

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Karen Wilkin, "Shirin Neshat: I Will Greet the Sun Again' Review: Finding Light in the Darkness," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 4, 2019

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

'Shirin Neshat: I Will Greet the Sun Again' Review: Finding Light in the Darkness

A retrospective of the Iranian artist's work highlights many themes on which she's focused, including death, migration, exile, isolation, the separation of men and women, and poetry.



Shirin Neshat's 'Bonding' (1995) PHOTO: SHIRIN NESHAT/GLADSTONE GALLERY, NY AND BRUSSELS

I first saw the work of the Iranian-born, American-educated filmmaker and photographer Shirin Neshat at the 2000 Whitney Biennial. I remember finding the soundtrack of her installation an irritating distraction from

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Richard Tuttle's delicate, refined constructions, on view nearby, until I entered the projection space and discovered a split-screen black-and-white drama set in some Islamic country, perhaps in North Africa. A white-shirted man and a black-clad woman moved toward each other on intersecting country roads, entered opposite sides of a segregated building and, from their respective male and female zones, heard a male performer inveigh against temptation. The two exchanged loaded glances, exited, and passed on the street, disappearing separately into the geometric town.

I was mesmerized by Ms. Neshat's expressive, nearly wordless disquisition on male-female relationships in a fundamentalist Islamic world, on desire and repression, on darkness and light. I was fascinated by the way her spare, ambiguous, highly charged narrative was carried by economical, expressively framed images. After that, I conscientiously followed Ms. Neshat's exhibitions—even, after seeing sections of her full-length film "Women Without Men" at Barbara Gladstone Gallery, reading an English translation of the fantastic, banned-in-Iran novel by Shahrnush Parsipur that triggered the film. I learned, along the way, that Ms. Neshat collaborated closely with cinematographers and photographers, among others, to bring her vision to life, yet her work still seemed personal and individual.

Now, the ambitious retrospective "Shirin Neshat: I Will Greet the Sun Again," at The Broad, in Los Angeles, offers a fairly comprehensive overview of the 62-year-old artist's work from 1993 to the present. (The title comes from a poem by Forugh Farrokhzad.) The exhibition includes an ample selection of Ms. Neshat's photographs and videos, although, alas, not the work that captivated me at the Whitney. The accompanying catalog is handsome and informative.

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Shirin Neshat's 'Ilgara' from 'The Home of My Eyes' series (2015) PHOTO: SHIRIN NESHAAT/GLADSTONE GALLERY, NY AND BRUSSELS

The earliest video on view is “Turbulent” (1998), in which a male singer performs to an audience of white-shirted men, on one screen, and a woman sings a passionate lament to an empty auditorium on the other, reminding us of the separation of the sexes in fundamentalist Islamic society and the suspicion with which music is regarded. The most recent short films are “Land of Dreams” and “The Colony” (both 2019), parts of the continuing project “Land of Dreams.” Shot in the American Southwest, vaguely surrealist but oddly literal, with occasional flatfooted dialogue, these recent works are unlike most of what preceded them, indebted as they are (but not enough) to Franz Kafka, Orson Welles and perhaps Fritz Lang.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

In between are several emotionally stirring videos, shot in Morocco and rural Mexico between 1999 and 2002. (The full-length “Women Without Men” is being screened at intervals.) Most explore themes that have long obsessed Ms. Neshat: death, migration, exile, isolation, the separation of men and women, poetry. We watch crowds of men and women, separated by gender, as they surge through minimalist villages and desolate landscapes toward obscure objectives, becoming metaphors for aspects of today’s Islam and Ms. Neshat’s own experience of leaving Iran at age 17, returning at intervals, until she was mistakenly detained, and then deliberately distancing herself. In “Tooba” (2002), for example, the crowd rushes toward an elderly woman, miraculously embedded in a tree, who vanishes as they arrive. The most potent of the color films may be “Passage” (2001), a collaboration with the composer Philip Glass. A group of men carry a white-shrouded corpse along a rocky seashore toward a distant circle of chanting chador-clad women who dig a grave with their hands. A child ignites a wall of fire as the men arrive.

The videos are contextualized by large, confrontational, black-and-white photographs made under Ms. Neshat’s direction by such photographers as Cynthia Preston, Larry Barns and David Jiménez. Faces and bodies are overlaid with Persian poetry, written in exquisite black and red Arabic script. In one poignant photo, verses are written on the soles of feet, while a toe-tag transforms the image into a memento mori. Elsewhere, illustrations from a vintage edition of the Persian epic “The Book of Kings” are imposed, like florid tattoos, on male bodies; real tattoos are recorded in recent photographs, made in the Southwest.

The show begins with the “Women of Allah” series (1993), close-ups of chador-clad beauties, including Ms. Neshat herself, with kohl-ringed eyes, brandishing guns. One gallery is lined with “The Home of My Eyes” (2015), portraits of Azeri people commissioned by the Yarat Contemporary Art Center in Baku, Azerbaijan.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Cumulatively, all the images seem very similar—frontal, elegant and stylish—no matter who collaborated with Ms. Neshat. Everyone, old or young, weathered or dewy, looks beautiful and chic, homogenized by the overlaid gorgeous script.

I wish I found Ms. Neshat's recent work as compelling as her earlier inventions, but I'll wait and see how "Land of Dreams" turns out. Maybe it's better than I think.