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Mirlesse, Sam, "In Conversation with Shirin Neshat", White Hot Magazine Blog, December 2009

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whitehot | December 2009, In Conversation with Shirin Neshat



Shirin Neshat, Passage Series, 2001
Cibachrome print 42 x 63 1/8 inches (106.7 x 160.3 cm) framed Edition of 5 + 2 AP
Copyright Shirin Neshat, Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York

December 2009, Sam Mirlesse in Conversation with Shirin Neshat

Shirin Neshat is the recipient of a variety of awards including the Dorothy & Lillian Gish Prize in 2006, the Hiroshima Museum Contemporary Art Peace Award in 2004, and the Infinity Award at ICP in 2002. She has shown her photographic and film work all over the world, in spite of her relatively recent public recognition only fifteen years ago when the artist was well into her mid-thirties. Her films remain currently banned in Iran, but possess a large following as far as both Persian diasporic communities and underground Iranian art and intellectual circles are concerned. Institutions that have exhibited her projects include the MoMA in New York, the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin, the Tate Gallery in London, and LACMA in Los Angeles. Last January, *Vogue Italia* magazine did an interview with her entitled *Portrait of a Visual Poet*. Since then her multi-part feature film *Zarin, Munis, Faezeh, Mahdokht* and *Farokh Legha* won the Golden Lion award at the 66th Venice Film Festival as the chapters that comprise the larger film entitled *Women Without Men*. Ms. Neshat continues to live and work in New York City and is represented by the Gladstone Gallery here and in Brussels.

Last week she kindly agreed to sit down over a coffee in SoHo and let me ask her several questions about her work and experience as an artist.

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Sam Mirlesse: Perhaps we could start off with your beginnings as an artist? If you could talk a little about how you started—I know you originally were studying painting at Berkeley for example...

Shirin Neshat: I came to this country in 1975. When I came, I was in my last year of high school. And I knew I wanted to study art. Just about when I graduated - I was in California - there was a revolution in 1979. I was separated from my family and I was trying to figure out how to school myself. I basically got myself to UC Berkeley on my own. I studied art as an undergraduate and a graduate, and after school I was doing more printmaking than painting, but I've always said I was never really good at it.

My main issue at the time was that when I was at this school I didn't possess that kind of maturity that you needed to really develop as an artist. I was very young and I had a lot of anxiety about what was going on in my country. It was almost impossible to really focus in school. I was feeling really disjointed. I realized that I never really connected to this school as I should have as a form of community because I was so devastated by my personal situation. So I went through the whole of art school more or less being a very mediocre artist. You know I tried to do work that many artists who come from other cultures do—where they blend in their own culture background and iconography with what they learned in the West, and so what you ended up with was not really very exciting.

In 1983 I came to New York. I came really not knowing what the future was going to be, artistically or personally. I really uprooted myself from California to come here, and as a young person coming to New York I felt so intimidated by the whole environment. I found very quickly that my paintings had no future—and basically that I was not an artist, and that I should just stop. Immediately after I came to New York, I basically stopped making art! I devoted myself to the work I was doing at this not-for-profit space called the Storefront for Art and Architecture.

Only in 1990 after seven years of being in New York, and after eleven years of having not gone back to Iran, I went home. Meanwhile in those years of not being an artist and being really active and involved in other areas I'd really grown as a human being, both intellectually and as a person. I'd seen things. I was exposed to a lot of great minds and artists, and I began to feel really educated. You know at art school at Berkeley it was more or less like — go in your studio and close the door and search your mind and exist. So I felt more motivated later, as in New York this can occur more easily, but most importantly because I found a subject matter that really resonated with me — which was Iran. But this was not with the intention that I was really going to be 'making art' or having a 'career' or anything like that. I think when I look at it, the lucky thing for me was that I never really had an agenda — like 'I want to be an artist, I am going to climb the ladder, and I'm going to find representation, and get shows, etc'. Art has got this competitive quality — and I'm so outside of the mindset. Everything came as this kind of accident — only when I abandoned making art.

I really think that the most important thing is to be self-critical. Our culture in a way rejects a lot of things both about the methodology involved in surviving as an artist, and also in terms of your form — like where they teach you that you have to just work hard and find what you are good at and repeat it a million times. I am so against that. In my particular case, I've had to do more than just study and repeat a form, but experiment. I had to reject everything. But also in terms of this system in which it is believed that you must go after managing yourself as an artist in order to move towards a career. I am completely going against this grain—(for example, and we can talk about this later, my going from art to film.) I think I have pioneered my own way.

