

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Lauren Collins, "Voice of the Veil," *The New Yorker*, October 22, 2007, 86 – 92.

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

VOICE OF THE VEIL

Can a video artist bring the lives of Iranian women to the big screen?

BY LAUREN COLLINS

Shirin Neshat's "Rapture" (1999) is a twelve-minute video-and-sound installation, shot in black-and-white. On one screen, the viewer sees the silhouette of a seaside fortress; a second depicts a rock-littered wilderness. The sound of rushing wind gives way to strange music—guttural chanting, underlaid with ominous thums. On the first screen, a corps

The camera lingers on the boat, bobbing in the middle of a vast ocean.

Neshat is a visual artist who works primarily in video. Born in Qazvin, Iran, a provincial capital northwest of Tehran, in 1957, she has lived in the United States since she was seventeen. She began making videos in the late nineties, and they soon became celebrated examples

dramatically picturesque. Writing in *The New Republic* in 2001, Jed Perl criticized Neshat for not having a viewpoint. "All that a viewer gets," he wrote, "is a generalized mood, a kind of artsier MTV." Neshat does have a viewpoint, but it is an idiosyncratic, psychological one that, rather than offering sweeping political prescriptives (she, like you, is unsure about how to achieve peace in the Middle East), tries to make sense of the particular discombobulations of geography and culture that have beset her own life. The beauty of her art tends to arise from its elemental contrasts: men and women, silence and sound, earth and sky. She has said that she wants people to "take away with them not some heavy political statement but something that really



A scene from Shirin Neshat's twelve-minute video-and-sound installation "Rapture." Neshat herself in her video "Soliloquy."

of white-shirted men marches toward the camera; the other screen fills with a mass of women in black chadors. The men begin to move through the alleyways of a town toward the fortress and, arriving, prop ladders against its walls to ascend the ramparts. As some of their brethren, and the camera, watch from above, a group of the men break into a stylized brawl, their outstretched arms forming geometric patterns, like the cells of a honeycomb. Suddenly, on the other screen, the women erupt in a shrill lamentation. They pray and then, in birdlike configurations, cross the plain, eventually reaching a beach. Their chadors flap in the breeze as they push a rowboat toward the water. From the other screen, the men wave to them.

of the genre. "Turbulent," a tense split-screen installation that featured a man and a woman in an anything-you-can-do-I-can-do-better singing contest (women are not permitted to sing alone in front of a mixed audience in Iran), won first prize at the Venice Biennale in 1999, and Neshat's work is in the permanent collections of the Guggenheim, the Whitney, and the British Museum. The vagaries of biography and recent history have meant that her concerns have often coincided with those of the evening news. A number of critics have viewed her work through a lens of identity politics, taking her to be some sort of oracle of Muslim womanhood. Others have scoffed at her tendency toward the melo-

touches them on the most emotional level."

Neshat's work was not originally so nuanced. Her first solo exhibition, in 1995 at the Annina Nosei gallery, in New York, was a series of photographs called "Women of Allah." They featured veiled women, including herself, many of them holding rifles or handguns. Their hands, faces, feet, and even eyeballs were inscribed with modern Persian poetry: Forough Farrokhzad's songs of sexual love ("Weary of divine asceticism, in the middle of the night in Satan's bed / I'd seek refuge in the slopes of a fresh sin") and Tahereh Saffarzadeh's odes to religious sacrifice ("O, you martyr/hold my hands/with your hands"). The show got a lot of attention. Pepe Karmel, a reviewer

LARRY BARKS © SHIRIN NESHAT, 1999/GLADSTONE GALLERY

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for the *Times*, confusing Neshat's use of the Saffarzadeh poems with an endorsement of their political content, wrote, "Ms. Neshat's imagery seems tainted by a 1960's-style glorification of revolutionary violence: radical chic comes back, in her pictures, as radical sheik." Others saw in them an indictment of a culture that oppresses women. The controversy, reductive as it was, ignited Neshat's career. "A collector came and said, 'I would like to look at your work,'" Neshat recalled recently. "I had three photographs!"

