

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Nadja Sayej, "Shirin Neshat's Unflinching Focus," *Garage*, November 10, 2019

**GARAGE**



## Shirin Neshat's Unflinching Focus

Three decades into her career, the artist shows no sign of stopping.

In 1995, the young Iranian artist [Shirin Neshat](#) had a solo exhibition at the Annina Nosei Gallery in New York. She showcased her photo series *Women of Allah*, portraits of Muslim women as martyrs of Iran—one had a gun hiding in her headscarf. Then something unexpected happened: Cindy Sherman bought one of the artworks. She was the first person to buy one of Neshat's artworks. Ever.

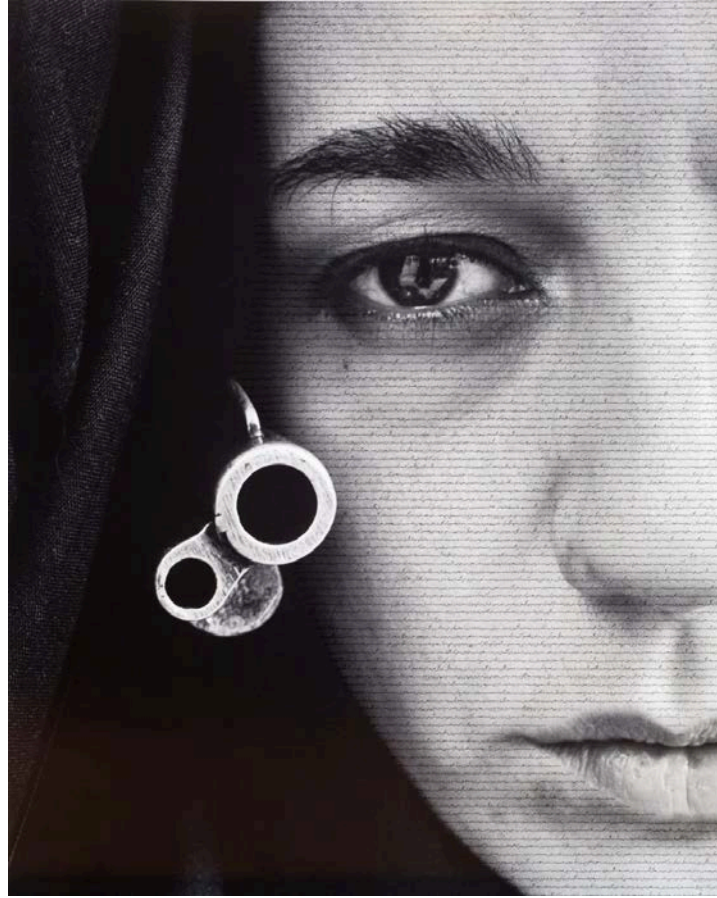
## GLADSTONE GALLERY

Neshat, now 62, is one of the strongest artistic voices to ever come out of Iran. She left her home in the 1970s, studied art in California, then landed in New York, where she has become a pioneer of feminist photography and filmmaking (she has made two feature films: *Women Without Men*, which one the Silver Lion for directing at the Venice Film Festival, and *Looking for Oum Kulthum*, she is currently working on a third. Although her mediums have been varied, her focus has remained the same: Iranian women—from women living in exile to the ones struggling with Iran's political past.

She currently has three exhibitions on view; [I Will Greet The Sun Again](#), a 30-year retrospective at The Broad in Los Angeles, showcasing over 200 artworks, including video of the Arab Spring protests in 2010, and her collaborations with Philip Glass in 2001. As part of Paris Photo, she just opened an exhibition [Looking for Oum Kulthum](#), at the [Association Azzedine Alaïa](#) in Paris, showing clips and stills from her feature film about an Iranian woman singer in a male-dominated field (women aren't allowed to sing in public in Iran, unless it's for other women). Meanwhile, at the High Line Nine Gallery in New York, she has curated a group show of Iranian women artists, [A Bridge Between You and Everything](#), which is a collaboration with the Center for Human Rights in Iran, showcasing 100 artworks made after the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

Despite her busy schedule, Neshat spoke to GARAGE about supporting young Iranian artists, overcoming narcissism, and why she's happy exactly where she is.

