

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Becker, Carol, "Shirin Neshat with Carol Becker & Phong Bui" The Brooklyn Rail, September 2009, 20 - 23



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Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

## IN CONVERSATION

### Shirin Neshat WITH CAROL BECKER & PHONG BUI

Shirin Neshat's new full-length feature *Women without Men* will be shown at the 66th Venice Film Festival (September 2 - 12, 2009) and the Toronto International Film Festival (September 10 - 19, 2009). One evening in July, Carol Becker, Dean of the School of the Arts at Columbia University, and Publisher Phong Bui, paid a visit to the SoHo loft which she shares with her partner, the artist Shoja Azari, to watch the near-final version of the film before its last minute revisions. Following is the discussion that took place right after the screening.

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**CAROL BECKER:** Having read *Women without Men* by Shahrnush Parsipur, I wonder at which point you began to realize or even imagine doing a film based on the novel?

**SHIRIN NESHAT:** It evolved gradually, I think. My deep affinity with Iranian women writers began when I first started to make the "Women of Allah" series between 1994 and 1997, which incorporated their texts on my photographs as a form of calligraphy that is infused with the image. Then in my later videos I used some of the poems of Rumi and Atar [Neyshaburi], the two great Persian poets of the 13th century. But then, for the first time, after many years of making short videos, I decided to undertake a project that might be a full-length feature film. I knew that I would not be writing an original script, and that I wanted a novel written by a prominent Iranian woman writer whose work would complement my own interest in the way that both the narrative and the imagery could function visually and conceptually.

For a long time I just sort of immersed myself in different readings, short stories, long stories, but it was my friend Hamid Dabashi, who handed me *Women without Men* in Farsi and said, "You really should read this book." I mean, I'd already read her works ever since I was young in Iran, including her masterpiece *Touba: The Meaning of the Night*. Parsipur is without a doubt one of the four or five most important living writers in our literary tradition. Anyway, when I read it, I understood why Hamid thought that it would be of interest to me. The novel is written in the realm of magical realism, so as you can imagine it has one foot in reality while the other is in the imaginary, therefore lending itself to extremely visual presentation. Parsipur has such a fantastic imagination, particularly in this novel; it allows me to create my own sequences of images which operate within the philosophical, mystical, emotional, personal issues that I've experienced as a person and I think are important. The novel takes place in Iran in 1953, an important year, when a democratic government led by Mohammed Mossadegh was brought down by a coup spearheaded by American and British forces. But it really is a philosophical text that does not conform to any boundaries in terms of place and time, indoor and outdoor, dream and reality—the dynamic of opposites. I felt that the essence of what my work had been about has this similar attraction to opposites, male and female, religion and secularization, East and West, etc., but when I embarked on the task of adapting the story to film, I had no idea how challenging that would be. That's why it's taken us more than six years to make it work.

**BECKER:** How did you approach her?

**NESHAT:** Oh, very fascinating. I had been invited by the Sundance Institute to a writer's workshop lab to develop my script of *Women without Men* in January of 2003. By the fall I decided I wanted to make the film, so I traveled to meet her where she lives in Albany, California, and as soon as I arrived at her house, she said, "Would you mind sitting down, I'll be back in a few minutes, I have to go to the post office." Anyway, she had me sit down and I was immersed in her environment for a good forty-five minutes or more while she was gone. [Laughs.] As soon as she came back, I said to her, "I would like to option the book." Then we discussed the characters and made sure that we had a mutual understanding of the book and what I wanted to do with the film. All of her characters are kind of eccentric and marginalized, and each of them sort of reflects a part of her.

**PHONG BUI:** Did she know your work before?

**NESHAT:** Very little. Maybe she had seen a few "Women of Allah" photographs, but she really was very open to the idea of collaboration. Mind you, she had just come from Iran. There she had been in prison four different times, first by the Shah's regime in the mid 70s, then later after the 1979 revolution. She was jailed by the Islamic Republic for nearly five years.