Neshat is small, with a lithe figure and deep-set eyes rimmed with slashes of kohl. She favors an extravagantly feminine yet armorial uniform of simple clothes and heavy jewelry: stacks of silver bracelets, hoop earrings as big as handcuffs, a collar necklace hung with bells. Her open-hearted manner (she giggles a lot, uses exclamation points in her e-mails, and, in accordance with *taarof*, the elaborate system of Persian etiquette, is always offering lemonade or insisting on sitting in the least comfortable chair) hardly suggests transgression. But, because of the sexual and political content of her videos, she cannot work in Iran, where her mother and some of her siblings still live. The last time she travelled there, in 1996, she was interrogated and detained at the airport as she attempted to leave the country. "I don't really fancy the idea of going to prison," she says. "I'm not a martyr."

The way Neshat works is collective and instinctual: she comes up with a visual idea and recruits whatever technicians—cinematographers, actors, costume designers—are necessary to help her realize it. She has never owned a camera. Her videos are typically shot on 35-mm. film and transferred to video, for projection onto the walls of a gallery. Her dealer, Barbara Gladstone, who also serves as her producer, sells them in editions of six, mostly to museums, for hundreds of thousands of dollars. (If you buy a piece of video art, you get a DigiBeta master videotape, an archival videotape, and a certificate of authenticity.) They are conceived in collaboration with a group of mostly Iranian exiles, with whom Neshat often shares her profits. One or more of them can often be found sleeping on the couch in her loft, in SoHo, which she shares with her son, Cyrus, and her longtime boyfriend, the Iranian-American filmmaker Shoja Azari. "We live very tribally," she says.

The videos are crafted with a draftsman's attention to detail. Klaus Biesenbach, the chief curator of media at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, says, "She has accomplished a quality of composition and image construction at the highest artistic level." Peter Schjeldahl has written, in this magazine, "Neshat's elegant, two-screen meditations on the culture of the chador in Islamic Iran emit an icy heat of suppressed passions; they are among the first undoubtable masterpieces of video installation." In a medium that often prizes esoteric nonchalance, her work is unusually fervent and sincere.

Between 1998 and 2003, Neshat made ten videos, but in the past three years she has made only two, "Mahdokht" (2004) and "Zarin" (2005). Both consist of rejiggered material from what has become her main endeavor: a full-length feature film intended for theatrical release, which she hopes will premiere at Cannes in May. When she decided to try directing, her reputation was prospering. The attacks of September 11th had increased demand for her work, and for commentary from her on Islam, which she has often felt unqualified to give. "I got attention, but at the same time I had to confront really simplistic questions," she said. "I felt ridiculous." Neshat's work has always had a cinematic quality—the director Atom Egoyan has written of "Turbulent" that it "completely inspired me"—but acquaintances warned her about jeopardizing an

art-world sinecure with a movie project. "I'm doing this film wholeheartedly, without really knowing if it's going to succeed," she said. "I know the price attached. I could fall on my face."

The movie project was born in 2001, when Neshat received a call from her friend Hamid Dabashi, a professor of Iranian studies and comparative literature at Columbia. "He said, 'Shirin, have I got a book for you,'" she said. It was a novella called "Zanan Bidun-i Mardan," or "Women Without Men," by Shahrmush Parsipur, one of Iran's most prominent female writers. The book was difficult to find in Farsi—the Iranian government had banned it—so Dabashi photocopied the one he had. A wry, profane fable about the interlocking lives of five female outcasts in Tehran who converge upon a mystical garden in Karaj, cultivating a feminist Eden, the book awoke in Neshat a feeling of deep communion. "The protagonists are very vulnerable—they go mad or they kill themselves—and I identify with every one of them," she said.

Neshat was determined to find the author, who had fled Iran in 1994. She tracked her down in the San Francisco Bay Area, living in a garage apartment. Parsipur, who has been imprisoned many times because of her work (once for four years), and who suffers from a bipolar condition, welcomed Neshat, and the two women talked for hours. "I just fell in love



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with the way she looks at the world," Neshat said of Parsipur, who is sixty-one. Parsipur agreed to allow Neshat to adapt her book into a film.

Neshat worked on the script at the Sundance Institute workshop for filmmakers, and her crew finished production in June, in Morocco. Out of the footage, she is also preparing three more video pieces (one for each character in the film) for a show at the Barbara Gladstone gallery, in January. She said, "I wanted to see if I could work within the logic of art and the logic of cinema at the same time."

