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Heartney, Eleanor, "Shirin Neshat-An Interview by Eleanor Heartney," *Art in America*, June/July 2009, pp. 152-159

SHIRIN NESHAT

AN INTERVIEW BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY

OVER THE LAST 12 YEARS, Iranian-born Shirin Neshat (b. 1957) has produced a series of lyrical video installations that touch on such issues as gender politics, cultural self-definition and the authority of religion. Drawing on the artist's experiences as a Middle Eastern émigré as well as more universal themes of identity, desire and social isolation, these works have garnered many honors, including, in 1999, a Venice Biennale International Golden Lion prize. Since 2003, Neshat has been engaged in an ambitious two-part video/film project based on (and titled after) the 1989 novel *Women Without Men* by the Iranian writer Shahrnush Parsipur.

The project's five individual videos—*Mahdokht* (2004), *Zarin* (2005), *Munis* (2008), *Faezeh* (2008) and *Farokh Legha* (2008)—each of which centers on one of the female characters in the novel, have recently been brought together into a single multiroom installation. First shown in 2008 at the AROs Aarhus Kunstmuseum in Denmark, the composite work traveled to Faurshou Beijing Gallery in China and the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens. It will go on view at the Kulturhuset in Stockholm this fall, with other venues pending. In addition, four of the videos (all except *Farokh Legha*) were screened at last year's "Prospect.1 New Orleans" biennial.

While making the videos (largely sponsored by Gladstone Gallery, New York, and Galerie Jérôme de Noirmont, Paris), Neshat also worked on a soon-to-be-released feature film. The movie, which spins off from both the novel and the videos, features a dreamlike narrative that interweaves the women's personal stories with the political upheavals of 1953 Tehran, the setting for Parsipur's book. (Alarmed by the nationalization of Iran's oil fields, British and American operatives that year abetted a coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, reinstating the Shah.) To create the videos and the film, Neshat worked closely with her longtime collaborator, Shoja Azari, who coauthored the final script. The film version, shot in Casablanca in the Farsi language, primarily uses Iranian actors who live in Europe. It also includes a voiceover written by poet and art critic Steven Henry Madoff.

Over a series of weeks, I spoke with Neshat about the genesis of the "Women Without Men" project. We discussed its meaning to her, the challenge of translating Parsipur's novel into moving images, the tricky task of balancing its poetic and political elements, and the differing demands of video and film.

ELEANOR HEARTNEY How did this project come about?

SHIRIN NESHAT At the time I was in Documenta in 2002, having made several video installations, I was beginning to feel very consumed by being in one big international show after another, making one work after another. I felt I needed time off to plan a project that would take



All images in this article, unless otherwise noted, are stills from Shirin Neshat's film *Women Without Men*. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York.

Above right, Shirin Neshat (standing center) during filming in Casablanca, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

Neshat's film *Women Without Men* at LACMA, on June 15, and the MCA San Diego, on June 18.

a long time to realize. Then I got a call from the Sundance Institute, asking if I would consider developing a feature film project for their writers' lab. At first, I thought I couldn't, so I said no. Then, after Documenta, I thought why not?

EH What did you discover about the difference between the art and film worlds?

SN In the art world you are very free, but you end up making something that few people see. In the film world anybody can view your film for the small price of a ticket, but you are not as free. There is also a big difference between film producers and art dealers. Producers are extremely involved. Everything has to go through them, while an art dealer basically leaves you alone and remains

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uninvolved in the production.

What I wanted from the beginning was to create a feature film for theaters, in parallel with a group of related video installations for gallery and museum settings. I found out that in order to get funding for a feature film you have to have a quality script—and this was a new experience for me, since I had just storyboarded my past videos. My producers insisted that I work with the German script consultant Franz Rodenkirchen, so I started to travel back and forth to Berlin, eventually becoming a resident in 2003. Franz would read the script and offer his criticisms; I would revise and return for more discussions. This took a few years, and in the process I think we did over a hundred and fifty different versions, ending with a script that was co-written by myself and Shoja Azari.

EH The film and the installations tell the story in radically different ways.

