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Scott MacDonald, "Between Two Worlds: An Interview with Shirin Neshat," *Feminist Studies*, Fall, 2004

## Between Two Worlds: An Interview with Shirin Neshat



Speechless, 1996. RC print. © 1996 Shirin Neshat. Photo by Larry Barns. Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York City.

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

A native of Qazvin, Iran, Shirin Neshat finished high school and attended college in the United States and once the Islamic Revolution had transformed Iran, decided to remain in this country. She now lives in New York City, where she is represented by the Barbara Gladstone Gallery. In the mid-1990s, Neshat became known for a series of large photographs, "Women of Allah," which she designed, directed (not a trained photographer, she hired Larry Barns, Kyong Park, and others to make her images), posed for, and decorated with poetry written in Farsi.

The "Women of Allah" photographs provide a sustained rumination on the status and psyche of women in traditional Islamic cultures, using three primary elements: the black veil, modern weapons, and the written texts. In each photograph Neshat appears, dressed in black, sometimes covered completely, facing the camera, holding a weapon, usually a gun. The texts often appear to be part of the photographed imagery. The photographs are both intimate and confrontational. They reflect the repressed status of women in Iran and their power, as women and as Muslims. They depict Neshat herself as a woman caught between the freedom of expression evident in the photographs and the complex demands of her Islamic heritage, in which Iranian women are expected to support and sustain a revolution that frees them from Western decadence and represses dimensions of their individuality and creativity.

By 1998, Neshat was making films, shot in 16mm (and later in 35mm), and initially presented as gallery installations, usually organized so that the viewer stands between two projections that face each other—and sometimes seem to address each other—from opposite walls. In *Turbulent* (1998), for example, a man (Shoja Azari) and a woman (Sussan Deyhim) are seen on opposite sides of the gallery space. First, the man sings a song, to the delight of an all-male audience. When his song has ended, the woman performs a complex vocal piece. She has no audience and sings no lyrics, but her voice and delivery are evocative and powerful, so powerful that the man on the opposite side of the gallery seems as mesmerized by her as we are. In the installation of *Rapture* (1999), one screen reveals a large group of men who march aggressively toward the camera, through city streets—it seems to be the Middle East—and subsequently into and onto a fort at the edge of the ocean. On the opposite screen, a group of women dressed in black walk toward the camera in an arc over a rocky landscape, and subsequently onto a beach, where several of the women board a small boat and set out to sea. In the final moments of *Rapture*, the men seem to signal from one side of the gallery to the women sailing into the distance—either asking the women to return or waving good-bye. In both installations Neshat focuses on the separation of the sexes in Islamic culture and on the various ways in which this traditional separation is articulated. In *Turbulent* the male singer's performance is public and verbal, the woman's is wordless and solitary. In *Rapture* the men are juxtaposed with public, and particularly military, architecture; the women, with the land and the sea.

In *Fervor* (2000) Neshat again uses two images, but unlike *Turbulent* and *Rapture*, *Fervor* is presented with the two images side by side, both as an installation and when the films are projected. *Fervor* develops a skeletal narrative involving a woman and a man, kindred spirits apparently, but separated by the restrictions of their society. At most, they glance at each other at public prayers or pass demurely by each other along country roads or on city streets. The overall design of the two juxtaposed images, combined with Neshat's use of mirror printing, creates a visually arresting maze within which the protagonists seem fated never to meet—and Neshat's most visually engaging and evocative film.

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Turbulent, 1998. Production still. © 1998 Shirin Neshat. Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York City.

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Recently Neshat has been showing all her double-screen installation films as theatrical works, with the two images side by side (in DVD projection). *Soliloquy* (1999) is the most overtly personal of her films. In the installation version we see Neshat herself in two very different cityscapes: on the left dressed in black, she is seen walking in a small, unidentified Middle Eastern city and visiting a mosque where she watches children play in a small pool, then seems to join some sort of ceremony with other women in black; on the right, Neshat, again dressed in black, is seen in a modern urban landscape, where she seems to have business and to come upon a Christian religious service. The spectator's physical position, looking back and forth between two different worlds, echoes and embodies Neshat's psychic position, caught between her past and her present, and between her fear of losing her individuality within a traditional Islamic definition of womanhood and her feelings of separation and isolation within a modern Christian-based society.

*Pulse* (2001), *Possessed* (2001), and *Passage* (2001) are more conventionally theatrical works, although they are also presented as gallery installations. In *Pulse*, a single continuous tracking shot first moves forward into a darkened room, evoking both bedroom and cell, where a woman is sitting on the floor, embracing a radio, then moves back out through the room. In *Possessed*, a madwoman, not dressed in traditional black and with her face and hair revealed, wanders into a public square, then out again, leaving consternation in her wake. *Pulse* and *Possessed* suggest a diptych evoking dimensions of the private and public realities of women in traditional Islamic cultures.

In *Passage*, a collaboration with composer Philip Glass, Neshat intercuts between a group of men solemnly carrying what looks to be the corpse of a woman, dressed in white, along an empty beach, and a circle of women, dressed in black, who are digging a hole with their hands. Nearby, a young girl makes a circle of small stones and, as the men near the circle of women, a fire behind the child (started by the child? emanating from the child?) moves in a line across the rocky landscape into the distance and in an arc behind the women and men in the foreground. Like nearly all of Neshat's films, *Passage* is a kind of cine-ritual, in this instance a ritual that seems to function as a premonition of, or at least as a kind of cine-prayer for, fundamental change in the relations of women and men. *Tooba* (2002) is also a ritual, shot in Mexico, in which groups of women and men, in a mountainous landscape, converge on a beautiful, isolated tree. Early in the film we see close-ups of a woman, apparently the spirit of the tree and of this landscape, but by the time the groups of women and men arrive, the spirit has disappeared.

Neshat's work suggests an ongoing transformation. "Women of Allah" reveals Neshat's anger at the traditional suppression of her gender and her willingness to express this anger. The two-screen installation works reveal a woman and artist rendered schizoid by her diasporic identity and torn between heritage and aspiration. The more recent, single-image films suggest Neshat's developing identity as a film director, certainly still empathetic with the struggles of women, but now in control of her own life and career, less torn and more ambitious.

I spoke with Neshat in New York City in January 2003 and subsequently by phone. We refined the interview by mail.

Scott MacDonald: *Soliloquy* depicts a young woman caught between two worlds. Since you play the central character, it seems a very personal film. I know you were born in Iran and have lived in New York for some years, but I'd be grateful to know more about your history.