Her *Prison Memoir*, which hasn't been translated into English, is one of the best memoirs I've ever read. I think her relationship to prison is a very complex one, partly due to the fact that she had developed manic depression to the degree that she had to be institutionalized. She had a son who she had to give to his father and that was very painful for her. You can tell that her writing is her only refuge, a way of escaping reality. Maybe her mental illness has had a lot to do with the fantastic imagination that she had shown. Despite of all that, he's fearless with those conditions.

**BUI:** So magical realism seems to be a more fitting reality for her.

**NESHAT:** Well, I heard her recently say to someone, "The reason I'm interested in magical realism is because if you think about it, during the day you are awake but you are asleep at night. So when you are asleep you're in a state of dream, you're in another state of consciousness, which is as much a part of you as when you are awake." So she sees dreams as magic and imagination, not so separate from reality.

**BECKER:** While seeing the film I felt I was in a dream and when the film ended I felt like that I had to wake up to reality.

**NESHAT:** It was a real challenge because so much of the novel and the film are not at all grounded in reality. The two characters Farokh Legha and Faezeh are fairly realistic, whereas the other two, Munis and Zarin, are quite magical. I feel closer to the women who are not realistic. At the beginning the film was more factual as it started out with the 1953 revolution, and the surrealist part just came and went, which is true to the novel. And in fact, it's the latter that is closer to my sensibility. I'm more invested in operating the film in a symbolic level without losing the thread of communicating to the viewer. For example, at the end of the year and a half of editing I reconstructed Munis as the narrator or spiritual guide that defines the mood of the story. After a long period of gestation over her character, I've decided that this is a strange film, and this is a strange character who is at once alive, then becomes dead, and later is resurrected. And I don't want to let that go because I'm not interested in making a realistic film. That's why the film begins and ends with her flying off the building in slow motion, which more or less ties the whole film together.

**BECKER:** It wasn't so much the characters or even what they did that made the film feel like a dream; it's that it somehow creates the same sensation that you feel when you wake up from a dream.

**NESHAT:** I had many conversations with Shahrnush and I would say to her, "Did you have to write such a complicated book that it took me six years to make a comparable adaptation?" And she said, "Well, you could have chosen an easier book." But I can't imagine another easy book. She even said to herself that as a writer, for

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example, you could have a ship with two hundred people and they could drown one by one, but when you make the film you have to get the ship, you have to get two hundred people and then drown them one by one.

**BUI:** Which is a far cry from your early work where actors or extras were being deployed as images, or functioned as sculptural forms. And the fact that it's been dominated by black and white for so long, ever since your first show in 1993 at Franklin Furnace, with no dialogue except for occasional singing, prayers, or music. It's the first time you use long narrative, dialogue, and color. You just spoke about the process of adapting the text into the moving images as well as various technical elements that the film requires, but to maintain the continuity from what you've done before and what you're doing now is another matter.

**NESHAT:** As I started to really learn about cinema and study how to write a script, I came to the conclusion that the fundamental difference between visual art language and cinema is a question of character. Up to this point I've been making videos and photographs where people are more or less devoid of character, they are iconic figures or function as statues, as you said. "Rapture" is a good example in which there is no close-up of a single person—they function as a group, or one monumental image. It's about going deep into the psychological, mental, emotional state of each person and for me that was the biggest challenge. And I soon learned that this filmmaking [laughs]. I must admit that I often felt short in experience in terms of how to communicate with the actors, but in the end I'm quite happy with who we chose and how terrific they all were in their performances. As for the aesthetic decisions, I decided from the beginning that this is going to be an experimental film, and that I would be playful with it, especially in terms of occasional use of color.

**BUI:** Pasolini and Tarkovsky have similarly used color in some specific occasions.

**NESHAT:** In my case, I knew that it was going to be a 1950s painted photography kind of style, partly because it breaks up the starkness of the black and white while discretely separating real life episodes from the dream world.

