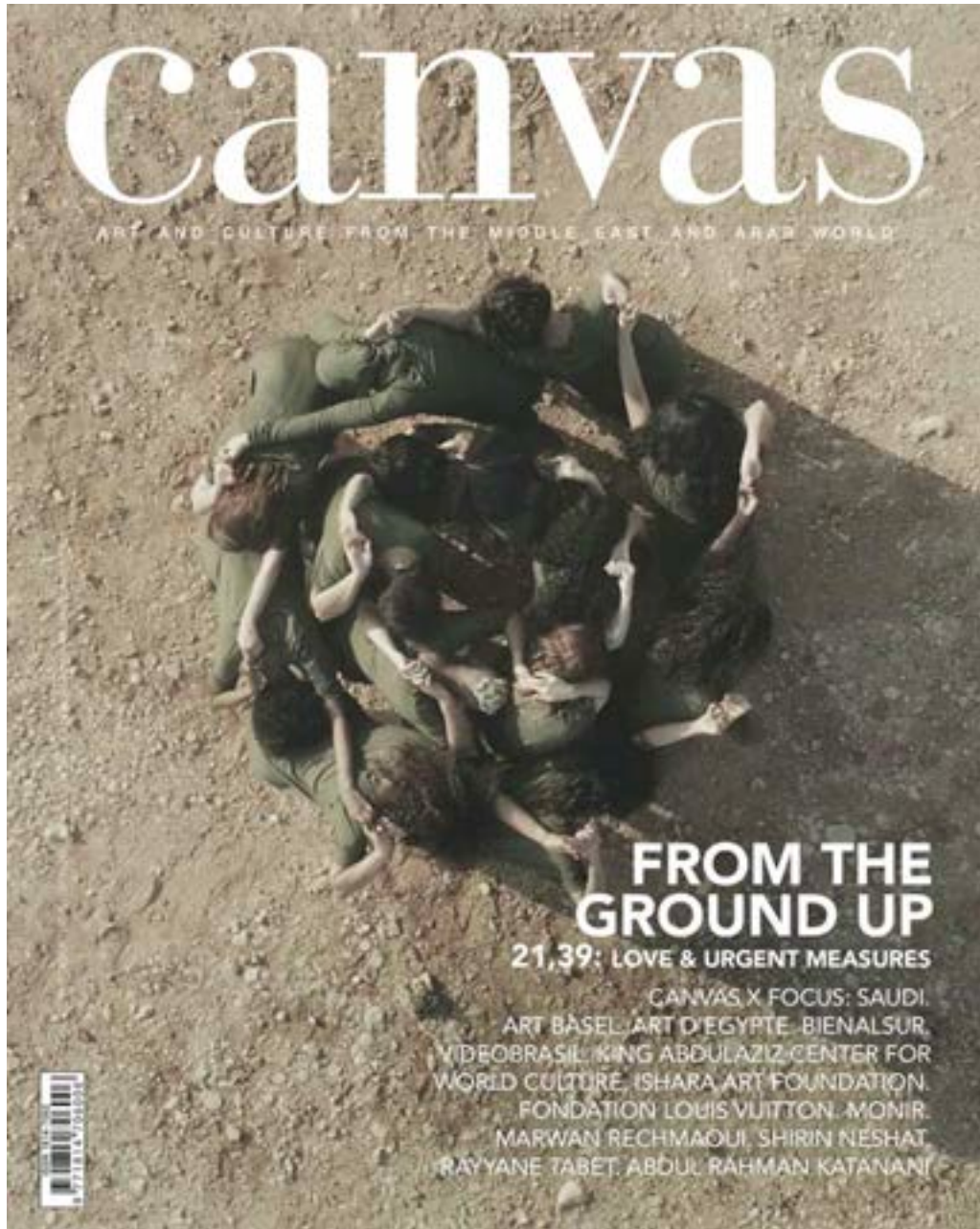


GLADSTONE GALLERY

Patrick J. Reed, "Ground Rules," *Canvas*, Jan/Feb, 2020



REVIEW



Shirin Neshat. *Untitled*, from *Roja* series, 2016. Silver gelatin print, 101.6 × 152.4 cm. All images courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

GROUND RULES

Shirin Neshat is having her mid-career moment. It is her first and largest exhibition in Los Angeles (ends 16 February), where The Broad museum is tying together all the obsessions that have occupied her artistic practice since she began showing her work in 1993. From 230 lyrical photographs to eight video installations on revolutions and their ramifications, *I Will Greet the Sun Again* is about poetics and praxis.