Shirin Neshat: I grew up in Iran in a small religious town that has now become a big city, called Qazvin. Its setting is mostly desert landscape but it's only a few hours away from the Caspian Sea. My father was a well known physician, a very educated and progressive man, with an unusual passion for agriculture and farming. I lived through his influence; he always encouraged me to be an individual, to take risks, to learn, to see the world, as he always did. My mother was a more typical Iranian woman with little education and committed to family and domestic life. As a young girl, I was sent to the capital city Teheran to study in a Catholic boarding school, which ended up being a horrible experience.

SMD: What happened?

SN: Well, I had come from a very warm, supportive Muslim family environment, but at this Christian

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

school, totally guarded by the Catholic nuns, I ended up having a very difficult experience. It was a bit like living in detention. I slowly became ill and developed anorexia. When I went



Possessed, 2001. Production still. © 2001 Shirin Neshat. Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York City.

back to my home town after a year and a half, most people could not recognize me because I had lost so much weight.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was felt that a Western education was a good thing. Most upper- and middle-class people were beginning to send their sons abroad to study, but my father sent both his sons and daughters abroad to England and the United States. Eventually my two sisters abandoned their education, returned to Iran, and got married, whereas I ended up remaining in the U.S. and eventually developed a career. My father of course was very proud and often talked about it before he died.

SMD: How did you end up at Berkeley?

SN: When I first came to the U.S., I arrived at Los Angeles to join my older sisters. I attended high school for one year, but soon my sisters decided to move back to Iran, so I found myself alone. I never liked Southern California. After a short visit to northern California, I fell in love with its landscape, so I moved to the Bay Area. I started by studying in a small college named Dominican College and eventually was accepted to U.C. Berkeley. I managed to stay at Berkeley through the BA, MA, and MFA programs, but the truth is I was never a good student, never a highlight. I was just getting by. In fact, I barely got accepted into graduate school. I just wasn't ready for it, so I spent two years making what I now consider mediocre art. After I graduated with an MFA, I decided to abandon art all together and didn't really get back to making art again until a good ten years later— until 1990.

SMD: What kept you from making art? And how did you return to it?

SN: I felt that my ideas were confused and simply not strong enough. Also, I wasn't really inspired by the art history that I was exposed to. When I moved from California to New York, I felt further intimidated by the contemporary art scene in New York City and found that I had neither the maturity nor the desire to become an artist—to pursue an art career. I spent ten years working with an

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

institution called the Storefront for Art and Architecture, which was founded by my ex-husband, Kyong Park. I helped him with the curatorial program but mostly as an administrator. The Storefront was a not-for-profit organization committed to presenting art and architectural programs. It was very interdisciplinary and dedicated to bringing people together from both practical and theoretical backgrounds of architecture. I was exposed to great minds from various fields such as artists, architects, philosophers, culture critics, sometimes even scientists. Working there became my true education, mostly helping me to mature and to begin to develop my own ideas and methodology. Eventually in 1998, I left the organization. What became the turning point of my art career was of course my decision to return to Iran in 1990 after twelve years of absence. That trip and subsequent trips brought me an artistic focus: mainly the subject of the Islamic Revolution and of women in relation to the revolution. Finally I had found a subject that I felt passionate about, but more importantly, making art of this nature became an excuse to reconnect myself with my long-lost culture. Since then, the work has had its own natural evolution, one subject leading to another.

SMD: Can you talk a little about your earliest work after returning to Iran?

SN: My first artistic work was a body of photographs, called “Women of Allah” [1993-97], focusing on the subject of the revolution and the concept of “martyrdom.” This series had an element of performance involved, as I posed for it myself. The photographs were quite minimal: a few elements were repeated over and over again, including the female body, a very problematic topic in Islamic culture as it suggests ideas of shame, sin, and sexuality; text, I inscribed calligraphy–poetry by Iranian women writers–directly on the photographs; weapons, obviously a symbol of violence; and finally the veil, extremely controversial, which has been considered both a symbol of repression and a symbol of liberation–resistance against the Western influence. My book, *Women of Allah*, published in 1997 by Marco Noire Editore in Italy, entirely documents this series of photographs.

SMD: How old were you when you left Iran?

SN: Seventeen. I left Iran in 1975; the revolution happened in 1979, and I didn’t return until 1990, so as you can imagine the culture had undergone a drastic transformation. I, like many Iranians who had not lived through the revolution, found this change quite shocking.

SMD: How did the revolution affect your family?

SN: Of course, everyone was affected by it, and in some ways my family was not as badly affected as others were, but the change did take a big toll on my father. He had worked very hard all his life and was just about to retire when all his benefits suddenly disappeared, so he ended up with a minimal salary. He had gained a certain social status and high respect for the relentless contribution he had made to our city through his medical and agricultural practice. Yet, during the last years of his life, he spent most of his time fighting to protect what was his. A man who thrived in world travel could no longer travel outside Iran after the revolution, until just about a year before he died, when I urged the family to have a reunion in Turkey. By that time he was quite ill.

SMD: So you were the only member of your family who stayed in the West?

SN: My younger brother left right after the revolution, with many difficulties. My family helped his exit from Iran, and I managed to help him enter the United States. And now he’s living in California.

SMD: Have you been able to stay in contact with your family, or has that been difficult?

SN: For a while, I was going back quite frequently, and we’ve met occasionally in Europe. But traveling to the Middle East is not as easy any more, on both ends, so mostly we try to stay in touch through telephone, at least once a week.

SMD: You think the calls are listened to?

SN: I wouldn’t be surprised, especially these days.

SMD: So you were talking about your photography.

SN: Yes. At the beginning in the 1990s when I traveled frequently to my country, I became obsessed with the experience. I found myself both fascinated and terrified by the impact of the revolution. There was so

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

much that I didn't understand that I desperately wanted to understand: for example, how and why the revolution was formed and what were the main philosophical and ideological ideas behind this change. In a sense, coming to terms with this subject strangely made me feel less distant and more a part of the community. Since then it has been an amazing process; every experience and question has led to many more. Later, there were a lot of questions about the problem of translation in the Women of Allah series. My response has always been, "You have to keep in mind the context in which this work was made. I had no art career; I was not thinking about the audience since I didn't have any; I was making this work for myself."

SMD: I assume that if someone who knew Farsi was looking at these photographs, they could read this text and might even recognize the poetry?



Offered Eyes, 1993. RC print and ink. 11 x 14 inches. © 1993 Shirin Neshat. Photo by Plauto. Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York City.