SN Yes, they are very different kinds of constructions. The logic behind the editing of the video installations was to create a group of five nonlinear narratives, giving a glimpse into the nature of each of the five characters, as opposed to telling their entire stories. The idea was that the viewer would walk from room to room and, at the end, be able to put the story together. So in reality the viewer becomes the editor.

The logic for the movie version was to make a straight narrative, a more or less conventional film, while relying on my visual esthetics. The main challenge was how to fuse my artistic vocabulary with cinematic language. I realized that I had underestimated the difficulties of pacing, story development, dialogue and many other

related issues. In a film, you must never lose the thread of the story, and at times beautiful imagery has to be discarded as too distracting. The issues of comprehension and clarity are very important, whereas in art practice, enigma and abstraction are encouraged.

In the end, I learned that the fundamental difference between cinema and art is the question of character development. In all my past work, such as the videos *Rapture* [1999] and *Passage* [2001], I had treated people sculpturally, devoid of any character or identity. They were simply iconic figures. But with this film, I had to learn how to build characters, how to enter their inner worlds, their mindsets. This was an entirely new experience for me. I began to appreciate directors like Bergman, who could keep you pinned in your seat, some-



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"FOR IRANIANS, WHO HAVE ENDURED ONE DICTATORSHIP AFTER ANOTHER, POETIC-METAPHORIC LANGUAGE IS A WAY TO EXPRESS ALL THAT IS NOT ALLOWED IN REALITY."

times spending two hours merely with two characters in one room.

EH Let's talk about the story you chose to tell. Both the videos and the film are based on Shahrnush Parsipur's novel *Women Without Men*. What drew you to this book?

SN This is a very well-known novel that has been banned for many years in Iran. Parsipur herself spent five years in prison. I have always had an obsession with certain Iranian women writers, not just for their fantastic talent but also for how their lives and artistic work mirror each another.

Women Without Men is a quite beautiful but strange novel. I couldn't

have picked a more difficult book. It is written in a magic-realist style, which I was told later is perhaps the most challenging type of literature to convert into cinema. Even before I started, my advisors told me to be careful.

My attraction to the book probably stems from the fact that my own work comes out of a similar conjunction of influences. It is deeply personal and highly emotional yet equally political. Like Parsipur's novel, everything that I have ever made concerns the intersection of contrary elements: personal/social, global/local, spiritual/violent, masculine/feminine. My work is all about opposites and parallels.

Parsipur's tale follows the coup d'état that took place in Tehran in the summer of 1953, when Iranians struggled for political freedom against imperialism, while also tracing five women as they go on their own quests for personal freedom.

EH How would you sum up the theme of this book?

SN The story is a deeply philosophical one. It tells of five women who all run away from their troubled pasts and find that their lives mysteriously converge in an orchard in the countryside. This orchard becomes a refuge, a place of exile, where they can disconnect themselves from the external



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world. These women have something in common—the courage to take their destinies into their own hands. Some of the characters are quite realistically portrayed, such as Farokh Legha, a woman in her fifties who still wants to start life over again, and Faezeh, who wants to have a normal family—a plan interrupted when she is raped. Other characters are more surrealistically drawn, like Munis, who commits suicide and finds freedom through death, and Zarin, a prostitute who begins to see her customers as literally faceless.

The film follows in parallel manner each woman's journey out of Tehran and into the orchard. Once in the orchard, the women feel fulfilled and safe. Together they create a utopian community, until one of them gets bored and chooses to open the orchard to others. Parsipur is obviously alluding to the Garden of Eden. **EH** In the film, Munis is the pivotal char-

acter. She dies at the beginning but is resurrected, and it is her voiceover that guides us through the story.

SN In the novel, Munis enters the orchard like the other women, and Parsipur treats her as a woman who is simply curious about the world but not particularly political. In my film, I changed her story. She becomes a political activist, and she enters the orchard as a ghost, not as a human. In fact, it is through her experiences that we witness the political development in the country. Meanwhile, as the narrator of the film, she also serves as a spiritual guide.

EH The book and videos have a fifth female character, Mahdokht, who plants herself as a tree in the garden. Why did you leave her out of the film?