SM: *So you came back from this visit to Iran and you began to make the work that has led you to where you are now artistically — in particular I mean that first project entitled Women of Allah which is now quite well known. What was it about that particular trip that motivated you to start to make art again?*

SN: Well it was very personal. I had been separated for a very long time from my family. The country had transformed drastically from the monarchy to the Islamic Republic of Iran which, since the revolution, was so expansive, in the way that it had changed just about everything about the country. Ideologically, musically — the country became so religious — but also in the physical form, in the way people looked, the relationship to body language, in terms of how you had to repress absolutely any sort of sexual or physical interaction with a man — it was a phenomenon just sociologically speaking.

But first of all, for me, the experience was this return to my own country and seeing how my own immediate family interacted. At the time the change might have been more noticeable than now, directly following the revolution, as the country has become more modern today, but then it was really noticeable. I had left the country when women were wearing miniskirts and my mother had had this kind of elegant hairdo and then now everyone with the black veil, and everyone without makeup, I mean for me it was really fascinating to me to go and be back with my own mother... but also aside from these very superficial things, to see that they had changed ideologically even beyond their own expectation and recognition. Don't forget it wasn't just the revolution either — it was all these years of war with Iraq. They had been invaded. Day after day they had had to hide in their basements, people were getting killed, and soldiers were coming back dead. So it was these years of grief over both the revolution and war —things I had never experienced — and here I was on the beach in California or in New York during those same years. So coming back to this and seeing what these people had endured outside of my own little experience where I was safe and.. had basically just worried about myself for the past ten years, and here I come see this family that had really been through a lot— and not just my family but the country. For me this became an obsession. In a very strange way I was envious of them. In the security of the life that I'd had, my life had been very superficial comparatively speaking. In looking at how profound their experience had been. I felt so very much an outsider and so stupidly narcissistic.

Meanwhile this wasn't my fault, it was just the reality of the situation that I hadn't been there. Reality had separated us. But so I in a way, I think subconsciously, wanted to immerse myself back into this society. I started to read — to find out really how the revolution had happened. I started to talk to people. I started to go every year. One thing led to another, I became very interested in the subject of the woman in relation to the revolution —and it all gave birth to some initial art form. It was really interesting. Nothing was strategized. In fact when people asked to see the work I was doing I was really caught by surprise because I was working at this organization, and I really thought they were talking about the work I was doing there. I really always remember the phenomenon of how everything sort of just fused together and created this spark in me that worked, and that was very special, and very natural, and never forced. Every time I'm working I try to remind myself of this feeling of being intuitively spontaneous, and how this was the beginning of my career, and that I should never take this for granted.

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Shirin Neshat, *Women Without Men (Untitled #1)*, 2004
C-print, 40 1/2 x 65 inches (102.9 x 165.1 cm), Edition of 5 + 1 AP
Copyright Shirin Neshat, Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York

SM: What does your family think of the work you make?

SN: It took years and years for them to even understand what I was doing. My family is not familiar with art, or contemporary art, or any form of art. It wasn't until years and year after when I started to get some recognition that they started to take it seriously. Then when it began to be known in Iran, because the work eventually became very controversial, they began to even know more about the controversy over my work than anything else—that controversy being that the *Women of Allah* became very dubious for the local government because they in a way couldn't figure out whether I was endorsing the revolution or criticizing it. So my family really only knows the consequences of the publicity, but does not really understand the conceptual aspect of the work or what it is meant to do, because they are just not familiar.

SM: Can you talk about the strong visual style you've developed? I remember hearing you once describe the aesthetic as "beautiful and disturbing"—could you perhaps elaborate on what you mean by that description?

SN: It is a very big part of my work. For a long time I think beauty was problematic in contemporary art. There is always this question of sentimentality or decorativeness that sort of distracts from content or the reality of everyday life. I think that a lot of times my work is criticized by certain people for having such an emphasis on beauty. When you look at the *Women of Allah* where I did the calligraphy — it is very beautiful — or when I did the decorative patterns. When you look at the movies and videos — everything is really aestheticised — everything is very stylized and carefully crafted in terms of the camera movement, in terms of composition of symmetry, the harmony — and I ask myself 'why?' because if you look at my own house or what I wear it is always about that same idea of aesthetic. It's just certain things speak to me. I've realized this is something very cultural. This is something that I definitely feel I grew up with. This is something very Eastern, I would even say Persian — a heritage of the idea of how harmony and beauty is a reiteration of our spirituality and really almost becomes something religious in the way that we are always told "God loves beauty" and so when you look at the architecture or the decorative aspects of interior design, its all reminiscent of patterns and motifs that are reminiscent of our spiritual and philosophical orientation.