SN: Yes, of course. Iranians not only could read and understand the meaning of the poetry but are also very familiar with the history and place of the writers in relation to Iranian society—something that would be impossible to translate to Westerners. SMD: How did you make the transition from photography to film and video? SN: I had been working with photography and the subject of the revolution since 1993, but by 1997, while I remained totally interested in the social and political realities of my country, I felt the urge to move beyond the realm of politics and take a more philosophical approach. While thinking about reformulating my concepts, I thought it was also necessary to change the medium that I was working with. I had grown frustrated with the limitations of photography, at least in the way I was approaching it. Photography was a medium that I had no training in, but had developed a particular style, which became the Women of Allah series. I needed a medium that offered me a new level of lyricism. So I made what felt like the bold decision to shift from photography to the moving image. My first big attempt was a video I shot with two cameramen in Istanbul.

SMD: Is this Turbulence?

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

SN: No, this was *The Shadow under the Web*, a piece with four simultaneous projections, shot in Istanbul in 1997. This was an installation that basically depicted a woman (myself) draped in black chador running simultaneously in four distinct different spaces—private, public, sacred, and natural. At the time I was very interested in how space is defined, controlled, and divided in Islamic cultures according to the nature of the gender that occupies it: for example, how in traditional societies, private spaces are considered “feminine” and public spaces are “masculine.” *The Shadow under the Web*, a color video shot in both natural and built landscape, became a big departure from my earlier black and white photographs, which were so sculptural and almost monumental with no use of background.

SMD: *Turbulent* was originally meant to be seen as two images across from one another; but even though I’ve only seen the DVD with the two images next to each other, when the woman begins to sing, it’s clearly as if the man is looking at her, so I get the sense of the original installation anyway. When you see the images side by side in any of these pieces, you can catch subtleties of parallel rhythm and graphic design between the two images that you would lose in the installation version. It’s both gain and loss, either way!

SN: Yes. When I look at the films with the images side by side, I like how they complement each other visually; but when you have the two images projected on two opposite walls, something very interesting happens between the viewers and the piece. They are physically and emotionally caught in between the two sides, and because they cannot possibly see both images simultaneously, they must decide which side to turn to and which side to miss, and in doing so, in a way they become the editors of the piece. This experience of course gets lost when the two pictures are projected side by side.

SMD: I found them all quite powerful the way I saw them. The only piece I’ve seen as an installation is *Passage*, which I saw at the Guggenheim. I like that one both ways.

SN: With *Passage*, conceptually it made no sense to divide the picture into two, so everything was kept in one screen.

SMD: Even without knowing Farsi, I understand, or think I understand, *Turbulent*. It’s almost a call and response, and a very generous feminist piece: the man’s singing is wonderful, and you show that he has support from the audience, which he deserves, and then the woman responds with her amazing music that seems to surprise and amaze both us and him. Are these the actual singers, lip-synching their own music?

SN: The female singer is an actual singer, Sussan Deyhim, who was lip-synching to her own music. The male singer was played by Shoja Azari. Shoja had never sung before; he was simply lip-synching the part. The actual singer is a very well-known Iranian singer: Shahram Nazeri, probably the most beloved living Iranian musician today who sings classical Persian and Sufi music. He mostly sings poetry by important Iranian poets such as Hafez and Rumi. In *Turbulent* he was singing a poem by Rumi.

SMD: Is Sussan Deyhim singing words?

SN: No.

SMD: Often in my teaching, I use Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen’s *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977). Do you know that film?

SN: No.

SMD: It comes out of a lot of film theory and much discussion about gender. In order to counter the usually “phallic” architecture of the film image, Mulvey and Wollen tell the story of their protagonist exclusively with 360-degree pans, to suggest a rounded, female orientation to the world. I wonder whether you see the auditorium space as basically phallic, and the circling around the woman as she sings as a kind of feminist response.

SN: That’s really interesting. The main conceptual device in this film was the notion of opposites: the man, the woman; black, white; empty auditorium, full auditorium; traditional music, totally improvised music; a conformist versus a rebel—and so we thought it would also be appropriate to have the camera stationary with the male singer, but circling the camera around the female singer, particularly as she reaches the climax of her song. The fast circular camera movement around her was meant to reiterate her mental state, her madness, her rage.

SMD: I like that the film doesn’t end with her facing away from us, which is the position we first see her



# GLADSTONE GALLERY

in. The man is facing us, with his straightforward look, but after we circle around the woman, the camera stops with her in profile. The image isn't quite the same as it was when we started.

SN: I wanted to reverse the situation so that at the end, she is no longer hidden. Having clearly proved herself through her unbelievable performance, she appears relieved and peaceful whereas he comes across as shocked and at a loss.

SMD: As you conceptualize a piece, how early are you bringing the collaborators in? How fully do you conceptualize a piece before beginning to work with them?

SN: The process of our collaboration has been very organic in its development. It started with the making of *Turbulent* when a few of us accidentally came together. All of us were Iranians living abroad, but each one of us came from a different artistic field. For example, Shoja Azari is a writer and filmmaker; Sussan Deyhim a singer and composer; Darius Khondji, a cinematographer; Ghasem Ebrahimian, a filmmaker and a cinematographer; Shahram Karimi, a visual artist and an art director. There was an immediate excitement in the energy of the group and how it seemed to satisfy us both socially and artistically. I would basically generate an idea and present everyone with a storyboard. We would discuss the concept, location, budget, visual form of the film, etc. Everyone would offer their reactions to the idea. Then a few of us would travel to find the ideal location in whichever country we decided to work, and eventually we got busy with the production. The entire time, I remained very open to everyone's input but also felt free to reject ideas. Of course over time, the group came to understand my aesthetic very well, and the collaboration became more fluid. Out of the group, Shoja Azari has been most essential in helping me through the entire process, from the conception of the original idea to the postproduction work. Sussan Deyhim and I have worked together a number of times. I am very proud of our collaboration as I think my images and her music blend unusually well together. Of course, the dynamic of this collaborative effort continues to change as new members join and a few move on. That has been the pattern. I must also mention that all members of the group are also independently very active in their own careers, and I dedicate time to helping them. For example, recently in Shoja Azari's film *K* (2002), I performed as an actress, helped with the production design, and was the executive producer.

SMD: I understand you are working on a script. Is this for a narrative feature?