## GLADSTONE GALLERY



"Speechless," 1996, RC print and ink © Shirin Neshat

**Cindy Sherman was the first person to buy your artwork in 1995, how did that feel? Do you feel like you're giving back to younger, Iranian women artists now?**

I started out working at a non-for-profit before I became an artist, so this idea of losing yourself and being able to focus entirely on other artist's work is a very positive thing. I think that, as artists, we are very narcissistic. I think just to be able to support others is a very important gesture. I would say Kiki Smith and Cindy Sherman were really, the two people who first bought my work. It was really the endorsement of another artist [that became] more important than anything else.

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

**You said in [a recent interview](#) that self-interest is a problem in the arts because it's very individualistic and capitalistic, especially in America. Is there any way to overcome that?**

Well, I've collaborated for the [Center for Human Rights in Iran](#), which was an important decision for me because I know what they stand for. There is always a part of me feels like an activist, but even though I'm not an activist. To be able to think broader than the art world, and to think of the broader community, artists who feel like they want to belong to a community, and not just on their own, we create isolated careers in the art world—which are very self-serving.

**What do you mean?**

Most artists just want to be praised and sell their work. But to do things where money isn't important, where you give as opposed to take, I think is really important. I've always been a part of communities, I've never functioned alone. I think it's kind of a blessing.

**I'm wondering if there's a connection between the three exhibitions you have going on right now; in your film work, you're always speaking up for the rights of Iranian women? And here, you curate Iranian women artists. There's a connection, no?**

Yes, I have to say with the decisions I make, it's never conscious. It isn't a strategy. Honestly. It's all intuitive. When they asked me to curate an exhibition of women Iranian artists, of course I said yes, I feel like it's my responsibility to support the Center for Human Rights in Iran, but also support other artists who might not have it as lucky as me.

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

### **What's the most important part for you?**

It's really about being a part of community and being a woman who has a feminist twist to her work. My subjects have always been women. I'm interested in stories being told by other women. I've always taken inspiration from other artists, especially other women artists from Iran.



The artist at her opening of "A Bridge Between You and Everything" Photo: Nadja Sayej

### **What defines the artworks of Iranian women, in your eyes?**

The main focus is that you can't separate the lives of women from their artwork, in Iran. You cannot analyze certain cultures with artists, in the same way that you analyze the works of western artists. We don't have that emotional, political and psychological luxury to distance ourselves from politics, because politics has defined our lives. It's very difficult for an artist in Palestine to paint flowers, for example. We're immigrants, in exile, longing to

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

go home, can't leave this country, or even enter their country. These are real issues that create an uncertain situation that is very vulnerable.

## **How do you feel about America and the Trump administration's relationship to Iran right now?**

And the travel ban. A lot of artists I know, they can't leave the US because they won't be able to come back. They also want the freedom to make art here they can't do in Iran. The demon lives on both sides, you're conflicted by two monsters.

## **Are you still working on your film, *Land of Dreams*?**

Yes we're showing 45 minutes of the film at the Broad. Now I'm going to make the feature film version of it.

## **Will the feature film will be a satire about Trump's America?**

Yes. It's about an Iranian woman who collects people's dreams with photographs and portraits, then takes them back to an Iranian colony. The Iranian clergy gets busy interpreting them.

## **What else can we expect to see in your latest video on at the Broad in LA?**

It offers a rare glimpse into my artistic journey and process, from 1993 onward, as I navigate through Iranian, Moroccan, Mexican, Egyptian and Azerbaijan cultures. I explore topics that seem to be mainly concerned with my own unresolved issues in the world, like the questions of identity, homeland, political oppression and religious fervor, as well as an individual sense of displacement and alienation.



## GLADSTONE GALLERY



"I See You Holding Back the Tears," 2018 © Shirin Neshat

### **Would you go back to Iran now?**

No, I have no interest.

### **Has being in New York helped your career?**

Without a doubt, the energy of this city, the exposure you get here, as opposed to being in the periphery, there's no saying that being at the center has been very helpful. To also see and be exposed to things I wouldn't otherwise typically see, too.

### **If there's anywhere else in the world, where would you rather be?**

I think I'm happy where I am.