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SM: *There also an element of Romanticism about it, something coming from literature, no?*

SN: Absolutely there is the poetic, lyrical, romantic... but I am an absolute believer that that on its own is dangerous. That is a space I don't want to fall into. The beautiful is one aspect I am interested in but I really am interested in also very dark, harsh, oppressive, disturbing material – which as one can expect, politics takes us to – this means oppression, violence, death, cruelty, guns, rape, prostitution, killing – all of these subjects. All of the work I have done to this day – from *Women of Allah* to *Women Without Men* has this constant juxtaposition of disturbing material with beauty.

SM: *What is the intention in emphasizing this dialogue between such different subject matter? How does it relate to the narratives you create?*

SN: For me this is the truest image of our humanity. In a way, every one of us has a demon inside of us and goodness inside of us. We are ourselves full of contradictions. There is always this element of the paradoxical-- between good and evil and how they always seem to co-exist. The same that you can expect in Islam, the same that you can expect in Christianity, the same that you can expect in one single human being – that I at once could be positive and extremely negative. That is just basically the reality. You cannot just look at it from one side. This is for me philosophically my constitution as a human being, I really believe in imperfection and the yin and yang and I'd rather think that way because I really question when people look at things only in negative or only in positive – I just don't believe it because ultimately it is a lie. It is not so black and white. For me, I think this is the way I think about my narrative and my characters.

SM: *What about music? You have collaborated with Philip Glass and with Sussan Deyhim several times. Sound has played such an important element in your films.*

SN: It's funny because it has really been a growing experience for me. I didn't really know very much pay attention to music that is played during movies, or to scores rather. It really started as a total experiment when we did *Turbulent* and that then led to *Rapture*. We really weren't following any models. With Sussan Deyhim we were just sort of pioneering our own way of putting music with the film in a way that was no logical way – in a way that replaced dialogue. In way it wasn't really a score as much as it was sound because her voice became the instrument. So it became an amazing juxtaposition with the image. Eventually I worked with Philip and I learned that it could also be a problem. I love his music, and for me to learn about not so much music but about sound score was so important, because he didn't so much with voice. I've learned now that I am less interested in music than I am in sound because I have learned that music can be really manipulative, emotionally speaking. Now I am working with Ryuichi Sakamoto who did the score for *Women Without Men* and I love the way he works because his music is very melodic but at points it is so minimal. I am now using a lot of silence and also natural sounds. I've become very minimal and I've grown to really not like any music that dominates the image.



*Shirin Neshat, Untitled (Zarin Series), 2005
C-print, 68 x 59 inches (172.7 x 149.9 cm), Edition of 5 + 2 AP
Copyright Shirin Neshat, Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York*

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SM: *On more than a few occasions your female characters or heroines are seen to flee — to depart, whether it is mysteriously into the sea in Rapture or to their own death in Women Without Men — how are these dark instances representative of escape? Are they escaping?*

SN: I think that a lot of these women are in a way modeled after myself. You're absolutely right. Every one of the women in my videos escapes. I think its because generally they're all outcasts, and they can never fit in, fit in to their society or into the model of life they are living in. And I think it is just a replication of how I feel as a woman myself — always like an outcast, whether with Iranian people or Westerners. I always feel like I'm just fleeting between things. I'm never anywhere really completely, and I'm always trying to find a new way to reinvent my life and my self, because I'm not really ever feeling settled and comfortable with any type of life. What I think all of these women are constructed as is enormously troubled but enormously courageous. You know there are many, many, many women across the world — especially that part of the world — that are living in these situations but never doing anything about it. All the women in my films are rebellious. They are all oppressed but they're always taking action. I think this is just the way I see my self.

SM: *But the way these female characters take action in many of the stories is by taking their own lives — can you explain how that is meant to be understood? I mean, obviously death can hardly be an escape from oppression. It should never be suggested to be the better alternative. I think this could be an important aspect of the content of your work to clarify.*

SN: You're talking about *Munis*? You have to understand this comes from the novel — she doesn't actually take her life. In a way she is a very unworldly character.

SM: *It also happens in the tale of Mahdokht...*

SN: I'm glad you brought this up. These two characters are two of the most magical characters of the novel. The idea of *Munis*' suicide is also reaching freedom — it is flight — it is really less about death but taking the means to freedom. She is a very metaphoric character. She could never ever be free within her family situation to experience everything that she wanted to experience. So now that she leaps to death — to flight — she is able to be forever active. So it is not really a tale of suicide. It is a very mythological approach. And with *Mahdokht*... she also becomes a tree, so in a way she wants to be renewed by re-planting herself as a tree. Again, it's the beginning of a new life, it's not a finality as we know it. It is a magic character. You see for example *Faezeh* or *Zarin* — they are more realistic characters, they don't have that kind of... Many people have asked me the same question... but I think the mistake is that you can never look at these two very magical characters as real people. They are metaphoric characters.