SN: Yes. I am in the process of readapting a book, so I have been writing a script. The book, *Women without Men*, is by a very well-known Iranian woman writer, Shahrnosh Parsipour. She is living in exile in Berkeley, California. She was imprisoned for about five years in Iran. I have been lucky in finding her, and we have developed a wonderful friendship. *Women without Men* is a beautiful surrealistic story of five different women who are all coming from oppressive backgrounds, but their lives mysteriously converge in the countryside in Iran, in a house with a big garden, and together they try to create their own independent society: a sort of a utopia, a paradise, removed from the outside world. The only man in this community of exiles is a gardener, who is like a god figure, a wise and compassionate man who becomes a guardian for these women. Every character in the novel is complex with unique aspirations. So obviously this is not a story about women against men. What is interesting is how eventually this community falls apart. The utopia proves impossible due to the likelihood that every woman herself contains the flaws that she is running away from in the outside world. To me this book, which is very visual, is political, philosophical, mystical, universal, and, of course, very feminist.

SMD: You mentioned that this new film is not a film about men versus women. Rapture on some level is that.

SN: Yes and no. I believe it was not really intended to pit the women against men and vice versa; it was more about looking at the contrast between men and women in relation to nature and culture.

SMD: Rapture was shot in Morocco?

SN: Yes.

SMD: Would you have shot in Iran if that had been possible? And did you choose that fort because its architecture would be well-known to people in the Arab world and in Iran? Are you using the fort as a specific place or a generic place?

# GLADSTONE GALLERY



Rapture, 1999. Production still. © 1999 Shirin Neshat. Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York City.

SN: It is very complicated, if not impossible for someone like me to film in Iran, because of the controversial nature of my subjects. Also, another factor has been the ambiguity in whether I am safe in Iran or not, and I haven't wanted to take the risk. But even though I work in these other— safer—countries, I pretend that I'm in Iran; I'm very cautious about the type of architecture that I use. For example, I stay away from the traditional, authentic architecture of that country. In *Rapture*, I filmed in the fortress in the city of Essaouira, because this space was a relevant location for my concept. The architecture of a fortress, particularly in Islamic cultures, represents a typically male space, as it suggests ideas of the military, war, defense, all the roles that are associated with men. Ironically this fortress was built by the Portuguese in the fifteenth century (I believe), but most Islamic cities traditionally were surrounded by walls—a fortress. The city of Marrakesh is a vivid example of that. There was another personal attraction to this fort which was that Orson Welles shot some scenes of *Othello* (1951) there. Orson Welles spent a lot of time in Essaouira. He is very much loved by the local people. In regards to the use of natural landscape, I normally choose what I consider a more generic landscape, a space that is not identified with any particular culture. For example, in *Rapture* the women were filmed in a desert that was quite plain. It was not possible to recognize what country it belonged to.

SMD: Even more fully than *Turbulent*, *Rapture* creates a male/female point/ counterpoint. When the men are chanting whatever they're chanting, the women turn their backs on them and hold up their hands as if to ward off what the men are saying, and there's that poignant ending where, and this would be particularly dramatic in a gallery space where the images would be on opposite walls, the men are waving to the women, who seem to have given up and are rowing out to sea in search of new territory. It looks like the men are waving good-bye and good luck, or please come back.

SN: Exactly. I'm glad you read it like that. Making *Rapture* was a unique experience. I felt that the narrative was expressed, as in choreography, with a special focus on form—geometric shapes. In other words, we were trying to tell the story through the massive body movement of the men and women in various built and natural landscapes. I particularly enjoyed the editing process and working on how the images aesthetically complemented other. For example, at one point the men were sitting in a

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

circle preparing for prayer, while the women were seated in a triangular form praying. There were many other instances in which I relied on the sheer beauty and power of the image to tell my story. Another important point about Rapture is that never in the entire film does the camera focus on a particular character. The narrative is always about the exchange of a mass of women versus a mass of men. There is no single protagonist here. My cameraman at the time constantly wanted to shoot close-ups of the beautiful faces, and I kept resisting it, saying, "I'm not going to use a single shot if you do." So soon he gave up.

SMD: You mentioned that Fervor was originally designed so that the two images would be seen side by side. For me, as a film person, that film is particularly appealing; the way in which the two images work together is remarkable.

SN: Originally, my feeling was that since the subject of sexual taboo was shared by both Muslim men and women, while still divided, they were no longer opposites. With the superb cinematography of Ghasem Ebrahimian, I felt that both the separation and the temptation that existed between the two groups of men and women were beautifully captured.

SMD: How fully were the formal elements designed in advance?

SN: In Fervor, the decision to put the images side by side was not decided at the beginning, but later, and only because by accident I saw some images next to each other in the editing room. I really got involved with experimenting with the mirroring effect.

SMD: If one reads the progression of the films, in both Turbulent and Rapture, men and women are going in different directions or are astonished at each other, but they are clearly divided into separate spaces. In Fervor, they're divided into separate spaces that often become one space; and then in Passage, it's as though the men and the women are collaborating in a ritual within the same image, to bury a certain kind of separation between them. They don't really do it, but they're on the verge of doing it.

SN: You are absolutely right. Usually the idea of installation design has direct relation to the concept. As you explained, in Turbulent and Rapture the men and women basically existed separately and were occupied differently. However, in Fervor and Passage, they came together to participate in a shared ritual, whether a public event (Fervor) or a funeral (Passage).

SMD: In Fervor, the man gives the speech in front of the divided men and women. Do you have a translation of that speech?

SN: Yes, I do; I had a professional translation prepared and was working on subtitles but many people, particularly the English-speaking friends, recommended against it, saying, "The translation would make the film too literal. Fervor should be treated like an opera." So at the end I dropped the subtitles. I sometimes regret this decision, but I do try to display the translation of the speech in exhibitions.

SMD: Operas are now subtitled in some places.

SN: Yes, but I think our experience with opera is not verbal. It is visual and aural.

# GLADSTONE GALLERY



Soliloquy, 1999. Production still. © 1999 Shirin Neshat. Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York City.

SMD: Can you explain the nature of the speaker's speech?

SN: He was delivering a moral speech about the subject of sin—sin that arises from desire, temptation for the opposite sex. He uses the story of Youssef and Zoleikha from the Koran. Similar to the story of Adam and Eve, basically Zoleikha is blamed for seducing Youssef. The speaker is using this tale as a lesson for the men and women, which is illustrated by a painting in the background. This style is inspired by a very special tradition of theater from Iran, where the storyteller uses a painting as a backdrop to illustrate his story. Anyway, as the speaker—I've left it rather dubious whether he is a Mullah, actor, or politician—addresses the public, he warns all good Muslim men and women to avoid adultery and to repress all uncalled sexual tendencies. He uses the slogan: "Curse upon the Satan!"

SMD: How widely has your work been seen in Iran?

SN: Only Tooba has been officially shown in Iran recently at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Teheran. Apparently it had an enthusiastic reception. But as you can imagine, the topics of my work are inherently problematic, so most projects are not really possible to display for public exposure.

