I'm a visual artist; I don't have that kind of familiarity. To go and leave an impression for two minutes was very challenging.

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What does it mean for an artist like yourself to win an award that is not necessarily for art but for cultural leadership?

This was one of the most meaningful experiences I've had in my artistic career. Very often, I talk about politics in my work but in an artist's community, people are distant from those issues. At Davos, I participated in a couple panels where the audience was not from the art world. I felt like an oddball but to see that they were listening and were interested in the role of an artist was really meaningful to me.



Mona, from "Our House Is On Fire,"
Shirin Neshat

You directly addressed Iranian president Hassan Rouhani in your [acceptance speech](#) and "passed him the torch to be the nation's saving grace." Rouhani was also at the forum. Did you get to meet with him afterwards?

I am supportive of him but critical of the government and past administration. A director of the forum asked me if I wanted to request a meeting, but it would have been very awkward because he was surrounded by people from the administration. For him to acknowledge and talk to me, who has been blacklisted, it would look like he was endorsing me. And to be honest for myself, I don't think it would have been a good idea to meet him. I have very mixed feelings about

it.

What inspired your latest body of work, *Our House Is on Fire*?

I've been developing a film in Egypt about the legendary singer, Oum Kulthoum, who died in 1975. I was there before Mubarak left, during the revolution and after the revolution. I was really immersed in the Arab Spring and have even done a piece of work called "The Book of Kings," which was about the Green Revolution and the Arab Spring. When the [Rauschenberg Foundation](#) commissioned me to do a project, I just thought it'd be really interesting to do a project in Egypt for a few reasons. One,

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Rauschenberg as an artist has a history of advocacy and Egypt itself has been deeply problematic in poverty and issues of women and children. It also happened to be in the aftermath of the revolution and you really felt an incredible sense of defeat among Egyptians. After all that euphoric energy of the revolution, I thought we could do something.

Two months before we prepared to leave, the photographer I was working with Larry Barns, unexpectedly lost his 22-year-old daughter. So when we went to Cairo and I was trying to capture the sense of loss, the spirit of the country was echoed in my closest collaborator's grief.

This body of work features stark portraits coupled with indecipherable calligraphy. This is a technique you've used before. How does the text add to the portrait and what does the portrait add to the text?

Every little wrinkle is covered in millions of words so aesthetically, it's a work of labor. Coming from Iran, I have an inherent passion for poetry, beauty and all things that come from classic Islamic and Persian art. But all of my work has a strong footing in dark, disturbing political reality. So the beauty, darkness, violence and spirituality in this exhibit is paradoxical. This is my signature as an artist and it's also the signature of the Iranian people that they're so divided in their poetry and their politics. So the calligraphy for me and the inclusion of text in the image comes directly from tradition. It's a way of adding a dimension about humanity, it's all of the positive things echoed into a concept that is extremely disturbing and dark.

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The collection was previously called *The Mourners*. Why the change in title from that to 'Our House is on Fire'?

I have never liked titles that are too obvious. Some of my previous works were titled "[The Book of Kings](#)," "[Turbulence](#)," "[Rapture](#)," "[Fervor](#)." There's an ambiguity that leaves the work open to interpretation. When we started these images, someone suggested "[The Mourners](#)." I accepted it but later I realized it was too direct, too obvious. I used so much poetry on these images that the work had to be titled after a poem. "My house is on fire," is a line from "A Cry" by an Iranian poet, Mehdi Akhavan Sales.

It's more of a metaphoric, ambiguous and enigmatic title. We're talking about the fervor and consequence of revolution. It's important for my audience to read the translations to see where the ideas are coming from. Even in that speech at Davos, I used the words of Picasso. I'm a woman who loves poetry and I think it's important that the audience is left with something for their imaginations.

In *BOMB Magazine*, you [described a decade](#) where you said you made "practically no art" and what you did make, you were "quite dissatisfied with" and was "eventually destroyed." In 1993, how did you overcome that stage?