One September afternoon, Neshat, Azari, and Sam Neave, a young British-Iranian editor, were at a friend's Tribeca studio, clustered around two computers. Lulu, Neshat's chocolate Lab, gnawed on a bone. The day's task was to refine the video piece about Faizeh, one of the characters in "Women Without Men." Faizeh is a devout young woman whose faith is shaken after she is raped by strangers in a Tehran alleyway. She overcomes the trauma with the help of her friend Munis, who wants to become a political activist. They were on version six of the edit. "Shahmush Parsipur is coming to see the film on Friday, and then next week my anxiety is Barbara Gladstone," Neshat said.

Neave, wearing a hooded sweatshirt, clicked on an icon. The video played, beginning with Faizeh, in a chador, approaching the gate of the garden.

"I think it is terrible, boring—it doesn't work," Azari, who co-wrote the film, said. He is a substantial, mustached man, whose initial gruffness belies a sprightly intellect.

Few established artists have made a successful transition to directing movies. (An exception is Julian Schnabel, whose films many critics consider to be better than his paintings.) The feature film did not turn out to be Andy Warhol's forte, and not many people remember David Salle's "Search and Destroy" (1995), a dark comedy about a corporate hustler, or Cindy Sherman's "Office Killer" (1997), involving a proofreader who murders her co-workers. Still, Neshat felt compelled to make "Women Without Men," whatever the risks. "It got to a point that it was a biennial here, a biennial there," she said. "You could just smell that they're using you for a time, and I started to get really tired of it. I needed a project that would let

me be alone, let me be a beginner again. I wanted to hide from the art world. There was a danger that I would lose perspective—the integrity, honesty, and naïveté being washed away." She pounded her fist against her palm to illustrate a wave eroding the shore.

The first issue up for debate was how to begin the video—did an "art" video have to follow the narrative logic of the film version? Even if it didn't, how would Neshat communicate fundamental information about the characters and their dilemmas? There was also the question of whether a video that would be shown in a gallery, rather than a theatre, could even be conceived of as having a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Neshat: "Matthew Barney would never let you walk out in the middle."

Neave: "Matthew Barney would punch you in the face!"

The group resolved that the video should have a chronology, even if nobody watched it that way, and began to debate what the beginning should be. "I think it is not a bad idea to start from the garden," Azari said.

Neshat disagreed, arguing that the scenes lost context if the girls weren't shown travelling from the din of the city to the garden's eerie calm. She suggested beginning with a scene in which Munis discovers Faizeh crying. Neave clicked on the footage.

"Faizeh looks desperate, and we don't know why," Neshat said.

"Well, yeah, that's because she's been raped, and now she's following a dead woman down the street," Neave replied. (Munis, forbidden by her brother to leave the house, has just jumped off the roof and become a ghost.)

"The other way you could go is to have the beginning of the video realistic and then, the minute you get to the garden, it becomes surrealistic," Neshat said.

Azari introduced a more complicated idea. "I think the way we could treat Munis is that she could be her alter ego."

The possibilities continued to multiply. The three considered superimposing faces on the scenes (no), splitting the screen (maybe), and intercutting the scenes in the garden with flashbacks of Faizeh's experiences in Tehran (yes).

"The viewer has to know that something terrible has happened to this girl," Neshat continued. "We have to show that

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she was raped. And that she had this dream that fell apart—she was in love." Neshat suggested beginning with a panoramic shot that follows Faizeh on the road from the city to the garden. "What do you say, Sam?" she asked.

Neave was quiet for a minute.

"Sam says, 'Get another editor,'" she ventured.

"No, I say look at version one. That's where we started in the first version."

"Is that true? Shit."

The garden is a central motif not only of Persian literature but also of Neshat's self-mythology. "The house I grew up in had a beautiful garden, a typical Persian garden with a pool in the middle," she said recently. "Sometimes I draw it just so I can remember it. Two willow trees growing around the pool, roses, everything symmetrical." Neshat was the fourth of five children in a middle-class family; her father was a physician and part-time farmer, her mother was a housewife. Qazvin was a conservative city, and Neshat never dared to go to the bazaar without a veil, but her family was not particularly religious. Now she considers herself a secular Muslim.