SMD: I have two levels of questions about Soliloquy and one involves the fact that you yourself play the main character, a person who seems—I don't know whether "alienated" is the right word—but at least

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

detached from each of two places, though in somewhat different ways, and, on another level, who also enjoys the two places, but again in two different ways.

SN: That's a pretty good reading, actually.

SMD: Albany, New York, seems the place of work.

SN: Yes, along with several shots made in the World Trade Center.

SMD: And what is the other location?

SN: We filmed in eastern Turkey, on the border of Iran and Syria, not far from Iraq, in Mardin, a Kurdish town very close to the city of Urfa, the birthplace of Abraham. Mardin is a religious town, extremely poor and neglected, but quite beautiful. The city was made of adobe-type houses built on a small mountain in the middle of the desert. We discovered quickly that this city was quite dangerous due to the activities of both Kurdish rebels and the Muslim fundamentalists who were apparently being trained by Iranians on the border. The Turkish government has placed a large military base there, and, as you can imagine, we immediately became suspects as we arrived to make an Islamic film. We were questioned and guarded the entire time we were filming. It was the first time that I was working under such a high level of anxiety.

SMD: Did you film in a single complex?

SN: Yes, other than one general scenic view of the city, we mostly filmed within an amazing building called "Ghasemieh," which was originally a school to study the Koran. However, this building, an architectural monument, has been totally neglected and abandoned. Children often use it as a playground.

SMD: Where did you film in the World Trade Center?

SN: The main location in the World Trade Center was the entrance to the PATH trains. For me the image of the long escalators, with masses of people traveling up and down, was both frightening and a reflection of the reality of modern life. We filmed in other areas of the WTC, such as the main entranceway to the Winter Garden.

SMD: How did you decide on Albany as your main location?

SN: I scouted a few other American cities such as Dallas, Texas, and a few cities in Connecticut and ended up with Albany. My original criteria were that the city had to be a typical American city but not so easily recognizable. I thought Albany was perfect because while being the capital of New York State, it is not a highly visited city. For me the Rockefeller Plaza in Albany was really amazing. There were several monumental but practically abandoned buildings. I found these buildings both beautiful and oppressive at the same time, very similar in the quality of the space to the building we filmed in Turkey. As you can imagine, the architecture became an essential aspect of Soliloquy as the buildings represented each culture in its traditional values. It was therefore important that each culture be represented in equal terms of beauty and grandiosity.

SMD: There's a remarkable moment right at the beginning of Soliloquy where the trajectory of the two images seems to make a single cityscape, and then slowly the two images diverge. For a moment, at least in the DVD version (which is not the original installation version, where the images would be opposite one another in a room), the two images seem to be of one place, but then they become two places.

SN: We carefully orchestrated that construction. In each country, we built exactly the same size of room and windows on top of a building. We wanted each room to face a building or a structure that became iconic. In Albany the window opened to a high-rise building, and in Mardin the window faced a minaret. The camera moved at the same speed, panning around the window to reveal the woman.

SMD: Did you use that design for all the double-screen pieces? Were the two images always on opposite walls?

SN: Turbulence, Rapture, and Soliloquy are all designed as two opposite projections, but in Fervor the two picture images are projected side by side.

SMD: In Soliloquy the black-and-white shots of the boy in the dust during the section of the film shot in Turkey are an interruption in the continuity of the film. How do those shots function for you?

SN: Basically the main core of the narrative in Turkey revolves around an obscure ritual of death, a group of men and women dressed in black arriving from all sides of the building to pronounce terrible news of "death," soon to be followed with a ceremonial event which resembled something between a dance and a

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

funeral. Here the death was of a young boy who belonged to the female protagonist. The occasional cut to the young boy in black and white was a conceptual device to reiterate this tragedy. The event was inspired by my sister's story, who just a year prior to the film lost her young son and was with me in Turkey as we shot Soliloquy.

SMD: In the image shot in the West, when the woman goes into the modern building, she finds her way into a chapel where there are women in white. In the East she disappears and becomes invisible; here, she's totally visible, but alien to her situation.

SN: Yes, that was intended.

SMD: There's also the difference that in the East the religious spaces are clearly religious spaces, but in the West, the basic space seems to be a business space, but inside it's religious.

SN: Yes. In the West I was really focusing on modernity and decided to stay away from older churches. That's why I used St. Anna's Church in Manhattan, a very modern chapel.

SMD: Both *Possessed* and *Pulse* seem a little more direct than the earlier films; *Possessed* seems most like a conventional movie.

SN: You're right. As I said earlier, to me every one of these films has been an experiment in a direction I haven't tried before. I find it problematic to repeat the same style over and over again. With *Possessed* I learned a lot. First of all, it was one of the first times that I worked with a professional actress (Shohreh Aghdashloo), so I had to spend a lot of time in character development, to create her psychosis. Also, this film had a clear linear progression, which meant that we would not have as much flexibility as in the past in the editing process. All of these issues became exciting and challenging for me, particularly since for a change, the cast were not treated as sculptural volumes but as real characters.

SMD: Compared with the earlier films, *Possessed* is more theatrical, a bit more like a conventional film.

SN: Yes, absolutely. In *Possessed* the biggest aim was to explore and reveal the protagonist's state of mind—her madness, both in private and in the public domain. Her behavior continued to evolve and change from one type of emotion to another according to the space that she was inhabiting. This became very theatrical and completely a new experience for me.

SMD: *Possessed* reminds me a little of *Un Chant d'amour* (1952), the Jean Genet film. Do you know it?

SN: No.

SMD: It's about gay men—or maybe men in general—in prison, and how prison is the only place where they can express their erotic desire for each other. Imprisonment becomes, paradoxically, the one place where they are free to express a crucial dimension of themselves. *Possessed* is similar in the sense that in the society implicitly depicted in the film, madness becomes the only way in which a woman can express herself.

SN: That was the idea. The character here achieves her freedom in the state of madness. This of course makes direct reference to the Iranian culture, where one lives under constant social control. Therefore, the notion of individuality does pose a threat to the order of society, as it might provoke others to demand the same right. In this film, once the woman enters the

# GLADSTONE GALLERY



Possessed, 2001. Production still. © 2001 Shirin Neshat. Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York City.

public plaza and becomes the focus of everyone's attention, she immediately disturbs the space and divides the public into two groups: those who support her and her freedom to behave as she desires due to madness, and others, furiously insulted by her presence, who demand her immediate removal.

SMD: We see people arguing in the square after she leaves. Her freedom has instigated a debate.

