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MODERN PAINTERS

INTERNATIONAL ARTS AND CULTURE

VISIONS OF EXILE
**SHIRIN
NESHAT**
ON ART & THE
MIDDLE EAST

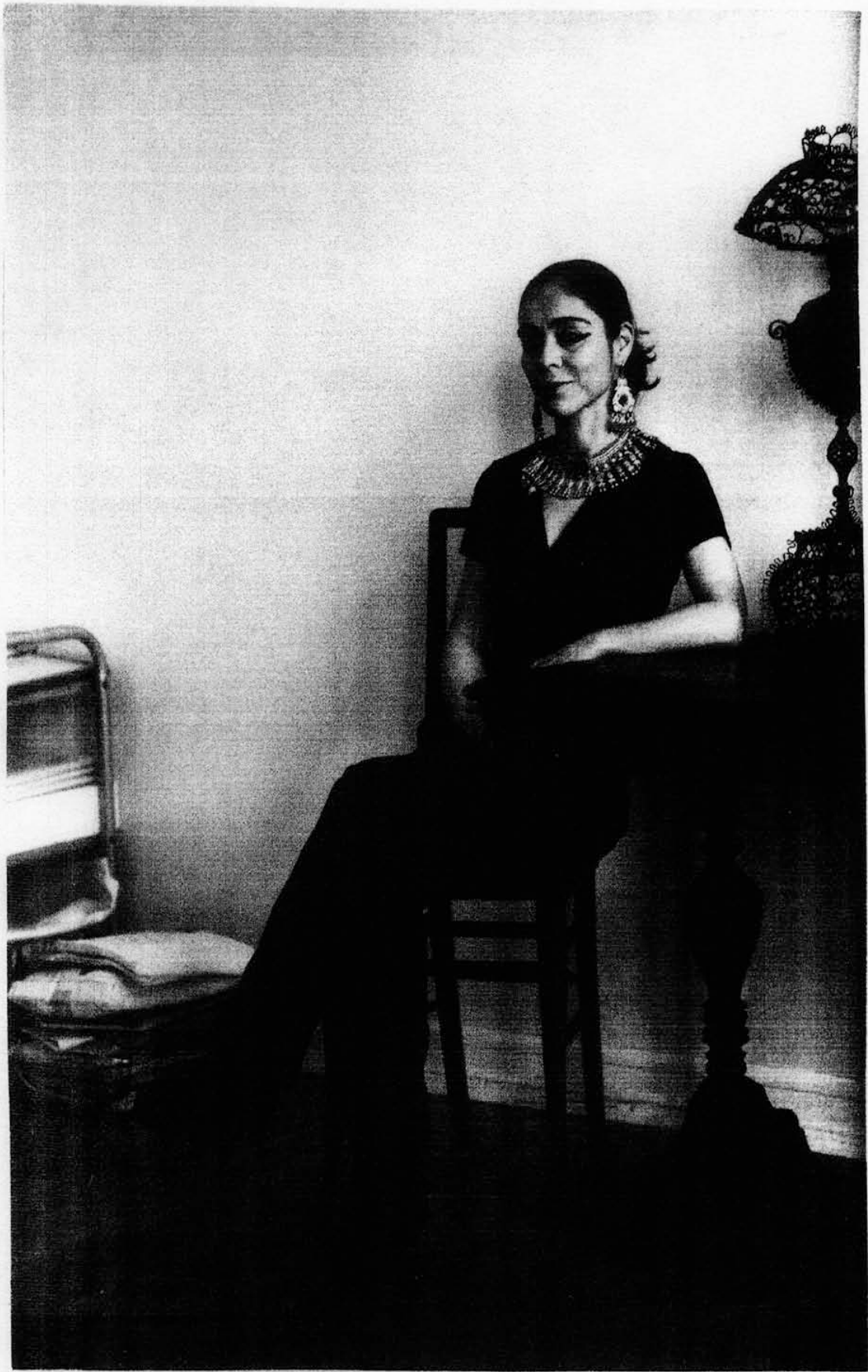
JERRY SALTZ ON
NAN GOLDIN,
CHARLINE VON HEYL
AND TARA DONOVAN