SN The extremely magical nature of her character was difficult to balance in the film. Originally, in the first few drafts of the script, she was included,

but she eventually got eliminated. Mahdokht is a woman who plants herself as a tree since she is terrified of sexual intercourse but obsessed with fertility. She dreams of producing fruits and seeds that can be disseminated around the globe. So you can imagine how far out her story was.

EH Meanwhile, you give a bigger role to the gardener, who appears both in the brothel scene as one of Zarin's customers and as a nurturing figure in the garden.

SN The gardener is treated as a very mysterious, rather angelic figure throughout the film. His identity is never quite revealed. He recruits the women for the orchard. And as you mentioned, he appears as a faceless monster in the brothel, which causes Zarin to escape the place; then, in the orchard, he seems very compassionate.

EH The ending of the film also differs radically from the book's.

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SN I must say that there are numerous things that I love about the novel, such as its philosophical and political nature, plus its broad range of female characters, from Westernized to devoutly religious and traditional to extremely poor. But I don't really like how the story plays out once the women arrive at the orchard, nor how it ends. I feel that the women become victims, and I never wanted to portray my characters as victims. I wanted to make a film that shows women who obviously are oppressed and against the wall—due to sexual, religious or social pressure—but who all undergo a positive transformation.

EH Which of these characters do you find yourself identifying with?

SN Just as Parsipur constructed the characters according to her own personality, I've done the same. Munis and I share a passion for political

activism, a belief in social justice. With Faezeh, I share the desire for a normal, traditional life. With Farokh Legha, the idea of aging but still wanting to start over again. With Zarin, the character that I perhaps feel closest to, it is the problem of the female body and feelings of shame. As a Muslim woman, I have grown up with a complex about my body, always feeling inadequate.

EH Your film also has much more emphasis on the political aspects of the story. You highlight the 1953 coup.

SN In the novel, the political material is only in the background, but I expanded it and brought it forward. Selfishly, I found it very timely to revisit history and remind Westerners that the American and British governments were directly responsible for overthrowing a democratic system in Iran. The CIA organized the coup in 1953, which in turn paved the road

for the Islamic Revolution in 1979. As far as I know, this is the only film made so far that tries to depict this monumental political moment.

EH The film deals with the period before you were born. How did you reach back to that?

SN The Iran I grew up in was not so different from the one described in the novel. We were quite Westernized. The society was perhaps not as democratic as in 1953, because the Shah had created SAVAK, the secret police, but the country was far freer than it is today. In my film, you'll see how, before the coup, the Communists and the Muslims, like the pro-Shah, the pro-Mossadegh and the pro-West groups, all coexisted. To this day, most Iranians believe that Mossadegh's overthrow robbed them of the possibility of democracy for decades, and caused the relationship