**BUI:** I also noticed there are recurrent motifs and repetition, like the falling image of Munis in the very beginning and the end. And I thought when Zarin snuck under the little hole in the bottom of the wall that took her to—

**BECKER:** Alice in Wonderland.

**BUI:** Exactly. I felt that such sequences really tied the whole flow of the movie together.

**NESHAT:** Again, being a visual artist I tend to think of the images more conceptually than in conventional filmmaking. The characters all came from different backgrounds and circumstances, but at some point their lives intersect, so for me it was useful

to make those intersections as fluid as I could without losing the subtleties. In other words, the path to the garden implies the transition from the city to the country, the transition from disaster to the possibility of renewal, and the fact that there weighs such loneliness in each character, so we carefully selected a simple road that is basically non-descriptive. The hole, in some ways, can be read as entering life after death or it could be paradise or it could be seen as a sexual organ. For me, if all of these women were looking for an idea of salvation, what would the other side be representing, and how would they be able to go into that same direction?

**BUI:** Unlike the novel, which tells each woman's story separately, the film seems to interweave their stories with a strong visual style made for each of them.

**NESHAT:** Yes, that was an important distinction for me. Parsipur originally wrote the stories about each character and at some point she decided to put them together. The scene of the garden was very short in the book, as if it was almost inconclusive, but for me, that was my favorite part of the story, so I wanted to stretch it out.

**BECKER:** You've created parallel universes that didn't exist in the novel. For instance, the whole political movement, which was only alluded to in the novel, is really brought it out more prominently in the film.

**NESHAT:** That was the most radical difference, otherwise we stayed quite close to Parsipur's idea, which is identical to my own interest in the pair of opposites: the political and the philosophical, the social and the personal, the traditional and the modern, men and women, nature and culture, etc. etc. Similarly, Parsipur chose her characters, from a super wealthy westernized woman in Farokh Legha, to Zarin, a lower class prostitute, to two women who both were from the religious traditional middle class, but the way each one of them represents a particular type of problem is quite powerful.

**BECKER:** I agree. When Amir, Munis's brother comes to look for Faezeh at Farokh Legha's home, you can see how uncomfortable he was in the kitchen. The class difference between the westernized bourgeoisie culture versus the traditional was very intense.

**BUI:** I also thought of the sequence of the police officer who appears at first with such an incredibly stern presence, and the moment he sits down to eat his meal there is an immense silence. And as soon as one of the guests begins to sing and play his sitar, the police officer becomes relaxed and participatory. It was intense but funny at the same time.

**NESHAT:** Actually, there is a lot of humor that appears in both the novel and the film, like when Munis and Faezeh talk about virginity as a hole in a curtain, and other times in the film that are not from the novel, like the absurdity of the man singing and playing the music while the officer was being so tense, then all of a sudden became so animated as you just pointed out, not to mention at the military reception when one man said to the other: "Oh, your wife looks like our gardener, do you know her?" And he says "Oh no, we are too busy" and the other responds "Oh that's too bad." Or when one other man says "Oh well, Albert Camus says such and such..." and the other says "Oh, who cares what he said." So there are moments full of sarcasm, but at the same time they function as kind of a relief from what otherwise is a very intense emotional and political film.

**BUI:** Would you say that the collaboration between you and Parsipur was inevitable largely because you both are interested in mysticism and mythology? While her novels reflect her interest in the myth of Gilgamesh, and Sumerian as well as Chinese mythology, you construct your imagery or characters with similar yet different mythic presences.

**NESHAT:** That's true for the most part, however, I have to say that I did eliminate the most mythical character, Mahdokht, from the film, mainly because Mahdokht is just too far out. (She is the subject of one

of my videos.) For the longest time, Mahdokht was in the script but at one point we just decided that the four characters were enough to deal with.

**BECKER:** There's starkness in the writing that I can only imagine how difficult it must have been not to literalize in the film?

**NESHAT:** This is the first time I've ever worked at readapting fiction, and I think without a doubt it will entail some degree of truthful interpretation while other parts have to be reconfigured in order to find the right balance for the film. So it's like...

