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Kelly Grovier, "Shirin Neshat: a stare that challenges us to look away," *BBC*, November 4, 2019



Shirin Neshat: a stare that challenges us to look away

Shirin Neshat confronts certain views of Islam with her Women of Allah series. As it goes on show in LA, Kelly Grovier takes a look at the Iranian artist's arresting images.



Forget the Remington rifle that, propped upright in front of the veiled woman's face, boldly splits her being in two. What really blows you away is the double-barrelled blast of her inscrutable eyes. Deepening the penetration of her stare is the alignment of the sniper's 'sight' (that slender ridge at the weapon's tip that a marksman uses for aiming) with the middle of the woman's forehead. Is this a subliminal suggestion of a mystical third eye – a detail that elevates the work to something spiritually universal – or is she, herself, a tragic target caught in the crosshairs?

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© Shirin Neshat/ Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

In *Rebellious Silence* (1994), Neshat reveals competing themes of vulnerability and aggression

I'm talking about *Rebellious Silence*, one of the most arresting photographs to emerge in contemporary art over the course of the past 25 years. The unforgettable black-and-white portrait, created by the Iranian artist and filmmaker Shirin Neshat in 1994, is among the highlights of *I Will Greet the Sun Again* – a major retrospective of Neshat's work at The Broad art museum in Los Angeles, California. Part of a larger series of photographs collectively entitled *Women of Allah*, the image serves as something of a starting point for the exhibition, which follows the growth of Neshat's art from deceptively simple still photography to more elaborate video, film, and performance art.

As with all of Neshat's work, *Rebellious Silence* is layered with intense, tightly-packed meaning. "Every image," Neshat tells me, as she prepares for the opening of the first major display of her work on the west coast of America, "is symbolic of a certain idea, of a certain type of thinking, a certain ideology. And to me, that image is a very ideological

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image in the way that it embodies contradictions... it's a very loaded image. Because it has issues of feminism, religion, fanaticism – you know, religious fervour – and criminality. So it has all these three elements, and they are all moving in different directions. I feel that the way I approach my photography is in that conceptual way. It's not just like a snapshot, it's like how do you build layers of meanings and intentions that could have multiple interpretations?"

Speaking without words

Rebellious Silence is profoundly multi-layered. The subtle play of shadow that complicates the Islamic woman's striking countenance – dividing it into hemispheres of darkness and light – becomes a gently textured parchment on which a second skin of calligraphic text has been scribbled in Farsi. The intervention is at once alluring and alienating: as much a fragile lattice that draws observers in, as it is a filigreed fence that pushes them away. The handwritten lines, superimposed onto the silver gelatine print, are an extract from Allegiance with Wakefulness – a poem by the contemporary Iranian writer and translator Tahereh Saffarzadeh. The speaker of the Persian verse, which celebrates the sacrifice of religious martyrs, proclaims that her "inflicted body" will "rise again" as she praises the "bullets in the air" that "break my sleep".

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uncertainty – Shirin Neshat*

"I made Women of Allah and Rebellious Silence back in 1994," Neshat says, when asked about the image's continued resonance, "and

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now we're in 2019 and I feel like ironically those images are still really relevant. They've become iconic and symbolic of certain values and continue to be cherished among certain people in the Islamic world.”

The photographs's ability to compress into a single portrait an array of competing themes and emotions – courage and fear, vulnerability and aggression, feminism and fundamentalism – is at the heart not only of the work's enduring power but of the imagination of the artist who created it. “To me the human body, human expression, is powerful,” Neshat says. “The woman may be armed and very dangerous, but her eyes are so vulnerable and fearful and full of uncertainty. To me, that also tells you about us, who are very often brainwashed or controlled by outside forces.



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Ilgara, from The Home of My Eyes series of photographic portraits, showing people from Azerbaijan whose bodies are inscribed with ink

Born in Iran in 1957, Neshat has been reflecting on the power of outside forces since her parents sent her to California in 1975, at the age of 17, to

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complete her education. Tensions between secularists (who favoured the Westernisation of culture, including expanded rights for women) and religiously conservative revolutionaries were growing, making it difficult to remain in Iran. Following the overthrow in 1979 of the Shah of Iran by rebels led by Ayatollah Khomeini, Neshat found herself unable easily to return from California. After earning an art degree from the University of California, Berkeley in 1983, she established a life in New York, working variously at a hair salon and a textile office, before meeting her husband, Kyong Park, the founder of a not-for-profit contemporary art gallery. Having all but abandoned the making of art herself after graduating, Neshat helped run the experimental enterprise for a decade before shifting her focus back to image-making in the early 1990s.



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Offered Eyes (1993) contains lines from the poet Forough Farrokhzad, who was candid about sexual desire

Following a return visit to Iran in May 1991 (her first since emigrating 12 years earlier), Neshat re-entered the art world in 1993 with Unveiling – a sequence of still photographs that reflected on the changes she had

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witnessed in her home country. Offered Eyes is among the more mesmerising of the works from this initial wave of works that would go on to comprise her breakthrough series, Women of Allah. The black-and-white photograph is an anonymising self-portrait that isolates the artist's right eye. Orbiting around her iris and pupil in the blank sclera, or white of the eye, are tight concentric spheres of cursive writing whose silent whirr evokes a sense of shared hypnotism – a spell into which both the observer of the work and Neshat herself are endlessly falling.

