

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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BARBARA GLADSTONE GALLERY

Martha Schwendener, "Review", *The New Art Examiner*, December, 1995.

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Most work "on the body," to which it is often referred without irony, takes as its purpose an exploration of the body within a social field. This usually means revealing what is hidden, depicting the body by exposing it while treating it as more than just an object, a source of visual pleasure, how it is seen in everyday representations: advertisements on bus shelters, television, or in magazines.



feminist poetry. Aesthetically beautiful, the text winds around the pupil of an eye or across a face or hand. The poetry is reportedly seen as radical within Iranian culture, but it is, unfortunately, less powerful translated into English.

Working against such obstacles—language barriers, sexual discrimination, prejudice—is a major part of Neshat's project. Her awareness of boundaries is acute, since she works within them, honoring Islamic laws on the body, and gently moving toward breaking them down, as she tries to make Westerners recognize the cultural stereotypes they hold of Iranians (usually as gun-toting terrorists). Although

Shirin Neshat's work confronts these expectations. Here, she takes an opposite tact from much current American/European "body art," exploring what is covered up or revealed by default rather than pushing the envelope of what is exposed. An Iranian-born, American-educated artist who lives more in this country than in her native land, Neshat herself dons the veil, covering up most of her body when she travels back to Iran. Although her work displays a meager amount of flesh (by Western standards), she highlights the cultural imperative on the body to conform, taking what could be seen as artistic timidity and using it to show cultural difference.

Neshat photographs herself, sometimes with friends, dressed in the black veils, or *chadors*, worn by Iranian women since the revolution of the 1970s transformed Iran from the Shah's westernized Persia into a strict religious state. Her works display uncovered hands, feet, faces, and eyes decorated with calligraphy that Neshat applies to the surface of the black-and-white photographs. The text—in Persian or Farsi—is scripted in Arabic letters, but is different from the Arabic spoken and written in most Middle-Eastern countries. It is taken from Iranian

accepting boundaries is not an approach we necessarily esteem in the West ("transgressive" art and "bad-girl" artists are more in favor), it serves her as a perfect platform to jump into other discussions: women's place in Iranian culture, Western perceptions of Middle-Eastern women as docile and passive, and Iranian identity in the Arab Middle East.

Neshat works in series, and this show included photographs from her "Unveiling" series and her "Women of Allah" series, including her latest self portraits with guns clutched in her hands and cradled between her feet. Works like *Grace Under Duty*, in which a gun bisects Neshat's somber face; *Seeking Martyrdom*, in which her hands are painted a brilliant, blood red; and *Moon Song*, in which she appears with outstretched hands holding bullets, point to yet another cultural paradox—that of Iranian women warriors who are considered equal to their male counterparts in war, but not in daily life. The Western guns in the photos, the Remingtons held in the hands of this bicultural artist, serve as apt metaphors for the battle she wages, trying to reconcile disparate identities peaceably within one person, and in one artist's work.