**BECKER:** ...leaping off of a cliff.

**NESHAT:** It was terrifying [laughter] because sometimes I would have a few people read the script and they would say, "this is all bad, oh my God," and I have to tell them the truth, that the discipline of cinema is another kind of language, so once I've learned to educate myself while being very respectful to the integrity of the novel, I had to make a film that was accessible, yet enigmatic enough to be faithful to my work. I remember a friend who I had worked with in my previous project who said, "You should stop now, this is not going to go anywhere, you're never going to make this film," and I said, "No, I won't give up." And maybe part of the reason I said "no" was I couldn't disappoint Sharnush Parsipur. I could not imagine letting her down, and the book is simply a masterpiece.

**BECKER:** On the way here, Phong and I were talking about this new phenomenon of artists who make films. Schnabel has already done four, Matthew Barney has his *Cremaster* cycle, Steve McQueen just made *Hunger* this year, and I think it's quite exciting. Perhaps general audiences today desire to see films that are more challenging, which makes them think rather than just take in the spoonfed formulas that Hollywood films have endlessly and successfully used.

**NESHAT:** My intention is of course to have the film shown at commercial theaters, not at galleries and museums. I just feel that it's useful and productive if visual artists can also be participants in the popular culture beyond the doors of galleries and museums. Obviously Schnabel has been very successful in reaching the mainstream. As for Steve McQueen, as a first time filmmaker, I thought *Hunger* was remarkable.

**BECKER:** It's good for the health of film, because artists' conception of the form is different. It's more hybridized and visual artists refuse to simplify the narrative or sequences of imagery.

**NESHAT:** Yet my feeling is that we cannot be ignorant about the fact that we need to acquire a complete set of skills that are required in making a full-length feature.

**BUI:** There is a difference between the language of form and the language of technique.

**NESHAT:** Exactly. I was thinking about Barney's films the other day. While his use of the narrative remained more or less abstract and enigmatic, the ways in which he constructed the characters in relation to the sets and the music are pretty much identifiable with his personal aesthetic. Whether or not he intended his films to reach a certain kind of audience, that's difficult to tell. As for Steve McQueen, he just directly adopted a script that somebody had written and he was able to make that long scene of the two men so compelling and visual. Schnabel, on the other hand, took a more conventional direction. Nevertheless, he managed to make really good films. In my case, maybe in addition to some of my friends, maybe my own mother would understand the film. This is my intention. [Laughs.]

**BUI:** Have you ever spent much time seeing experimental films?

**NESHAT:** There was a period where I started to really fall in love with the moving picture. I took courses in film history and saw as many films as I could on film directors and film history. I have to say that I am not as familiar with experimental film as I should be. Instead I spent lots of time watching every film of Antonioni, Kurosawa, Pasolini, and especially with Bergman and Tarkovsky who are really great masters. They certainly know how to create strong psychological narratives

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Shirin Neshat, Film Still, "Zarin" (2005). Copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery

with complex characters, without sacrificing their visual sensibilities. I really feel like I have been to university in the past six years, trying to learn all of filmmaking— from editing, working with editors, cinematographers, to actors, from technical to artistic skills, while learning from other filmmakers as well. To this day, as I sit with both of you, I feel like I am a perpetual student of film. I feel like I have a lot to learn, which I think is a great feeling.

**BUI:** Throughout your work, there's always been a sense of space that constantly has to be negotiated, whether interior vs. exterior, private vs. public, sacred vs. natural, near vs. far, and so on. One can trace it from *Shadow Under the Web* (1997), *Rapture* (1999), *Soliloquy* (1999), to this new film, which deals less with those issues. I wonder whether that sense of space stemmed from your past experience of having worked at the Storefront for Art and Architecture for ten years?

