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Sovereign Remedy

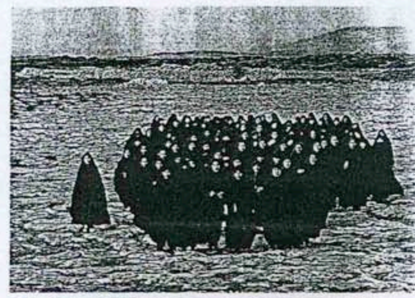
Ronald Jones

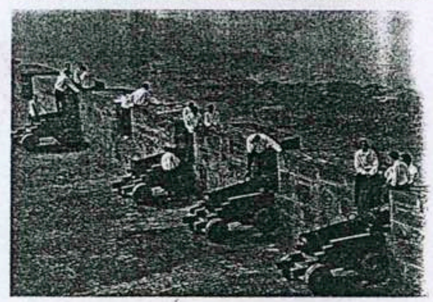
THE ART OF SHIRIN NESHAT

As I write, students from Teheran University have spent the last week protesting a new law meant to stifle freedom of the press. The government's response has been prompt: Security forces raided a university dormitory, beating students and tossing them out windows. Riots ensued. Yesterday, police fired tear gas at demonstrators as tens of thousands of uniformed and plainclothes security forces, soldiers, Revolutionary Guards, intelligence operatives, and antiriot units with helmets and shields stood by, watching baton-wielding vigilantes and street thugs rampage. Two days ago, eighteen cities throughout Iran reported widespread demonstrations. It is now Wednesday, July 14, and the prevailing sentiment, despite the vehemence of the protests and the reaction of the security forces, is that the ongoing student protests do not represent a full-bore counterrevolutionary movement against the Islamic republic. Clear heads on the ground in Teheran feel certain that the students, and their sympathizers, from retirees to laborers, mean to signal—in the most forceful terms possible—their support for rapid progress toward democracy, a stronger economy, and the cultural freedom promised by the reform president Mohammed Khatami, whom they brought to power in a landslide election two years ago. If not exactly counterrevolutionaries, these students still represent a formidable force: Two-thirds of Iran's population is twenty-five years old or younger. More important, they remember almost nothing of the 1979 revolution that brought the Ayatollah Khomeini and the hard-liners to power.

There is a fundamental difference between turmoil today and the revolution two decades back: the present chaos. Twenty years ago there was a single and definable goal: to bring down Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi and to replace his Western-leaning, modern-style regime with an Islamic government. That there are no clearly definable sides to the conflict today is precisely what makes the unfolding situation so dangerous. It has become increasingly difficult to know who is working for whom. After a Monday meeting with the Ayatollah Khamenei, the man in control of Iran's security apparatus and army, the popularly elected Khatami stopped calling the demonstrators "university students" and began to refer to them as "rioters who are believed to be backed by terrorist groups."

These uneasy developments form the backdrop against which Shirin Neshat's wildly praised recent video work, for which she won a Golden Lion at this summer's Venice Biennale, has emerged. Until the appearance of ***Turbulent***, 1998, a delicate form of allegory expressing complex political sentiment, and especially ***Rapture***, 1999, the work of the New York–based, Iranian-born artist—self-portraits in which she is posed behind a chador, holding a gun—has been the inconspicuous (and rather transparent) agent of another weary rivulet of multiculturalism. With every appearance of her photographs, the routine Western reading of "gender politics in Islam" was rehearsed and recycled as critics and art historians bore down on the "subject" of her art: how the social, political, and psychological dimensions of women's lives in contemporary Islamic societies are defined by absolute submission. The message one seemed to take away from her photographs was that the