I guess I didn't have that maturity when I was in school. I didn't have pressing subjects to make work about. I guess I was smart enough to recognize that, to recognize that mediocrity is the worst kind of art and I didn't want to participate in making mediocre work. Today, I don't think an artist should make a mark unless they have something compelling to say. I feel strongly that you cannot make work about a subject unless you have experienced it yourself. You can't make work about exile unless you have lived in exile. You cannot make painful art unless you have suffered. You cannot make political work if you haven't lived a political life. When I returned to Iran, I felt that



Hossein, from "Our House Is On Fire," Shirin Neshat

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art was going to be my only tool to convey issues on my mind. I guess I was lucky that I had found both the methodology and the subject matter that really was urgent for me. Ten years of not making work was really important to me so that when I came back to it, I took it very seriously.

Have you had any other similar circumstances since where you felt dissatisfied with your work or took an extended break?

After a few years of making photographs, I felt very frustrated. I felt that I was just making commodities to fit the market and I lost the soul of why I had started. I stopped making photographs and I went to cinema. I took a backseat from big exhibitions and became a student of cinema to make "[Women Without Men](#)," my first feature-length film. It was a very bold decision on my part because it was more likely to fail than succeed. But I was very proud of myself because I took six years and made a film that, only through piracy, was disseminated in Iran. I felt for the first time that Iranians knew me as an artist. I made a bold decision in abandoning photography and video altogether and in fact, I've only recently gone back to making photographs again.



What feedback have you heard from Iranians who have seen your film?

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Not only did it make it though piracy but BBC Persia broadcasted it in Iran for a week. You have no idea how much I got in response. Part of it is because of me but also because the book is really well known. The author is also in exile and she was in prison for five years. It also covered a period in 1953 where the Americans executed a coup in Iran. No film has been made on this period but it's so nostalgic for Iranians. Very few films have been made covering the period before the Islamic revolution. So for many who were born after the revolution, there's a huge curiosity to see grandparents, mothers and fathers in a space that's not Islamicized. For many different reasons, this film was really welcome. There was a lot of criticism, of course, on it being too artistic. There was also criticism on how I portrayed the Shah. But the film was seen and discussed a lot.

Did you make the film for Iranians?

Well, it's in Farsi with English subtitles and it took an extraordinary effort from an Iranian team to make this film. I felt that it was a tribute to the writer, who is one of the most important writers of our time. I know the government banned the book and would never allow the film to be shown in Iran so I can't describe the joy I had when I heard it was viewed. By the way, it came after the 2009 uprising. There was a lot of affinity and energy on the streets like in 1953. There was a lot of parallel politically. For me, it would have been a huge tragedy if the film was only seen in the West.

You said in W Magazine that you wanted to avoid art "that preaches." What do you mean by this and how you've tried to avoid that?

Political art that is affective doesn't have an agenda. It's politically conscious but not politically didactic. People need to decide for themselves what they believe, it's not my job. I'm trying to be very careful. It's completely wrong for an artist to tell people what to think. But it's important to inspire them, to provoke them, to mobilize them. I think that's my job: to make meaningful work that questions tyranny but not to force them to make a decision. When it comes to Iran, I don't know how you could not criticize them. You cannot not see their evil. The record is so obvious, there are war crimes against them.

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You said it's wrong for artists to tell people what to think, but aren't you leading them to a certain conclusion when you call them evil? What are you trying to provoke?

I don't have to tell people anything, they already know. They've converted. Nobody has to worry about people like Hitler or Stalin; their record is already there. For the question of what is right or wrong, I don't need to do that for people. I need to create a body of work that reflects on the issues and the times that have passed. Perhaps I can do it more profoundly than the media or an academic. I don't need to exaggerate and reiterate things that are obvious.

What's next for you? What are other things you want to accomplish as an artist?

I like to go in between making work that is slightly less political and more metaphorical and existential. I'm making a film called "The Voice of Egypt" on Oum Kulthoum, a musician who is caught in the middle of politics. I'm also working on collaborating on a piece with the Dutch National Ballet inspired by *The Tempest*. The play deals with the question of exile and there are all kinds of metaphors. It is about Shakespeare, but the piece will have a Middle Eastern flavor brought by myself and my partner, Shoja Azari, who is also Iranian. There are 60 to 80 dancers. I am doing the videos and the stage for it.