SM: *If taken literally this represents a very frightening reality. It makes a strong statement of the impossibility of their situation.*

SN: No, you are not the first person to ask, you know.

SM: *Now for a different kind of question: what is the most beautiful place you have ever been in your whole life?*

SN: Oh that is a really nice question. Beautiful physically or culturally?

SM: *However you would like to interpret it.*

SN: Nepal. I went there so long ago. I was in my twenties. I remember when I went there I honestly felt that I was on another planet. The nature of the mountains but also the people. I remember that I felt like I was reborn in such a way that I could not recognize anything by the definition that I was familiar with.

In terms of physical beauty it was Iceland — we went there last year and I have to tell you — never did I feel that nature could be so powerful in a way that it resonated spirituality. I don't usually say these kinds of things. But honestly when you go and you suddenly find yourself in this nature where there is nothing happening but this volcanic landscape and there are no trees... you really see this manifestation of the divine in a way that truly a new experience.

SM: *So your most recent project in Laos, Games of Desire, is so different from anything you've ever done it seems... such a shift to a playful subject matter...*

SN: It's funny people say that because I actually feel like it is so much like my other work. I'll just explain to you because at this particular time I wanted to work in a non-Islamic country and I had no idea what I could do but what immediately interested me was the political issues in Laos really resembled Iran's. They too had had a revolution that replaced their government that was a monarchy with that of the communists, and this revolution really transformed their culture beyond recognition. A lot of things are taboo to even do. Part of their culture is dying because their government simply doesn't show interest and also they have no money. This situation relates to Iran when we were transformed from a monarchy by the Islamic revolution. People in a way were forced to reject some of their authentic tradition. This is really very sad. This particular music that I went after — only older people remember it (people in their 80s, 90s, and 70s.)

What is also really amazing is that I came across this — that exactly like my previous work where I've always placed the man and woman as two opposites — I came to this ceremonial event and I was shocked. It was as if I was looking at my own work except they were Laotian and they were not repressed in the way that my people are. In fact they were overtly sexual and erotic. The irony of their age and poverty and the way they were physically and yet the amount of life and passion they felt for each other was so grand. In the images of the photographs I placed my own handwriting allowing the translations of the songs from Laotian to English and English to Farsi to create this kind of infusion of the cultures.

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Shirin Neshat, Games of Desire: Solo 2, 2009
C-print with ink, 50 1/8 x 33 3/8 inches (127.3 x 84.8 cm), Edition of 5 + 2 AP
Copyright Shirin Neshat, Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York

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SM: *What's next for you?*

SN: At this very moment I am reading a lot. I'm looking for the right script. I'd really like to continue with film. I really think that if I had thought a couple of years ago about how one has to separate or distinguish between what is visual art and what is cinema—I don't want to think that way anymore. They are all one. I as an artist always approach cinema within my capacity as a visual artist. I don't need to force the separation.

You know I've been really happy with the fact that I have involved myself with projects where I don't know what the end product would be — whether it would be successful to not successful, whether it would belong here or there — and at the risk of failure. I think this is way I should continue, and the way that other artists should be: to really take chances to experiment and to delve into areas both in terms of the thematic or form where they really don't know what they're doing—to play. I love this element of play. So now I'm looking to get inspired, I'm looking at a lot of movies. I'm struggling to give myself more time to get inspired and think about the next thing.

SM: *Do you think whatever the subject that it will be once again be about Iran?*

SN: No. I'd rather not. I've been thinking a lot about it and I can't promise that there won't be a great story that I will come across and feel compelled to do that is Iranian. But at this moment I think I need to take the next leap—which is to go to another story of another region. I'm reading at the moment a lot of books that were recommended to me written by an Albanian writer whose name is Ismail Kadare. It is slightly magical realism, and fantastic imagination. I really feel like it suits me. I'm really trying to expand my horizons culturally.

SM: *If you couldn't be an artist, what other profession would you pursue?*

SN: Well you know my passion, or my hobby, is dance. I'm afraid I'm too old to do that. I've always been equally interested in art and dance. I've been doing it ever since I've known myself. Generally I wish I was younger because I would have really wanted to—I have a really strong passion for dance you know. There your body becomes your instrument.

I'm not a good writer. I admire people who are writers and I wish I had skills as a writer. That's basically it.

SM: *Thank you so much for your time, Shirin.*



Shirin Neshat, photo credit: Sam Mirlesse