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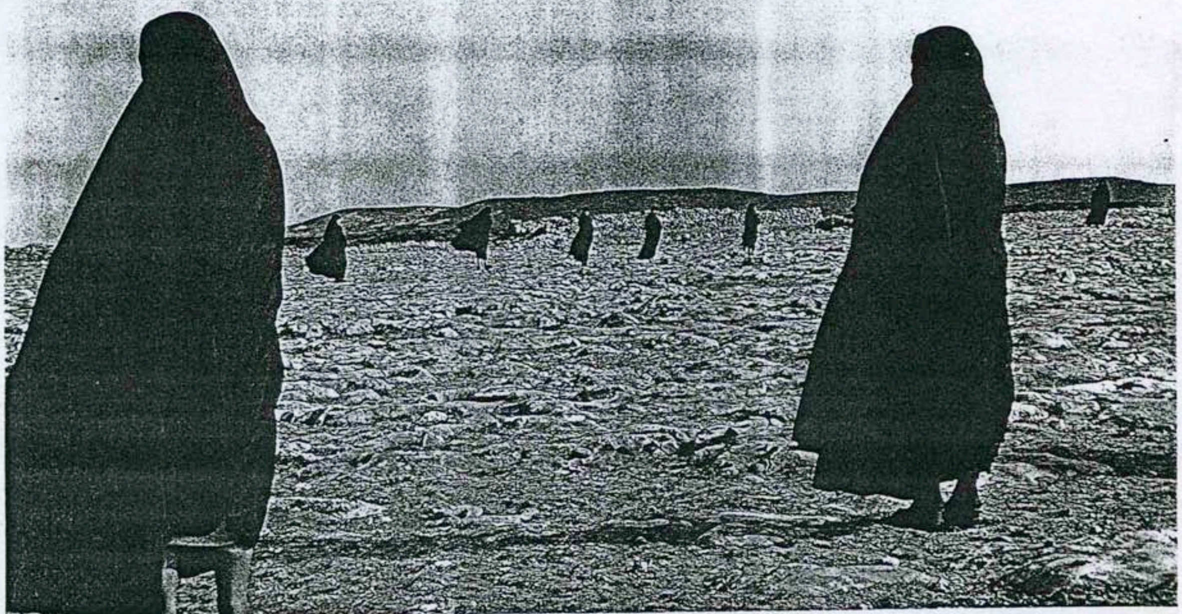

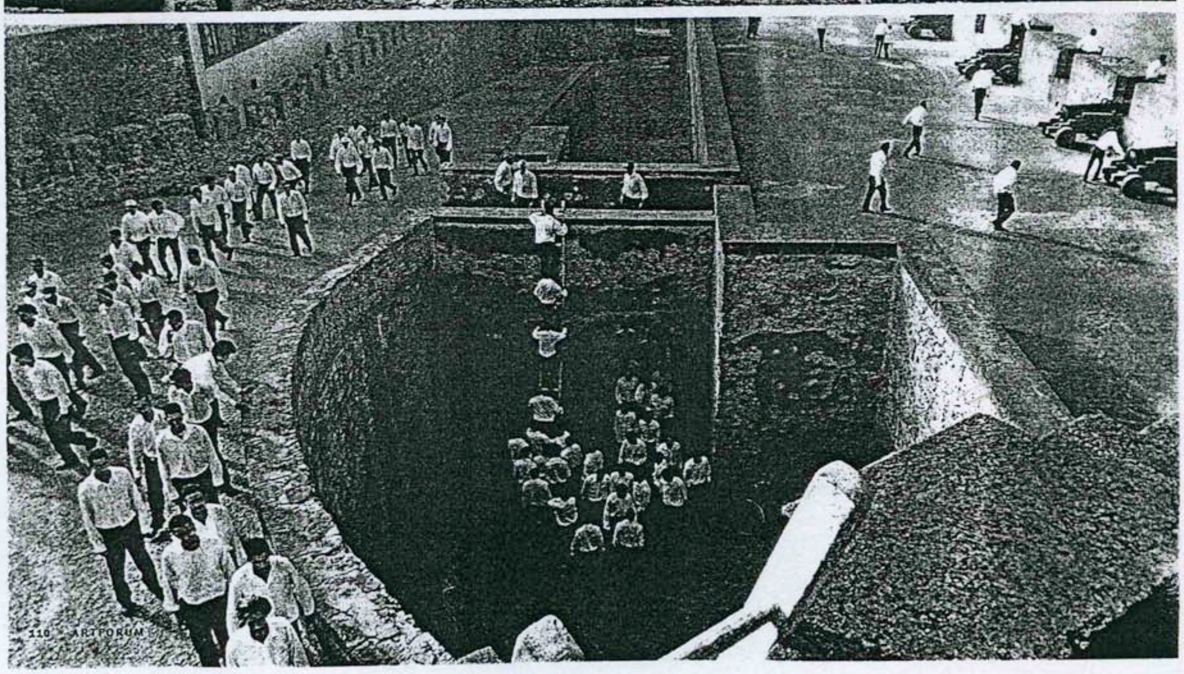

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level of acquiescence is such that it carries with it a built-in threshold beyond which a woman would just let her revolver do her talking for her. But when students are being thrown from windows, this all seems, well, a mite sentimental and anemic, if not sophomoric.