SN: Exactly. She creates what we call Fetneh, a social chaos among the people. Possessed becomes more obvious, in terms of its narrative and its message, than Rapture and Passage, which are perhaps more ambiguous and abstract. I personally prefer the latter direction, but I am very happy that I experimented with what is so far my most conventional film.

SMD: In Pulse, I'm not sure exactly what the woman is doing. First we see her from a distance; she's on the floor, holding something, and then as we

# GLADSTONE GALLERY



Tooba, 2002. Production still. © 2002 Shirin Neshat. Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York City.

get close, she seems to be holding a radio.

SN: Yes. We carefully organized the room so that it had the feeling of a bedroom, but also resembled a prison cell. The radio becomes her access to the outside world—a tool for escape from her immediate environment. As we approach the woman voyeuristically, we hear her voice singing along with a song that is playing on the radio. She seems to be lost in her own state of ecstasy—fantasy. The entire film was created in one uninterrupted shot from the beginning to the end, from the moment the camera entered the room with the sound of a pulse to the moment when it exits at the end of the song. There was something very erotic and sensual about this movement and her posture. There was no clear narrative but a sort of glimpse into a private moment of this woman's life.

SMD: Do you think of those two films as a diptych: public and private?

SN: Well, I never quite thought about it like that, but it is possible to draw that conclusion as they were made at the same time with the same actress. To me the visual organization of *Pulse* was very different from that of *Possessed*, but *Pulse* does obviously reflect the private life and *Possessed*, the public life of the woman.

SMD: What led you to Mexico for *Tooba*, and what does “*Tooba*” mean?

SN: *Tooba* is originally a mythical character from the Koran, a woman who is also a tree, a sacred tree, a promised tree. After September 11, I started thinking about making a piece that focuses on the idea of a garden—a heaven. In the Islamic and Persian tradition, the garden is a very important symbol both in mystical and political terms. As in many other cultures, in our mystical and poetic tradition a garden becomes a space for spiritual



# GLADSTONE GALLERY

transcendence, a paradise. And within our political language the garden is a place for freedom and independence. I found all those subjects very relevant at the time. I chose Mexico because it was extremely difficult to film in Iran. I felt the urge to go to the most neutral country, meaning neither Islamic nor Western. I had never visited Mexico before but was aware of the diversity in the landscape and of course its great culture. So I went for location scouting in Oaxaca, looking for that perfect tree to create a garden. I found the tree. It was a fig tree, which is a sacred tree. It was on top of a mountain where there was no road, so we had to make the road to get to it. We built the wall around the tree, hired local assistance, and began to cast.

SMD: In *Tooba* and in *Rapture*, you worked with fairly large groups of people, who I assume were people indigenous to the places where you shot. What was the process of getting those people involved?

SN: Usually we hire local people as coordinators—such as the casting director, project manager, a line producer, and others. To recruit local people you need local persons who are well-liked by the community and have some experience in organizing events. So we hold an audition, people show up, and we cast. Often, it becomes very frustrating because there's a lot of competition as there are always more people than we can hire. In most cases the population is extremely poor, and none of them have professional acting experience, so foremost they are in it for economic reasons. I have always felt proud about this aspect of the projects, which on a modest scale are able to make an economic contribution to the local communities. In every instance, we have developed a great bonding and love for the local people. Often, as in the case of Morocco, we continue to collaborate with the same people. In Mexico, we worked with native Indians, mostly elderly men and women. They were amazing-looking people with unusual physical strength and pride. I had a great experience working with them.

SMD: In *Tooba* it seems that most of the people we see coming toward the tree are men; there are a few shots where you see women, too.

SN: It was half and half, actually; it's just that the women couldn't keep up with the men. It was pretty strenuous running in those hills. I had every intention to have this film not be about gender relations. *Tooba* was a film that I think many Westerners, particularly Americans, didn't quite understand.

SMD: Why?

SN: My feeling is that most Americans don't really get the poetry and symbolism of this piece. Religion and poetry don't play a big role in American culture. The language of this film is metaphoric, and one must approach it more as a visual poem than as a narrative film.

SMD: Of course, that's true with all the pieces.

SN: Yes, but there was something more tangible for them in the previous pieces because of the more obvious Islamic iconography such as the veil. Here I dropped all of those elements, so the piece became rather universal, while in my opinion still very Iranian. In our culture, the use of metaphoric poetic language is the only way of expression for most of us who are not permitted to speak freely. Poetry becomes a political statement, and the public becomes accustomed to reading between the lines.

SMD: One thing that may be involved is that in many art communities, the idea of the spirit is dangerous and uncomfortable. In your work, it's obvious that you understand the absurdities to which certain parties can take a spiritual idea and use it to create alienation between groups, but you haven't given up on the idea of spirit, or on ritual as a spiritual process, or on art as a process of trying to heal spiritually.

SN: You are absolutely right.

SMD: In many ways, *Passage* seems related to *Rapture*.

SN: I think they share a similar visual and conceptual approach. For example, both narratives revolve around the relationship between crowds of people and landscapes, so they become more about choreography than anything else. Also, in both cases, visual configurations are extremely important in telling the story. In *Passage*, the linear movement of the men versus the circle of women becomes very critical and rather erotic. In *Rapture*, there are numerous moments where the visual vocabulary becomes key in reading the storyline.

SMD: How did you happen to work with Phil Glass? And what was it like to work with him? I notice that this is the first time that your opening

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

credit and the music credit are equal—in fact, it's Phil Glass first, and Shirin Neshat.

SN: (Laughter) That's just because Phil had commissioned four other filmmakers— Peter Greenaway, Godfrey Reggio, Atom Egoyan, and Michal Rovner—to make ten-minute films for which he could create new music and which he could accompany live with an orchestra, and the titles had to be in the same format for each film. I was approached by Philip Glass and his company to propose a concept for a short film, what became *Passage*, and Philip liked it. I went ahead and shot the film in Morocco and started editing. I gave him a rough edit, and he started his musical composition. I remember the first time he played his composition for me on the piano; I liked it very much. So eventually he recorded the music with a full orchestra. There were many exchanges back and forth, where for example I worked with the conductor to play down certain instruments and added the women's chant. It was a truly democratic collaboration; he was very supportive and sensitive to my ideas and opinions. At the beginning I was a little worried. I thought, "He's a man, and he's a Westerner." Up to then I had worked with Sussan Deyhim, the wonderful Iranian singer and composer who often used her own voice, as well as indigenous and traditional Islamic melodies, in her compositions. Here with Philip I was dealing with a minimalist composer who essentially used Western sounds and instruments to create his music. But I welcomed the challenge and listened to a lot of his music before I came up with the concept. I was concerned with another issue, which was whether Philip would deliver music which was as emotional as the picture. As you know, the theme of *Passage* was about a funeral, an obscure ritual of death. I have to say, by the end, I was very happy with the music. There was a strong and rather mixed reaction to the film when I exhibited it at Barbara Gladstone Gallery in May 2001. There were basically two camps: there were people who absolutely hated it, and they said, "Oh, this is the worst music; you should just work with Sussan Deyhim," and there were those who said, "It's really fantastic." My favorite moment in *Passage* is when the camera finally goes inside the pit and reveals the women's bare hands, digging. It is perhaps the most emotional moment of the film, and I love the way Philip handles the music at that point which is very melancholic.