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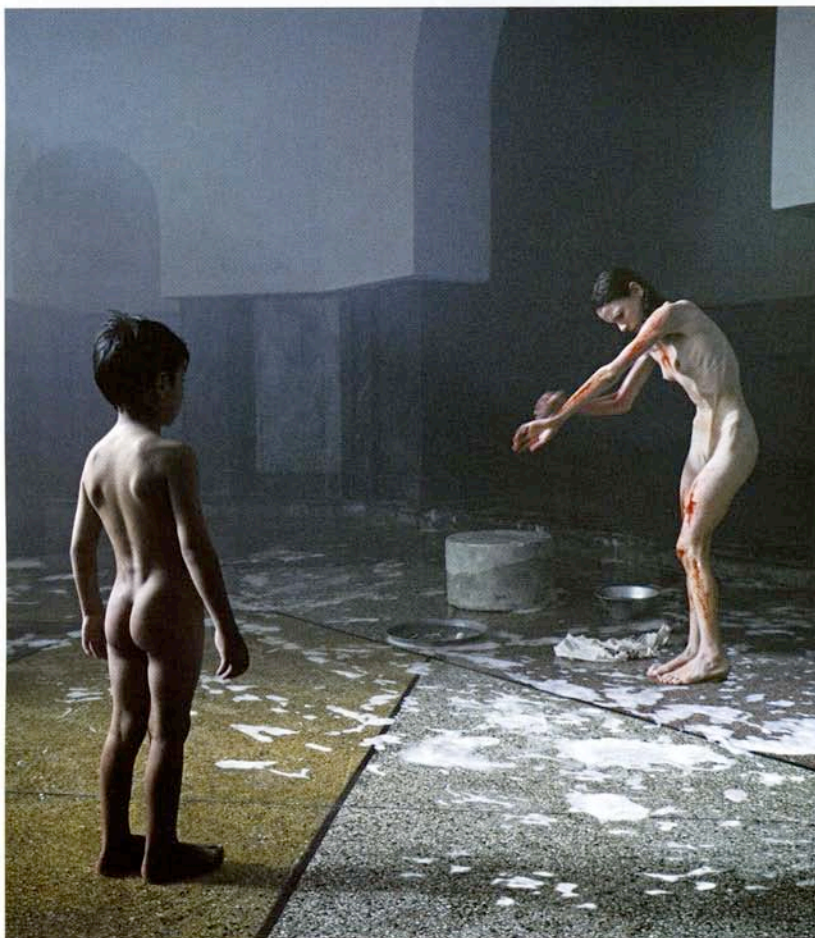
between Iran and the United States to break down. In the course of my research, I discovered how little I knew about this period and how wonderfully sophisticated and fascinating Iranian culture was at the time. **EH** On the other hand, although the film is more political than the book, you maintain a strong degree of magic realism. It can be argued that Parsipur, living in Iran, had to deal rather obliquely with her concerns about women's roles and the place of religion. You, however, could have made a more overtly political film. Why did you retain so many fantastical elements?

SN In cultures where citizens struggle with heavy social control, magic realism is a natural tendency. For Iranians, who have endured one dictatorship after another, poetic-metaphoric language is a way to express all that is not allowed in reality. Of course, these days, the government has a good grasp of subversive art and literature. So even though it takes place in 1953, Parsipur's novel is considered highly problematic by the current Islamic government, which is sensitive to the book's religious and sexual overtones. Personally, magic realism seems to suit me well, because

I feel most comfortable with surrealism—not only as a strategy to avoid the obvious but as a means to make art that transcends the specificities of time and place.

EH Do you anticipate any trouble with *Women Without Men*?

SN I already know that the film won't be screened in most of the Islamic world, primarily because of a few scenes. For example, at one moment we see Faezeh praying, then soon after, in another shot, she becomes partially nude as she unbuttons her shirt. But this was the only way I could represent a woman coming to terms with her body after



Left, from the "Zarin" series, 2005, C-print, 55 by 47 1/2 inches. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery.

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a rape. Equally problematic might be showing Zarin nude in the bathhouse. Without a doubt, there will be some angry responses from Muslims troubled by the mixing of sexual and religious themes. I also expect some controversy over the political nature of the story. There are many disputes among Iranians and Westerners regarding the coup. The course of events has been interpreted differently by different camps, so the historical truth still remains a subject of debate.

EH How has the film evolved from your earliest conception?

SN Originally, the film opened in a very realistic manner with a fight between Munis and her brother. For the first twenty minutes, the audience would have thought they were watching a conventional narrative.