It also seems a bit contrary to the current situation. Consider the following: Before the '79 revolution, only 35 percent of women in Iran were literate; that figure now stands at 74 percent. Under the shah, women made up one-third of the university population; today it's one-half. One in three physicians in Iran are women; so are 30 percent of this year's Harvard Business School class. These numbers, by the way, come from the West, not from the Khatami government. It is undeniable that significant strides have taken place under Khatami, and it is just as true that higher education, promoted under his version of Islamic government, has had a hand in stirring the unrest he has just ordered put down. As far as gender politics in Iran is concerned, there is no question that reform is being carried forward, but it is important as well to know what kind of reform, where it is headed, and how far there is to go.

The ham-fisted (if not entirely undeserved) readings of Neshat's earlier photographs—where gender politics is the one size that fits all—simply stopped with the imagined situation of women in the Islamic republic. They were never nimble enough to account for the evolving political and social policies of rectification, including the broad-based gains of Khatami's reform government (however modest these appear by Western standards). In turn, the meaning of Neshat's art was arrested, made to appear narrow and incapacitated where real-time politics was concerned. But current events have intervened, and the present din in Iran has helped liberate a complex of meaning that suggests the work is more far-reaching than we had come to imagine.

Rapture is an installation of two synchronized black-and-white videos, projected onto opposing walls in a darkened room. Neshat directed both videos in Essaouira, Morocco—a locale used famously by Orson Welles in his filming of *Othello*—and Sussan Deyhim's astonishing score accompanies them. One video is an account of a legion of self-involved men carrying on within their remote fortress by the sea; the other tracks a chorus of nearly one hundred unsheltered women roaming an infertile landscape somewhere beyond the castle walls. Neshat has set the scene so that the men are wound tightly around their own inward focus, utterly centered on performing a litany of rituals and entirely dependent on the imposing stronghold to express their identity. In obvious contrast, the women are uncomplicated and uninhibited. Looking out onto and ultimately beyond the landscape, the women shape their own providence. When there is occasion for the two groups to notice one another, it is by sequences of call and response, though it is nearly always the women reacting to the men. This kind of rhythm drives the two stories in fateful directions.

It is the question of destiny—by which I mean not so much giving in to fatalism but the recognition of the larger movements of which we are only dimly aware at a given time—that is really Neshat's subject, and to see this, it best serves us to fast-forward to a passage near the close of *Rapture*. In the final sequence, the nomadic women, veiled in traditional black chadors, have endured passage across the dreadfully desolate countryside in order to make their way to the ocean's edge.

Shirin Neshat, *Untitled* ("Rapture" series), 1999, gelatin-silver prints on fiber paper, dimensions variable.

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Once they arrive, there is not a moment's hesitation—as if from instinct, six women from the larger cast wade through the shallows to climb into a wretched, hulking boat and head out to sea. Those who do not go aboard either help to push the lumbering boat into the surf or caringly watch over the exodus from shore. My final memory of the film was of this pitiful but intrepid vessel, climbing and sliding back down the heaving swells, edging its way toward the horizon. The six have surely departed on an uncertain voyage, or have they? Neshat provides no denouement, but instead gestures toward a destiny yet to emerge from a complex field of possibilities. Things are far too lyrical and mysterious in *Rapture* to allow any certain fate to be ascribed. If the departure of the six women represents escape at any cost, then we have just witnessed—as have, presumably, the men in the castle—an act of expediency; if what we've seen is an act of suicide, it does not matter. If the women are engaged in migration, then all is lost; if liberation from repression is at hand, things are ultimately doomed (no matter how poetic the action). If it is the sacrifice of the many for the few, there may be hope for salvation; if it is the sacrifice of the few for the many, it is martyrdom.