**NESHAT:** Absolutely. I learned in that ten years that architecture is not just about design, it's about space and it's about the meaning a space gives. My ex-husband, Kyong Park, for example, really had a huge interest in the political relationship of space and social responsibility, like housing projects. He did a number of shows that I helped him do, which were really about defining space, and so I knew how to approach it theoretically, as well as its physical applications. Particularly in Islamic culture, space is an important element that separates private and public lives. People change behavior as soon as they enter a particular space. In any Muslim country you cannot enter a mosque without taking off your shoes, for example. There are certain codes that everyone must adhere to. It's very severe, like if you're outside a public space, you must wear a veil and cannot have eye contact with a man.

**BUI:** And this conception, the clichéd reading of the woman under the veil who has therefore no power. In fact it was brought up in an interview that Arthur Danto did with you, in which you said there has never been any sort of competition between Iranian

men and women—the acceptability in their own roles is identified with their dignity.

**NESHAT:** There are two things you are bringing up. One is the question of feminism in relation to that part of the world and the other is the idea of Orientalization and the exoticism of certain iconography. The question of feminism—even today somebody asked me if I think I am a feminist and I said I don't know what that means because only if you choose the word with the subject of a woman, does that make you a feminist? And the other thing is that I think the idea of feminism in the West and the East is very different. My understanding is, Iranian women are not really in a struggle to be equal with men—that is not what women want. Women want to remain women; they just want their rights. It's like a yin and yang situation. We think that men and women together make a perfect equilibrium in the universe, whereas I think in the U.S. women have to be like men in order to advance their careers. The other thing is a lot of people have accused me, even Iranian people, saying that I use the veil or other ideas as a way of exoticizing the subject or making purely aesthetic exercises and I'm saying well of course, I am an artist, aesthetic concerns are fundamental to what I do, but the question of orientalization is not my problem in that women in that part of the world actually wear the veil and the question of orientalization is a Western concern. For me, the mystery is built out of those two differences. Again, when *Zarin* was in the bathhouse, I made the set so that it looks like an Orientalist painting, partly because I thought how often do you have an anorexic woman who appears in an Orientalist picture? In other words, I was very conscious of both averting the ideas of stereotypes while playing with them, trying to deconstruct and construct the text and image at the same time.

**BECKER:** I love this quote from you that I read in another interview: "I appreciate beauty as a way to neutralize violence."

**NESHAT:** My justification at the end is that this notion of beauty, symmetry, and harmony is a fundamental

part of all arts, whether Persian, Islamic, or Classical art. I really believe that beauty is a fundamental way of getting closer to the divine. Of course, that conception comes from spiritual Islam. But I also think it's very poignant to bring that spiritual element into juxtaposition with the political reality. In other words, we have all these beautiful women with the veils against the background of those magnificent mosques and architecture, and then we have the guns. To me, these are two conflicting forces that reveal the ongoing complex web of Islam today. Where it comes from, where it's going, and how they're all in this world together.

**BECKER:** You're moving in this complicated terrain because you really have these very disparate audiences that the work is addressing. One is a Western audience and the other is an Iranian audience.

**NESHAT:** You're absolutely right, because on one hand, although most of the Iranians I know are not familiar with contemporary art, they understand the complexity of their social, political, and religious situations—and they are entitled to their opinions. The Westerners, on the other hand, may understand the contemporary art better, but they don't understand the complexity of Iranian culture. In this feature film, I had to keep them all in mind.

**BECKER:** But I think you keep them all in mind all the time. You're navigating the space in between, which is not an easy thing to do. But by doing just that, you're creating a new space.

**NESHAT:** Absolutely. I chose to be in the middle of that space, and I'm fully aware of my responsibility, and I will insist that this is very personal work. This is about me, my perspective of the world. I'm quite clear about what I do and once it's sent out to the world as an object, people can decide what they feel and think.

**BECKER:** There are a million landmines that all of us could be falling into.

There's always the potential that any one of them could explode.

**NESHAT:** Or I could make a mistake, by making wrong work.

**BECKER:** But through metaphor, and through a symbolic universe that you create, you're always a few steps ahead while they're trying to catch you. They might think that you're here but you're in fact over there.