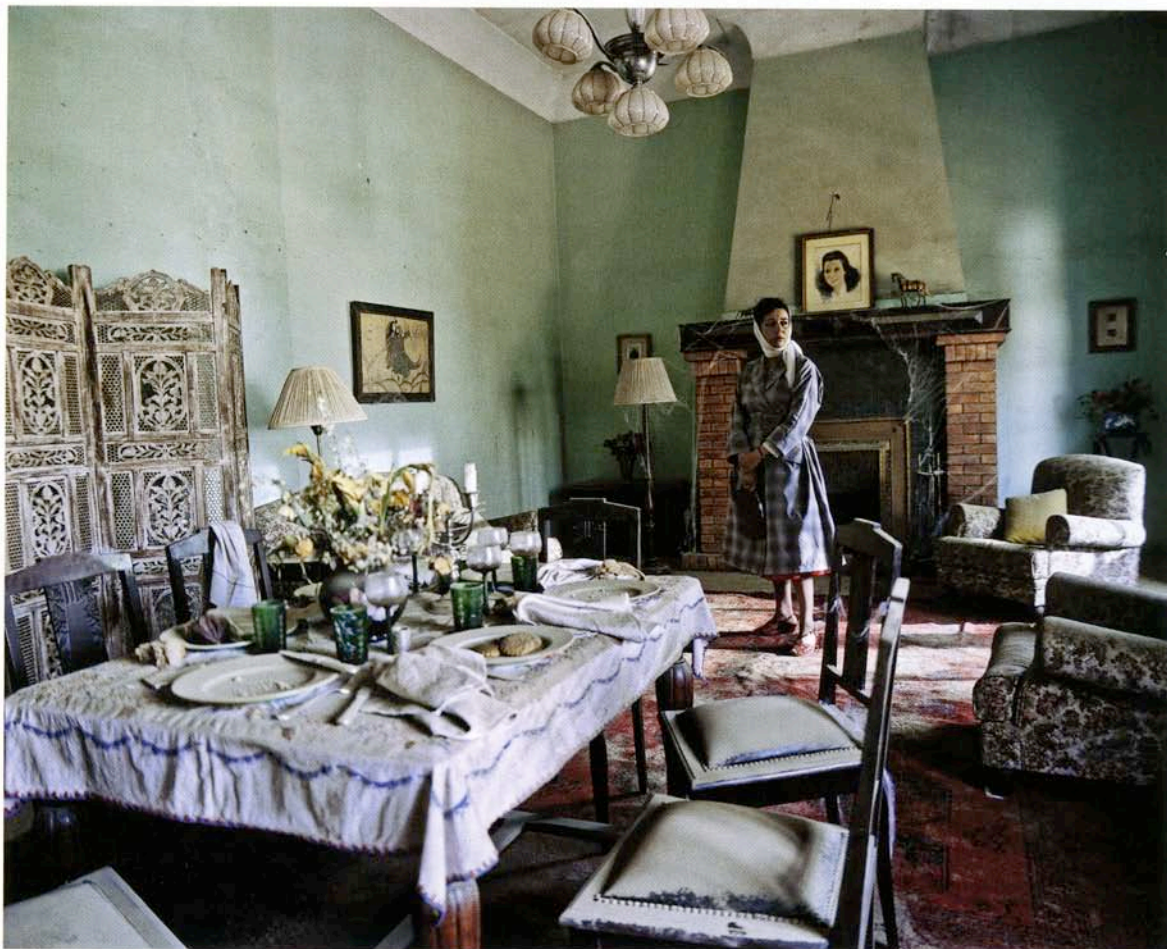
Then, half an hour into the film, we introduced the surrealistic nature of the story. But later I decided that we must establish the surrealism from the beginning, so the audience won't build an expectation for a standard film. In its current version, the film begins with Munis's flight from the roof, which could be interpreted as a suicide but also as a leap toward freedom, since the shot is exaggerated. She is also now the narrator, who is telling us a story while flying and observing the world below.

In making the film more artistic and surrealistic, I had to be sure that it does not go in the direction of an extended video installation. Within this somewhat abstract framework, we had to develop a clear logic that hopefully will give the audience strong clues to both the story

and the style of the film. By nature, this film is like a puzzle, as we must simultaneously follow four main characters, each on a journey, as well as a country in turmoil. For me, filming *Women Without Men* has been all about finding the right balance. ○

Shirin Neshat's film *Women Without Men* will be screened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art [June 15], the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego [June 18], and the Museo Nazionale del Cinema, Turin [Sept. 25]. Her video exhibition of the same title appears at the Kulturhuset, Stockholm, [Oct. 24, 2009-Jan. 10, 2010]. The artist will also have shows at Galerie Jérôme de Noirmont, Paris [Sept. 16-Nov. 21], Gladstone Gallery, Brussels [September dates pending], and Marco Noire Contemporary Art, Turin [Sept 24-Nov. 30].

ELEANOR HEARTNEY recently published *Art & Today* (Phaidon, 2008).



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