When Neshat was in seventh grade, her parents enrolled her and her siblings in a Catholic boarding school in Tehran. Neshat was homesick, and she became anorexic, so her parents brought her home. When she was seventeen, they sent her to Los Angeles for an extended visit with a sister who lived there. Neshat spoke little English and was profoundly homesick again. "The first few years in the U.S. were the darkest of my life," she said. She stayed, though, graduating from Berkeley with a degree in art. "My father insisted that all his children, including the girls, go to the highest levels of education," she said. "But sending us away from the warmth of the family separated us forever."

In 1983, Neshat moved to New York, where she worked as a receptionist at a hair salon as she tried to get an art career off the ground. She was a painter then, attempting to incorporate iconography from Persian miniatures into a Western style. "My work was so mediocre," she said. "I had two sessions of showing work to gallery owners. It was the most humiliating thing in my life." Around the same time, she met Kyong Park, a Korean-American artist and architect who had established an avant-garde exhibition space

on Kenmare Street called the Storefront. "All this time, I'd been in California with stupid men," she recalled. "I was mesmerized by his intelligence." She abandoned painting and threw herself into life at the Storefront, helping out with everything from cleaning and mass mailing to organizing conferences.

She and Park married in 1987, and had a son, Cyrus, in 1990. The following year, Neshat visited Iran, with Cyrus, for the first time since 1979. The country was nothing like what she remembered. "It was as if you lost color and suddenly everything went to black-and-white," she said. She was disturbed by the new regime—the police presence, the dark clothes, the disappearance of nail polish—but fascinated by, even initially enamored of, the idea of a revolutionary society. Her life in New York seemed increasingly bereft, and she pulled away, travelling to Iran every year between 1991 and 1997. "It took a few years for me to really get attached again," she said. "When I came back to New York for good, I left my work, I left my husband," she said. "I completely changed my life."

As Neshat started to hang around other Iranian expatriates, her views began to crystallize. She sympathized with radical Islam's hostility toward Western hegemony and yet was dismayed by its fear of sexual equality; she saw vibrant Persian intellectual traditions being blotted out by black-clad religiosity. She didn't know how to resolve the big geopolitical quandaries of Iran and America, but she began to summon images that, through mood and emotion, could at least convey her sense of searching bewilderment.

Neshat goes to only three restaurants: Fanelli's, Walker's, and the Old Town Bar. They all look the same (dark wood, tin ceiling). She always orders chicken fingers. Most mornings, she jogs with Lulu for an hour along the West Side Highway, and every night she takes a dance class, either flamenco or West African. (In her twenties, Neshat became obsessed with *kathak*, a traditional Indian dance form. "I even became a vegetarian," she said. "But my parents objected. One of their friends said, 'You send your daughter to California and she becomes an Indian?'") These rigidities provide the necessary conditions for taking chances with her art. "It gives me a sense of security,"

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she said. "I am experimental on some things but not on others. I have to be mentally prepared."

Before she started directing a movie, Neshat embarked on a crash course in the history of film. "I am really in love with the moving image, because it's less of a commodity than photography," she said. "You cannot put a film in your pocket." She and Azari got a projector, and they sometimes watched three movies a day, assigning themselves curricula: Tarkovsky Week, Kieslowski Week, Bergman Week, Buñuel Week. "I am ambitious but not naïve," Neshat said. "I'm not one of those people who think that since I'm an artist I can escape all the rules of cinema."

In late September, Shahmush Parsipur flew from California to New York to view a rough cut of the movie version of her book. Neshat was nervous; the novella had not been easy to adapt. "The people at Sundance said, 'We warn you, magical realism is one of the most difficult things to do,'" Neshat recalled. "That's why 'One Hundred Years of Solitude' never got made."

Parsipur arrived at Neshat's studio to see the film on a Friday morning. She had brought takeout sushi and was wearing black ankle socks with purple Crocs that she had bought on the street; she was agitated because she had spilled squid juice all over her new shoes. A copy of the *Post* was sitting on the table with the computers. "ZERO CLUE: IDIOT IRAN PREZ IS 'AMAZED' BY UPROAR," the headline read, referring to a suggestion by Iran's President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, that he visit Ground Zero. The headline in the *Daily News* the day before had been, simply, "GO TO HELL!" "Can you believe this?" Neshat said. "'GO TO HELL'? Why?" Neshat, many of whose friends and family members have suffered at the hands of the Iranian government, feels that Ahmadinejad is a criminal, but she was put off by the paper's jeering tone: "It's just this superiority complex in this country that has to end."