**NESHAT:** There is also luck, which does occasionally happen to us all. I remember once someone called while I was still working at Storefront and asked if he could look at my work, and I thought he meant Storefront's work, so I said, "we're closed for installation," and he said, "no, your work," and I said, "what work?" I've only made four photographs (the Women of Allah)! And that was how it all began. It all happened in such an organic way, which is what we all want. I am a strong believer that I am the captain of my own ship, and as long as I'm clear about which way I'm going, I'll take all

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the good and bad that comes with it. And I have to say, I've made mistakes in collaboration, or making work that is not so strong, and that's OK, because the fundamental thing about the process of being an artist is failure. That you have to learn to accept that you are going to fail. It is similarly important for your critics, your audience, and your peers to understand that failure is part of growth. There is nothing wrong with failure. You fail or fall, and then you pick yourself up again. It's that very process that is what really counts in the end.

**BECKER:** All we wanted was to find a new form that can relate to what is happening now, in the world, and its timing in terms of the film, not only does *Women without Men* synchronize with the current political crisis in Iran, it also reminds us of the previous events from past and recent history, which we have yet learned from. But until it's achieved, that idea will continue to push the culture forward, push individuals forward until it becomes actualized. Once you put an idea in the world it has to manifest. It may take a hundred years, but it will keep coming back, it will be a force until it actually finds a form within which to actualize itself.

**NESHAT:** That was a big discussion, on what note do we want to leave the audience with? A pessimistic or an optimistic note? Well, the failure of the coup d'état didn't and couldn't discourage or oppress the people's desire for freedom. They were courageous, and they will do it again. When you look at modern and contemporary Iranian history, we've had a very dark history. We've had the British and CIA along with local as well as foreign dictators on our necks so the way that the Iranian people have seemed

to cope with their difficult political reality was to reach into the wisdom of their traditional poetry and spiritual practice, even the spiritual adaptation of Islam. You can see how we took Islam and we adapted it to Sufism or adapted it to other subsequent rigidities that were imposed upon us. You can see how the younger generation is not doing well with this rigidity. Hamid [Dabashi], our most prominent intellectual, beautifully said, in a recent panel, that this new generation of uprisings is very different than my and the previous generations, who were more ideological. They're not interested in fighting for communism or socialism. They're not interested in Revolution. They just want freedom and democracy.

They just want their basic rights, which is not much to ask. The key is that we have to learn from this young generation who don't want their parents to convolute their struggle. They want peace and they want to be like everybody else in the world, and they're willing to fight for their ideas. They are a new idea of revolution and that idea is the idea of democracy and tolerance. There is a word in Farsi, which means "to make up." We Iranians have been divided into many political and religious ideologies: the Muslims, the anti-Muslims, the pro-shah, the anti-shah, the rich, the poor, the capitalists, the radicalists. and Hamid emphatically said, for god's sake for once, let's come together and understand that we could be different, but we could still be fighting for one thing: freedom. This is one goal that we all have in common and this is the theme of the film, freedom, and release. It's such an irony that the garden, where the women look for freedom, is a place of exile. And at the last hunger strike at the U.N. Headquarters in July, we were there united to demand the release of the prisoners from the recent election in Iran.

**BECKER:** All you have said is the embodiment of Munis. All she ever wanted was freedom.

**NESHAT:** Right, at first, she got involved with the Communists, then soon realized that the Communists themselves were capable of violence.

**BUI:** That realization came when she held in her hands the dead, innocent young guard, one of her own people.

**NESHAT:** Exactly. All she wanted was to make peace. I mean, it's been 30 years since the last revolution in 1979. Different people have different relationships to the country. Some people would never go back, some people had members of their family killed, so they have strong feelings against the government and they don't see any way of making up with the country. The whole idea for us in exile is we have to make peace with ourselves, and pay attention to those who are living in Iran, especially the young generation. They're our only hope. ■■

Shirin Neshat's current exhibit, *Games of Desire*, will be on view from September 3–October 3, 2009 at Gladstone Gallery on 12 Rue due Grand Cerf, Brussels.



Shirin Neshat, Film Still, "Zarin" (2005). Copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery

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