Words by Patrick J. Reed

Revolution dominates Shirin Neshat's *I Will Greet the Sun Again* at The Broad museum in LA, which might seem too brash and maladroit a claim if one considers only the conservative meaning of revolution – that of radical change. But there is so much more at stake here, starting with examples from the earliest canonical era of Neshat, the photographic series *Women of Allah*. These were created in response to the sociopolitical tumult effected by Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution as the artist saw them in the mid-

1990s, after her ten-year sojourn from her home country. The staged portraits consider the role of women post-revolution – the woman as soldier, mother, desirer and as radical martyr. It's a conceptual exercise inevitably complicated by the requirements of the theocratic regime, where 'woman' as a category of person is subject to a life of limited rights.

Untitled (Women of Allah) (1996) distills the ambiguity produced by such fraught navigations. The photograph depicts a woman's

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Shirin Neshat. Still from *Land of Dreams (The Colony)*. 2019

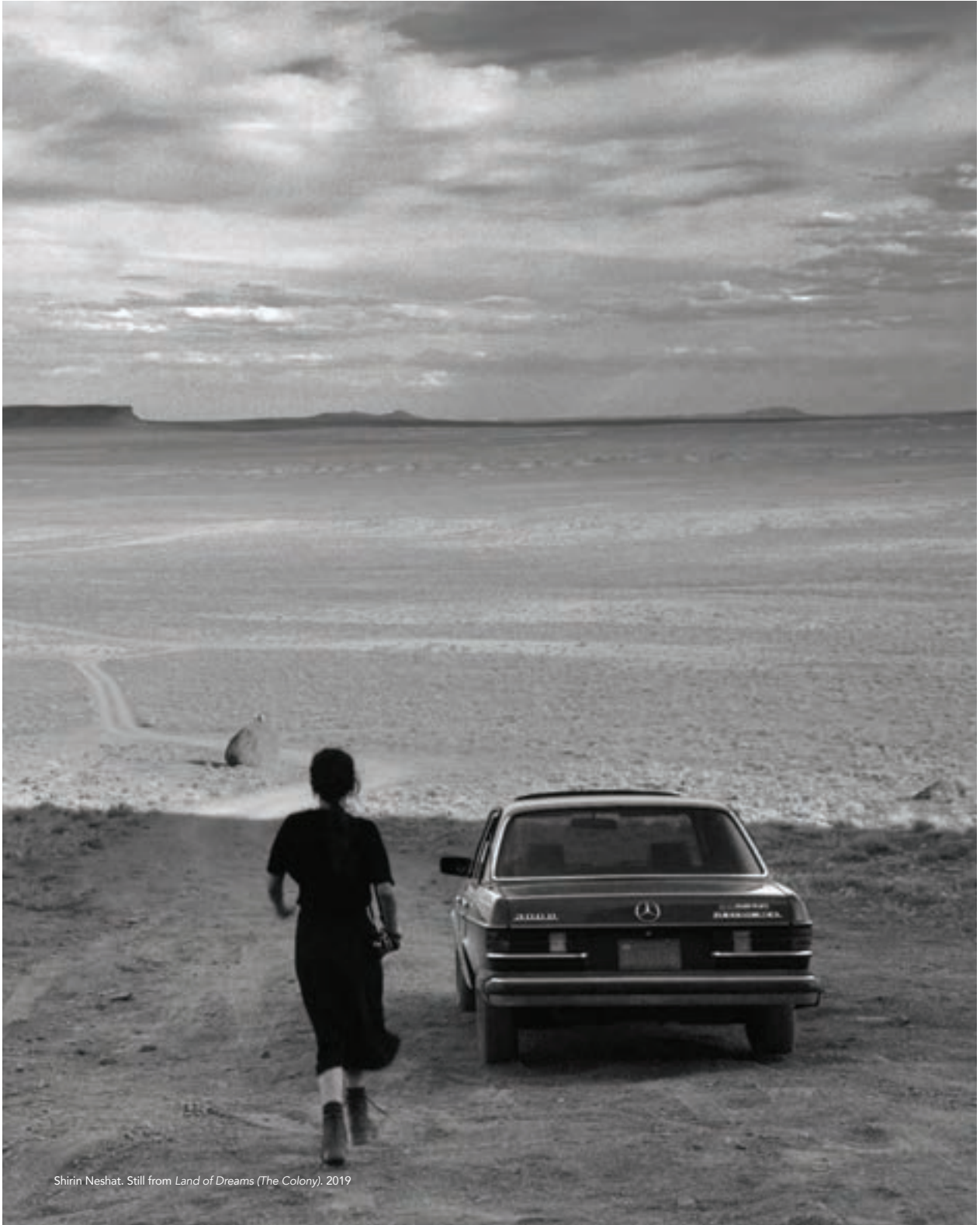
face, veiled by a chador. Her head is closely cropped by the edges of the picture plane, and the top edge omits her upper face, leaving only the lips visible, to which she raises her fingers. The isolated gesture is rich with implications, all plausible in Neshat's interrogation of womanhood – the figure is contemplating, preparing to blow a kiss, harbouring a secret, hatching a plan. Viewers able to read the Farsi script superimposed over the image are invited to access an action of *reading* and the poetic logic that accommodates such incongruities, in all their paradoxes.