In *Rapture*, the destiny of the protagonists is perpetually unsettled—it could be said that it is as unresolved in the highly allegorical world Neshat has imagined as it is in the gritty world of Khatami and the students who rally against the pace of his government's reforms. Yes, half of Iran's university population is now women, and a certain number of them are being teargassed for expressing opinions undoubtedly hatched by the university education they have only recently been able to attain. It's all relative, and relativity, in that kind of dosage, stings as long as the ultimate outcome of Khatami's reform government remains in question. Capable of evoking the problem of gender in a field of geopolitical speculation without being ground down beneath the abstract ideology of any particular politics (gender or otherwise), Neshat's allegory in *Rapture* possesses a reach far beyond her earlier work. Her accomplishment with the video causes me to think straightaway of William Kentridge's poetic reflection on the legacy of apartheid. Even of James Baldwin.

TO UNDERSCORE NESHAT'S WORK AS SIMPLE RAGE AGAINST "PREVAILING REPRESSION WITHOUT END" IS TO IGNORE WHAT IS TRANSPIRING IN CONTEMPORARY IRAN.

It doesn't take a great leap of imagination to see that the army of men, uniformly dressed in white shirts and black pants, must represent the status quo of fundamentalist Islam in Iran. As the video begins, a hundred or more of these men are seen streaming into the ancient bastion. Like drones, they seem mindlessly compelled by pointless routines, each one more futile than the last. In one example, they storm through the citadel carrying ladders, which they prop against the thick walls; doing so, they discover that each ladder is invariably too short, but fail to recognize this as the first sign that their exercise of power is going nowhere. Trapped by their imagination, frustrated by their own futility, they inevitably fight among themselves until the women, in the opposing video, bring an unexpected halt to the anarchy.

When the women begin ululating, a repetitive and beautifully shrill vocalization, the men stop their fighting. For a moment, they are spellbound by the riveting, reverberating sound. But ultimately their identity as drones spurs their behavior and they resume the menial drills: rhythmic clapping, washing hands while seated in concentric circles, herdlike proceedings from which reason has long since been banished. By now, the six women have climbed into their boat and set out through the surf; their imprecise passage has begun. Somehow the men are drawn into a formation along the top of the fortress walls. Looking outward for the first time, they recognize the courage and self-determination being carried out across the sea in a humble boat. How perilous it seems. Could these men do other than long for sovereign destiny, that which has obviously been lost to them? And so they wave, but is it farewell, or do they mean to signal something else? Their raised hands are not clenched; instead their open palms seem to offer goodwill. Neshat leaves us with the impression that in the end, it is the men, not the women, who have experienced the central epiphany in *Rapture*—it is the men, the seat of stifling power, who have been transported toward enlightenment. But whether they can act on their rapture, resuscitating destiny, remains to be seen. How appropriate this is, for after all, in contemporary Iran, it will be the men behind the fortress, rather than the women behind the veils, who will determine the outcome of the existing strife.

Rapture glows with a labyrinth of meaning as it breathes with a rare compassion for Muslim women. But to underscore Neshat's work as simple rage against "prevailing repression without end" is to ignore what is transpiring in Iran and to buy into the wholesale stereotyping of Islam proffered by the official art-world left. There is an important comparison to be made between the ending of *Rapture* and the conclusion of director Tahmine Milani's *Two Women*, one of the most popular movies in Iran today. Having escaped her insensitive husband and malicious father, an Iranian woman pledges herself to a new life apart from repression, proclaiming: "I have to go to computer class. I have to learn to drive." The six women making their way over the ocean have likewise promised themselves to a renewed life, a life "apart." Just as *Two Women* declares to its audience that self-defining destiny is the path toward reform, so too does *Rapture*. But in *Rapture*, the first audience must be understood as the army of men waving from the ramparts.

Rapture is a poignant meditation on sovereign destiny at a time when the situation in Iran requires both meditation and action. Speculation abounds in the West as to whether an Ayatollah Gorbachev or an Ayatollah Deng Xiaoping will emerge at this crucial juncture to continue the reforms Khatami has set in motion. In order to avoid the Gorbachev-like counterrevolution that resulted from the failed synthesis of capitalism and communism, perhaps a Deng-style path toward reform will provide needed guidance. What is clear, however, is that the fusion of modernism and Islam is no longer a choice for Khatami; it must be one way or the other. In the end, *Rapture* is poetic reflection, not political directive, but it makes this much self-evident: Before the next step, Khatami and his followers, or even his successor, must sanction the bliss of sovereign destiny, that stream of rapture Neshat invites us to witness just beyond the fortress walls. □

Ronald Jones, chair of the Visual Arts Division, School of the Arts, Columbia University, is a New York–based artist.