The spiralling words have been appropriated from the Iranian feminist poet Forough Farrokhzad, whose candour in expressing sexual desire was at odds with the religious rules that had been imposed by the Islamic Republic. How, precisely, we are to interpret the static spin of that lyrical language, pulling us into the artist's stare, is teasingly unclear. Are we to see these syllables as articulating the artist's own secret and intimate yearnings, or as something she sees right through? "When many photographs from Women of Allah are installed together," writes the curator of the show, Ed Schad, in the accompanying catalogue, "it is striking how they oscillate between themes focused on a culture that Neshat loves (her identification with motherhood, with family, with eroticism, with the beauty of Iranian art and rituals) and some of the toughest challenges facing Iranian women: the Iran/Iraq War that seemingly empowered women through a call to arms, the mandate of the veil, and the religious and political realities circumscribing their sexuality, expression, and physical freedom."

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Bonding (1995) shows Neshat holding the hands of her young son

In a subsequent work, *Bonding*, 1995 – among the final wave of photographs to be added to the *Women of Allah* series – the artist shifts her attention to the impact of these cultural frictions on the mother-child relationship. Set against the echoing darkness of a traditional chador, Neshat's hands tenderly envelope those of her five-year old son, Cyrus. Once again, we find flesh stained by the ink of an inscribed script, but only that of the artist, whose fingers curl themselves into a heart-shaped nest in which the palms of her child innocently unfurl. However protective her body may be, her skin bears the indelible marks of a lived past – the scars of feeling, experience, and ideology. Her son's, on the other hand, represent a fresh start – a blank slate.

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© Shirin Neshat/ Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

In the 1996 photo *Untitled (Women of Allah)*, a woman's hand is reminiscent of the *hamsa*, a protective sign bringing health, happiness and good fortune

An eloquent choreography of hands is likewise powerfully at play in *Untitled*, 1996, created the following year. Here, the fingertips of an upraised hand pause on the lips of a woman whose face has been dramatically cropped, as if she is stopping herself from speaking. Though the shape of the hand recalls the *hamsa* – a symbol of protection popular throughout the Middle East and North Africa – its meaning is intensified by the overlay of lines from another poem by Farrokhzad, *I Feel Sorry for the Garden* – a reflection on humanity's neglect of the world around us. Vibrating at once with outspokenness and self-imposed silence, strength and lament, the photograph is a tissue of teasing contradictions that seems desperate to unravel into a longer narrative – an image that tests the limits of the story Neshat can tell with a single still.

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Moving images

“I think this exhibition, if you visit it from the beginning to the end,” Neshat says of how the retrospective unfolds from these early iconic images, “shows an evolution... both thematically and in terms of form. In terms of form, I started with still photography, with calligraphy inscribed on the images, then moved on to video installations, then, towards the end of the exhibition,” she says, “to more a film-making style”. According to Neshat, “Thematically, it seems like the work begins from the eye of an artist who is Iranian, but living in exile, living outside of her country after the revolution. Towards the end of the exhibition, that perspective turns towards the rest of the world.”



© Shirin Neshat/ Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, and Goodman Gallery

Neshat's Land of Dreams video (2019) takes the viewpoint of a female photographer from Iran, travelling across the western US

The past 20 years, since Neshat completed Women of Allah, has seen her grow increasingly ambitious and confident in the technical complexity and

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scale of her art. A succession of video works also on display demonstrates how these images were always pregnant with the possibility of more sustained cinematic narrative. The dual-screen film *Rapture*, shot in Morocco in 1999, pits men in white shirts marching through streets, on one screen, against a chorus of women singing in nature, on the other; Neshat's most recent work, *Land of Dreams*, 2019, follows an Iranian photographer as she travels across the US, chronicling recent changes in America's attitudes, especially towards immigrants.

Neshat's lens has come full circle to focus again on a divided subject

Neshat says that her work evolved in this way, because, after

many years of focusing on subjects inside Iran, she felt, as "someone always on the outside, [that it was] important to turn my lens on more of my nomadic life, because I work in Morocco, in Egypt, in Turkey, everywhere. But one thing remaining consistent is that the artist is Iranian. So it's always from the perspective of an Iranian, but it's not about Iran." *Land of Dreams*, which makes its debut at the exhibition, posits a parallel between America under Donald Trump today and Iran under Islamic Revolutionaries in the 1980s. In many respects, Neshat's lens has come full circle to focus again on a divided subject – one for which the metaphor of a weapon splitting the body into two is surprisingly apt.

"There was this general sense of democracy, and the inclusion of immigrants was a part of this American history," Neshat says of what motivated her to reflect on the soul of the country she moved to 40 years ago, "and everyone comes from another place, and you just felt

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that this truly was a land of dreams, and that's why I ironically gave that title to my video... But things have shifted in the way that that very pillar idea of democracy is becoming compromised. There's so much corruption, there's so much political injustice, there's so much chaos and uncertainty and I would even say fanaticism and racism (particularly to people who are immigrants and Mexican)... It's really a frightening idea for me that this country is starting to look more and more like Iran."