SMD: When you decided to become a filmmaker, you did it as a gallery artist, which on a certain level is an unusual—but fortunate—way to enter the field, because. . .

SN: Do you mean "unfortunate"?

SMD: No, I mean "fortunate."

SN: Oh really!

SMD: A number of filmmakers I've talked with in the past few years have said, "We've spent all this time and effort on these films, and the amount we get for a screening is so miniscule that it's hardly worth the effort!"

SN: Oh, you mean financially.

SMD: Yes, the gallery situation seems to be kinder financially, at least for some makers.

SN: Oh, yes. We can sell what we make as artworks. But you have to understand that I came to film as a visual artist, and my audience was the public who knew my photography and installation work. They understood and appreciated how my work slowly evolved from still photography to the moving image, and that although I am making films, essentially my work is about the language of visual art. At the beginning I thought that my moving-image work wouldn't have a place in the film world, because it didn't use conventional narrative. *The Shadow under the Web*, for example, was a purely sculptural video piece. But then, of course, with *Turbulent*, the direction changed more toward filmmaking—cinema. I think there is a big difference between video installation and film such as mine, because I am really experimenting with cinema more than anything else.

SMD: What was the reaction of the art world to your move toward cinema?

SN: At times you do find some resistance against the blurring of too many boundaries in the art world. For example, *Turbulent* and *Rapture* were very well received; mostly, critics and the public loved the idea of a short video installation that remained very visual but also became narrative and musical. In *Turbulent*, the element of narrative was minimal as it was simply one exchange of song between the male and female singer. But soon with *Fervor*

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

and Soliloquy the narrative became very pronounced. The more narrative the films became, the more critical art critics became, asking whether the work is art or a short film and whether it should be seen in a gallery, museum, or a movie theater. Then soon came the question of taste, of which work or style they preferred; for example, for a while everyone was tied to the black and white double opposite projections and very resistant toward my use of color or single channel projections. Similarly, some people grew so attached to Sussan Deyhim's music in my films that they complained about Philip Glass's music in Passage, while others appreciated it very much. I try not to pay attention to these opinions and objections. I instinctively follow what I think is a natural progression for my ideas and experimentations. Every film for me is a new exercise and a way to expand my language as a truly multimedia artist.

SMD: How did you get connected with Barbara Gladstone? And how does she work with you. It seems unusual for a gallery to be producing films.

SN: Barbara is a dealer who doesn't try to control artists; she gives them total trust and freedom to produce the work they want.

SMD: Does she see a script or a storyboard?

SN: No. Absolutely nothing. It's extraordinary how much risk she takes. I don't think she expected to be a film producer. It just happened since her artists started to make films.

SMD: What are the budgets like for your films?

SN: They are produced in various ranges. Turbulent cost something like \$20,000; Rapture was more like \$100,000; Fervor, about the same. Soliloquy was expensive because we had to be in two countries—about \$200,000. The maximum I've ever spent is \$200,000.

SMD: Was Passage a coproduction?

SN: No, we produced the entire film, and Philip took care of the cost of the music. When we were done, it became my artwork with his music. He didn't want any profit from my film, and I didn't want any profit from his music, so it was a good agreement.

SMD: How long does it take to shoot the films? You mentioned that you made three pieces in one trip to Morocco.

SN: Because of the cost involved, we try to pack it in. In Passage we worked with the women in the desert for three days, the men and women on the beach for two days. So altogether five days. For Possessed it was about three days. Pulse was one night. Soliloquy was more complicated; we had a lot of complications in Turkey. But usually we can do our work for a film in a week—maybe less, but no more.

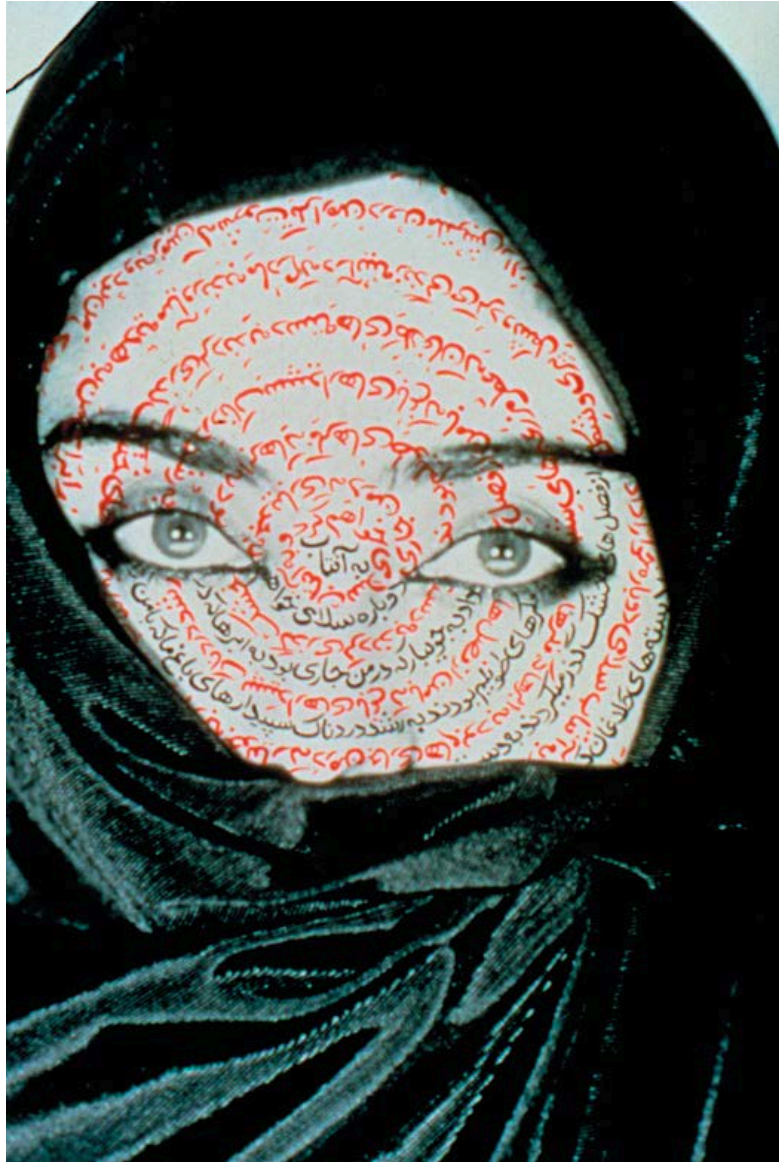
SMD: You mentioned you are about to shoot a new short. Where and when are you shooting?