Parsipur, eating her squid, began to drink soy sauce straight from the cup. "Shahmush, don't eat that soy sauce," Neshat cried out. "Too much salt!" A few minutes later, the screening began. Neshat clicked a mouse, and the screen filled with the image of a young girl, Munis, sitting in her family's house with her ear pressed to an old-fashioned radio. The movie is set

in 1953, and the tableau was as meticulously constructed as that of any Jane Austen adaptation: ornate carpets, pillows on the floor; Munis, surrounded by a samovar and teacups, dressed in a period costume of a shirtwaist dress and pin curls. Still, it did not look wholly realistic—you could detect the hand of Neshat, the artist, in the scene's saturated palette and portentous mood.

From Munis's house, the action moves into the Tehran streets, where a violent rally is under way. The British- and C.I.A.-led coup that, in 1953, overthrew the democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadegh, is just a backdrop in the novella, but Neshat had made it a major plotline. In an e-mail, she wrote, "My film, without a doubt, is to release some anger as an Iranian against the unfair intervention of the U.S.A. in Iran, which forever wiped out the chance for democracy in our country and later brought the Islamic revolution." Despite her insistence on historical authenticity, her depiction of the mob, with its lines of marching men, recalled the abstracted choreographies of her videos. The pro-Mossadegh faction, for instance, was outfitted in matching white shirts. "That is a little inspired by 'Rapture,'" Neshat said. "I studied BBC footage from the fifties, but I did my own thing."

When Munis jumps off the roof—the film breaks into surrealism. As the women make their way from the material commotion of Tehran to the garden, the light becomes gauzy, signalling an ancient, hermetic world. At one point, Faizeh finds herself alone in a forest of incongruous geographies, where wisps of cloud drift through the frame at supernatural rates and pine barrens suddenly give way to swamps. Walking through a field, she hears a noise and turns around to glimpse a woman in a chador darting among the trees. Not sure if the vision is imaginary or real, she walks and walks until she comes upon a crumbling house.

Filming began in Morocco in April, with a budget of around five million dollars. (The film is being produced by a consortium of European production companies.) The cast and crew came from twenty-five countries, and the mongrel society that Neshat had created made for some calamities. She had asked the Iranian actress playing Farrokhlaqa, the ma-

triarch of the garden, to stay in Morocco throughout the three months of filming, fearing that she might run into problems travelling back and forth. Two weeks before filming began, the actress refused, and Neshat found a replacement. When the new Farrokhlaqa arrived on the set, she had gained weight and highlighted her hair blond. Neshat was also concerned that the movie's nude scenes might offend Muslim extremists.

"I was every day praying to God to keep me strong mentally and physically," she said. "It was really a question of stamina, surrounded by men who could do anything." Neshat believes in the equality of the sexes, but not in their equivalence, and she can be harsh toward those, especially women, who she feels have violated decorum. One married actress, she said, was behaving like a diva, "flirting with all the men," and Neshat told her that if she didn't stop she would have to leave. In January, Neshat ran into a movie-business friend at a film festival in Rotterdam. "Shirin, it's not too late!" he said. "Just give it up. This book was not meant to be made into a film. Go back to making your nice little video installations!"

In the studio in Tribeca, after almost two hours, the final credits rolled. "It's a very good film," Parsipur declared, "but it's far from the book." She began to enumerate her grievances: "The brother prays too much. You must cut the first prayer. It's too many times in one day."

"O.K.," Neshat said. "Just show him combing his hair or something?"

Parsipur continued, "The dialogue between the man and Munis is weak. Everyone tells Farrokhlaqa how beautiful she is at the party scene, but she's not that beautiful." She went on, "In the Faizeh scene, when she asks for water, Farrokhlaqa should just give her the water, not talk."

Neshat explained to Parsipur that she had cut a main character, Mahdokht, from the movie, because "it was so easy for it to become corny."

Parsipur grimaced and began fanning herself with a FedEx envelope. After a few minutes, though, she smiled, and told Neshat that she was content. "When I don't see my imagination, I become sad," she said. "But this is *your* film." ♦

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A slide show of Neshat's work.