

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Aysegul Sert, "Taking Risks in Art and Politics," *The New York Times*, November 27, 2012

THE FEMALE FACTOR

## Taking Risks in Art and Politics

By AYSEGUL SERT

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NEW YORK — Over the past two decades, Shirin Neshat has drawn on her personal experience of being an artist at home in the West with roots in [Iran](#) to illustrate her creed: "People should be free to choose what they want to do with their lives, what they want to wear, what religion they want to believe in; this is not something a government or a community should impose."

Perched in her spacious studio in downtown New York, she added: "Globalization is happening, and the world is becoming more homogenous. We have to accept that we are not going to be all the same; we have to tolerate each other's differences."

Born in 1957, Ms. Neshat left Iran before the fall of the shah, settling in New York after a short stay in California. "I will never belong to anywhere completely," she insisted. "I will never fit in anywhere completely." Although if Iran were to become democratic, she allowed later in the conversation, "then maybe one day I could go back."

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Ms. Neshat has exhibited at the Tate in London and the Whitney in New York, and she earned a Silver Lion at the 2009 Venice Film Festival. She first gained attention in the mid-1990s, with "Women of Allah," a series of photographs depicting women in veils, their skin covered in calligraphy of Islamic poetry. It was a meditation, she said, on the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran — on martyrdom, patriotism and religion.

That revolution, she asserted, led to many Iranian women becoming "brainwashed and submissive." In recent years, first with the opposition protests in Iran in 2009 and then with the Arab Spring, "we see a generation of women and men no longer divided but equal. They are educated, they are not ideological, their interest is pure and positive, which is change, democracy and freedom."

In 1997, Ms. Neshat moved to video, and to more narrative than simple still portraiture would allow.

In so doing, "Shirin Neshat has developed a unique aesthetic perspective with the political dimensions of our lives," said Hamid Dabashi, a professor of Iranian studies at Columbia University, in New York. "She has the ability to translate experiences into art that communicates to the world at large."

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In 2009, Ms. Neshat won her Silver Lion for best director for her full-length directorial debut, "Women Without Men" — an adaptation of a novel by the Iranian writer Shahrnush Parsipur that chronicles the intertwining lives of four Iranian women during the summer of 1953, when a U.S.-led, British-backed coup brought down the elected prime minister, Mohammed Mossadegh, and reinstalled the shah.

The film took six years to make, and by the time it was finished, the Green Revolution of 2009 was in full swing in Iran. "That pulled me to being a center for it outside of Iran," Ms. Neshat said. "I became very outspoken, participating in hunger strikes and trying to help the young prisoners."

Subsequently, she said, she felt the urge to return to studio portrait photography and the craftsmanship of calligraphy. The result was "The Book of Kings," based on the work of the Persian poet Ferdowsi between 977 and 1010 A.D. It was just shown at the Galerie Jérôme de Noirmont in Paris.

The actress Natalie Portman, with whom Ms. Neshat recently collaborated on a short film for a project commissioned by the luxury goods company LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton, said she detected "a fascinating femininity" to Ms. Neshat's work, which she had seen before, calling it "strong and rebellious at the same time."

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Women and political and social turmoil fascinate Ms. Neshat most. "I'm a restless person; I get bored very easily. I'm terrified of artistic stagnation. I like to take risk in my work."

Her next project, she said, will be a film on the late Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum.

"I am pulled to the Arab world," she said. "I feel liberated because I feel like my world has expanded and I've gained a new community. Egypt is close to Iran because of its history, its dynamic, its clash between modernity and tradition. For so long I was feeling sorry for myself for being an artist in exile; now I feel like I'm not in exile because Egypt is also somehow my country."

Over an hour has passed. Ms. Neshat, glancing at her watch, must move on. But she has one more thing to say.

"What people are afraid of is not Islam, it is fanaticism," she said. "Fanaticism is growing everywhere, and it's not just in Islam," she added, citing homophobia in the United States.

And attitudes in Europe? "What Europe is afraid of is not Islam, it's the way Islam as a religion doesn't separate itself from political ideology," she said. "Don't look at Islam as the only threat. Something is causing a lot of people, especially the uneducated and the poor, to grasp on the notion of fanaticism, and it's not religion." She paused one last time. "Religion in a way that does not control private lives is O.K. I am against any community that tries to impose no choice on people. It should always be a matter of personal choice."

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