It is enough to makes one's head spin, or at least oscillate the way it does while viewing *Turbulent* (1998), a two-channel, black-and-white video installation of two screens facing one another, which was awarded the Venice Biennale's Golden Lion in 1999. Much like the experience of watching *Rapture* (1999) and *Tooba* (2002) and other two-channel installations – the simultaneous screen action is like following a tennis match. The gender divide is explicit in *Turbulent*, with one screen revealing a male milieu and the other what can only be described as female plight. In the

former, a man stands on stage before an audience of men and sings a poem by Rumi. In the latter, a woman stands on stage before an audience of none and performs a near-supernatural vocal rejoinder, in a critique of gender politics in Iran preventing women from public performances. The woman's expression casts the limits of the man's traditional chant in sharp relief, and poetry fails to provide egress from conventional mores. It is the song exceeding language – and therefore the rules it makes manifest – that transcends.

In *Passage* (2001), Neshat's gender devices are put toward allegorical ends in a minimalist narrative focused on funeral rites. By comparison with earlier work, the video installation seems bare. On a single screen, three lines of action unfold to a score by Philip Glass: a group of men carry a body through the desert; a group of veiled women, arranged in a circle, dig a burial pit with their bare hands; and a young girl stacks stones in a circle. Various sources describe the girl's rock formation as a furnace or fire pit because of its proximity to a nearby cairn from which a ring of fire erupts

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Shirin Neshat. Still from *Land of Dreams (The Colony)*. 2019

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Shirin Neshat. *Passage*. 2001. Installation view of the exhibition *Shirin Neshat: I Will Greet the Sun Again at The Broad*.
Photography by Joshua White

at the climactic moment of burial, but its formation resembles something fundamentally architectural, like the ancient Tower of Jericho. Women confronting architecture characterises a second, related motif in Neshat's work, for it is through architecture that national ideologies become foundational.

Take the mosques and the modernist buildings that co-star alongside the solitary woman in *Soliloquy* (2000), the artist's ode to life as an exile. The contrast between the distinctly Islamic structures and the secular or Christian ones embodies the two imposing worlds of East and West that the woman (i.e. the artist) must navigate while belonging to neither. And consider the town square of *Possessed* (2001), the site of a mob made furious at the sight of a crazed woman who appears in public, babbling incoherently and shockingly unveiled. The film ends with the woman levitating to the rooftops, leaving the crowd to roil on the pavement where religious concerns become civic.

As the 2000s progressed, Neshat's work expanded in scope to include a feature film, *Women Without Men* (2009), followed by photographic explorations of cultural and political developments in the Middle East and North Africa such as the Iranian Green Movement, the Arab Spring, and the idea of Persia via Azerbaijan in *The Book of Kings* (2012), *Our House Is on Fire* (2013), and *The Home of My Eyes* (2015), respectively. *Illusions and Mirrors* (2013) and *Roja* (2016) embrace fantasy, and take a psychological turn into the realm of dreams, or, rather, the *Land of Dreams* – an umbrella title for her 2019 work debuting at The Broad.

Anchoring the final chapter of the exhibition, *The Land of Dreams* comprises two videos, *America: Land of Dreams* and *The Colony* (both 2019), in addition to photography that synthesizes the sociopolitical critique typical of Neshat's early work with the magical realism of her projects from the 2010s. The videos' shared storyline follows an Iranian woman who pretends to be an art student so that she may photograph rural Americans and document their dreams – woman as emissary, woman as artist. The information she collects from her sitters is subsequently catalogued at an Iranian colony, "where the dreams are processed by a bureaucratic network of interpreters," according to the museum text. The stresses of living in a xenophobic America under its current, hostile administration, and the tenacious diplomatic strain between Iran and the US, form this immersive artwork's satirical core.

The heart of *I Will Greet the Sun Again* is Neshat herself and her unwavering, decades-long inquiry into essential human experiences, including the question of whether universal conditions exist. In much of the literature surrounding the artist and her work, the notion of singularity is evaded in favour of duality. A great deal of attention is paid to Neshat's unique status as an individual beset by dualities, many archetypal in their nature: male versus female, east versus west, past versus present, sacred versus profane, all intersecting to fashion a complex array not unlike the spokes of a bicycle wheel. As such, one can understand *I Will Greet the Sun Again* with this image in mind – an exhibition as a wheel, 'bespoked' for the occasion, and turning of its own volition.