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CULTURE VISIONARY
**Art That Is Political
and Personal**
Shirin Neshat's work touches on topics like exile, political
revolution and Iran's past and future.



Shirin Neshat at her Brooklyn studio. The biggest exhibition of her career opens next month in Los Angeles. Her "obsession with dreams" is reflected in her new work. Yael Malka for The New York Times

This article is part of a new series on Visionaries. The New York Times selected people from all over the world who are pushing the boundaries of their fields, from science and technology to culture and sports.

The artist Shirin Neshat has had an unusual trajectory to art world prominence. She left her native Iran as a teenager in the 1970s, before the revolution and the fall of the shah, and ended up studying at the University of California, Berkeley. By her own account, she didn't end up making art

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seriously until her early 30s. But Ms. Neshat, 62, has become one of the most distinct practitioners in the media of photography, video and film.

Now New York-based and working with several assistants in a large Bushwick studio, Ms. Neshat makes art that touches on topics like exile, political revolution and Iran's past and future. The biggest exhibition of her career, "Shirin Neshat: I Will Greet the Sun Again," runs from Oct. 19 to Feb. 16 at The Broad in Los Angeles.

The show looks at her three-decade career — including her renowned '90s series "Women of Allah," with photographs overlaid in calligraphy — but much of the attention will be on a new body of work called "Land of Dreams."

"I'm very interested in this fusion between the old and the new, the ancient and the contemporary."



Ms. Neshat's "Women of Allah" series featured photographs overlaid in calligraphy. Shirin Neshat/Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels



Portraits from Ms. Neshat's "Land of Dreams" series at her Brooklyn studio. Yael Malka for The New York Times

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It comprises a series of 111 photographic portraits of Americans hung in salon-style arrangement and two surreal, black-and-white videos. In the videos, which she considers a “diptych,” an Iranian photographer in exile travels around New Mexico, taking portraits and asking subjects about their dreams. It’s then revealed that the images and information she has harvested are being analyzed by a secret colony of Iranian scientists working in a bunker. Although portrayed by an actress, the photographer/spy is a stand-in for Ms. Neshat and the unconventional gathering of ideas that fuels her art.

“It’s true to say that every artist’s work is a projection of who they are and the life they have lived,” she said in her studio over the summer. “I have no interest in making autobiographical work, but the work is personal.” The following conversation has been edited and condensed.

What should people know about this show, and specifically the new works?

I’ve had this obsession with dreams. Making films about dreams, you’re able to touch on a lot of sociopolitical, cultural and emotional issues. Because dreams are innocent. There’s a universality about them, and they are cross-cultural.

The way you’ve set it up in the film, Iranians and Americans are at odds, but in complicated and nuanced ways.

Think about the fanaticism of the Iranian government and the fanaticism in this country, and the years of antagonism between the Iranian and American cultures. We make monsters out of each other. They demonize American culture, people and government; and the Americans demonize the Muslims.

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And so in the story, the Iranians are collecting people, via their dreams. For me it was a parody, done with surrealism and absurdity.

Who are your influences in terms of filmmaking?

Well, without a doubt, the minimalism of Abbas Kiarostami [the Iranian director who died in 2016], but also people like [Ingmar] Bergman and [Andrei] Tarkovsky. I respond to the melancholic mood of Scandinavian and Russian film.

“Making films about dreams, you’re able to touch on a lot of sociopolitical, cultural and emotional issues.”

Where do you find sources of creativity?

I’m really rooted in the Iranian culture I come from. I think there are a lot of emotions in the work, and I think that’s something that makes it non-Western, in a way. There’s a culture of poetry in Iran, and we are all deeply poetic in the way that we express ourselves. There’s a lot of longing, there’s a lot of nostalgia. The Broad exhibition is not only my biggest ever, it’s also a major show in Los Angeles, which has the largest Iranian community outside of Iran. And I felt that it was important to make a work that talks about being an immigrant, especially being an Iranian immigrant, today.

I know the “Land of Dreams” films use some special effects. How does technology interact with your work generally?

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I used to really insist on working with a 16- or 35-millimeter camera in our filmmaking and in my still photography work; we always worked with film. But more and more I gravitated toward digital cameras because the amount of control and freedom I gained in the final output was incomparable. But my work is always about a balance: I use my own hands to write old-fashioned, traditional calligraphy. I'm very interested in this fusion between the old and the new, the ancient and the contemporary. Even in the way that I dress, I combine the kohl from ancient Egypt around my eyes with very modern, minimal clothes.

“There’s a culture of poetry in Iran, and we are all deeply poetic in the way that we express ourselves.”



Ms. Neshat and her parents. She grew up in Iran but left the country as a teenager in the 1970s.

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What did you want to be when you were a kid, and how does your childhood stay with you today?

I was very blessed because I grew up in a middle-upper-class environment, but we never went to museums. It was a small town, and we were very provincial. My father was an intellectual, he was a very unusual Iranian; he traveled a lot, he read many books, and he was a physician and a farmer. So I think he was my inspiration in terms of thinking that anything was possible. But what grew in me to become an artist was really instinctive, something that I still don't understand.

It's difficult for you to go back to Iran for political reasons, so how has that impacted you?

It's a sweet-and-sour history for me. I am very lucky that my mother's still around, my family still lives in Iran. But on a daily basis when I speak to my mother, we're reminded of how we have been perpetually separated.

What was your first phase in the United States like?

I found myself alone in this country. So I had to decide on the course of my life. That next 10 years became kind of a dark period for me because I was pretty horrified about this separation, and not knowing how to take care of myself financially and emotionally. And I think much of the work that I do today, with its melancholy tone and its addressing of issues like abandonment, being an outcast, being always an outsider — they all come from my experience. It was kind of tough. I was not good at school when I was at U.C. Berkeley; I think I was one of the worst students. I didn't blossom.

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“I came to this country alone really, and I stood on my own two feet.”



Ms. Neshat's international student identity card when she attended the University of California, Berkeley.



Ms. Neshat with one of her paintings in the late '80s, when she was working at the Storefront for Art and Architecture.

What was your big break?

I was working for 10 years for a nonprofit organization that still exists called the Storefront for Art and Architecture. Along the way, people discovered my work and included me in some exhibitions. And so I became discovered by accident.

But to be discovered, you had to be making compelling art, no?

It took me a while to take myself seriously. And I think that's the preferable way. A lot of artists are at school, and they're trying to have a career immediately after they graduate. I tell them, "You have to live a life and not make art because of the need of career."

How do you define success?

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I think the one thing I feel very proud about is that I'm very self-made. I came to this country alone, really, and I stood on my own two feet. And if the clock stops right here, I feel that I have achieved a great amount of my dreams.

How does your future look?

I'd still like to do more. I don't feel like a failure, but I think I feel like I'm struggling all the time. Part of the reason I struggle is my own fault: I'm very ambitious, I do things in a very big way, I take a lot of risks. And because I've changed my medium, I feel like a beginner — I still feel like a young artist even though I'm not young. And that is the foundation of who I am. I'm still wanting to reinvent myself, and that basically is what keeps me on my toes and keeps me excited.