SN: In Brooklyn, during March 2003. For the first time I am making a film with some dialogue. It will involve just two main actors and a cast of fifteen. This time, I had to write a script and develop the narrative in conventional terms. [Neshat's The Last Word was completed in 2003.]

SMD: Do you see this as a form of training for your feature?

SN: Exactly.

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I Am Its Secret, 1993. RC print and ink. 11 x 14 inches. © 1993 Shirin Neshat. Photo by Plauto. Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York City.

I'll be greeting the sun again  
and the stream that flowed in me  
and the clouds that were my long thoughts  
and the painful growth of the aspens in the grove  
that passed through droughts with me.  
—Forugh Farrokhzad

The text written on the woman's face and in translation above is from Forugh Farrokhzad's *Remembering the Flight: Twenty Poems*, trans. by Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak (Los Angeles: Ketab Corp, 2004), 71. © 2004 by Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak.

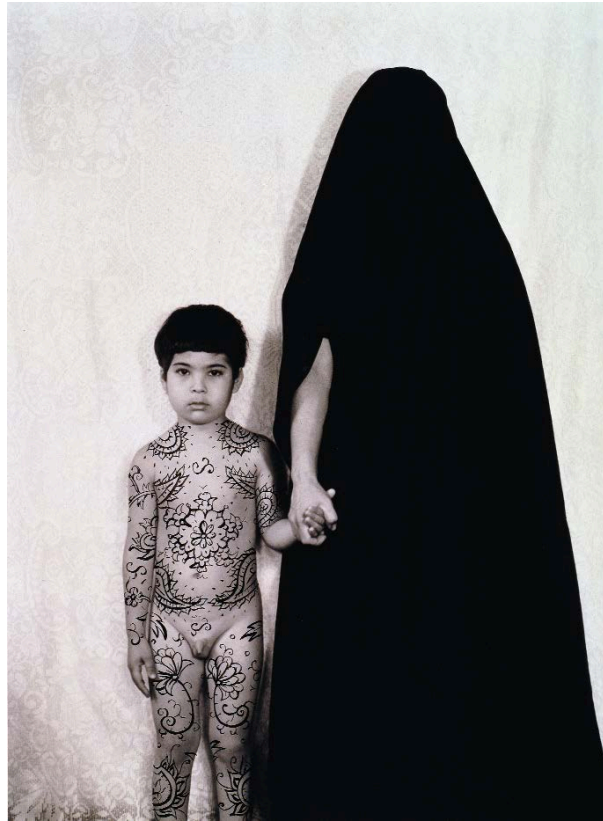
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Seeking Martyrdom #2, 1995. B&W RC print and ink. 11 x 14 inches. © 1995 Shirin Neshat. Photo by Cynthia Preston. Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York City.



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Untitled, 1996. RC print and ink. 11 x 14 inches. © 1996 Shirin Neshat. Photo by Kyong Park. Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York City.



Passage, 2001. Production still. © 2001 Shirin Neshat. Photo by Larry Barns. Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York City.

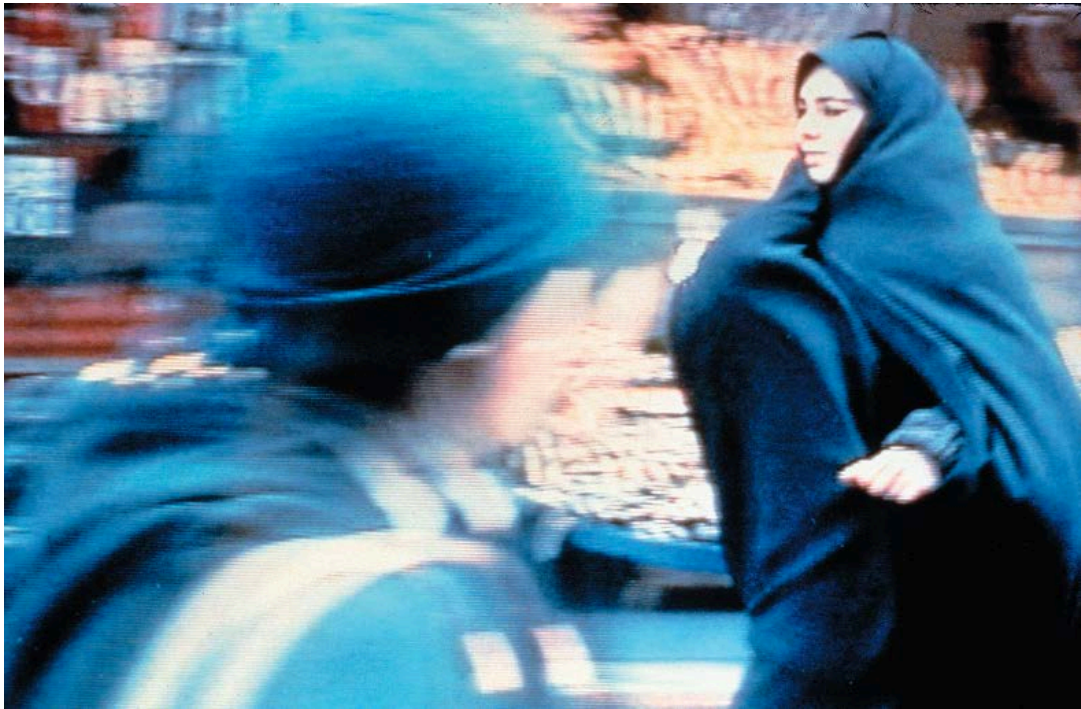
# GLADSTONE GALLERY



Above: Rapture, 1999. Production still. © 1999 Shirin Neshat. Photo by Larry Barns. Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York City.



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Above: *The Shadow Under the Web*, 1997. Production still. © 1997 Shirin Neshat. Photo by Larry Barns. Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York City.



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Above: *Fervor*, 2000. Production still. © 2000 Shirin Neshat. Photo by Larry Barns. Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York City.