EXCLUSIVE
**NICHOLAS
SEROTA**
TALKS MONEY,
MUSEUMS &
MODERN ART

CLASH OF THE TITANS
**REMBRANDT &
CARAVAGGIO**
GO HEAD TO HEAD



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BY
BRIGITTE LACOMBE

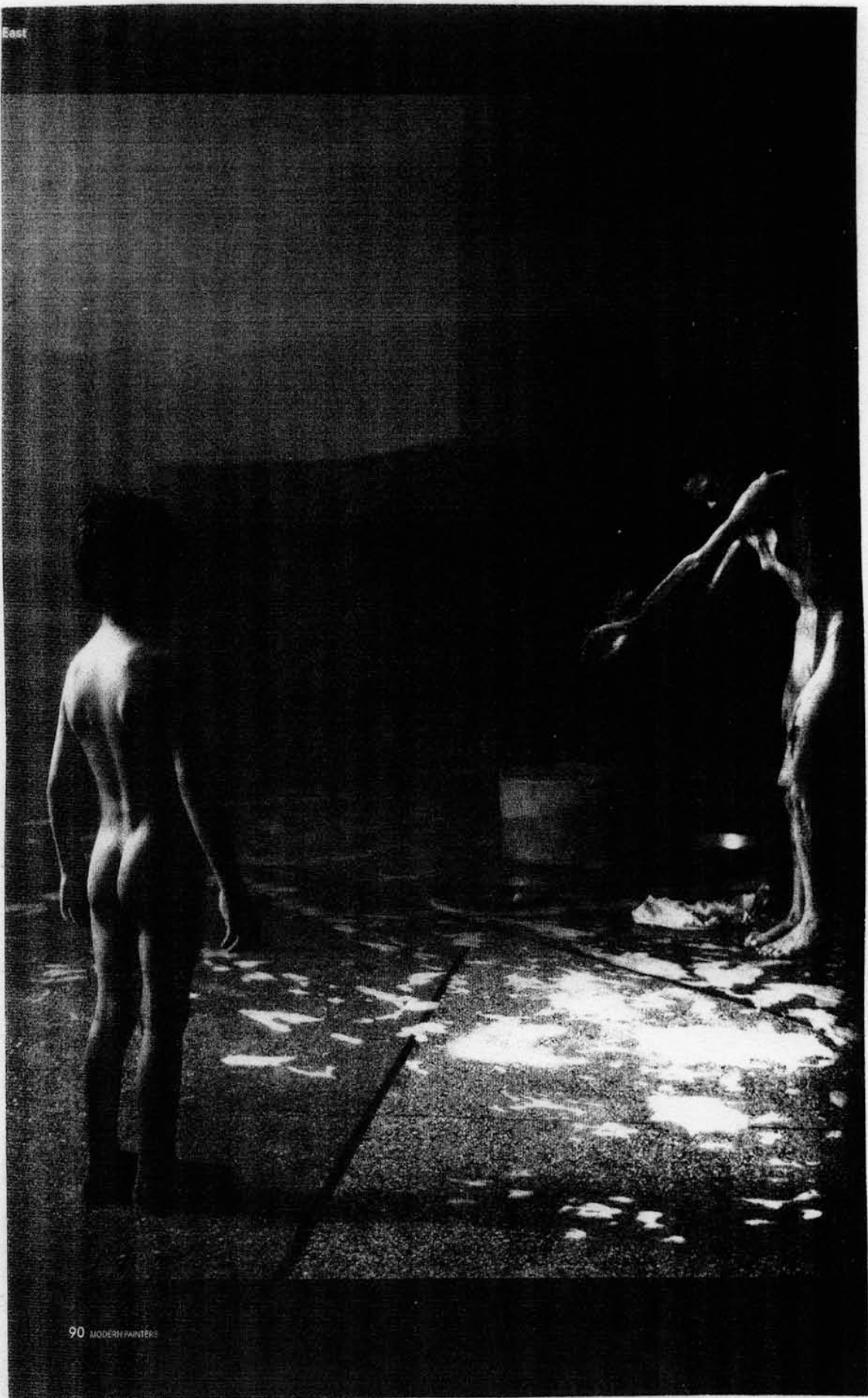
HOME TRUTHS

THREE MIDDLE-EASTERN ARTISTS
PROBE THE FACTS BEHIND THE FICTIONS

BY ANDREAS LEVENTIS

"I'VE BATTLED WITH THE PAIN of cultural disjointment and alienation, but over time have accepted the state of living as a nomad – a stranger, both in respect to my own culture and my host country," Shirin Neshat tells me with stoic resignation. It seems that one of the reasons why she's endured that pain and accepted her nomadic state is that it gives her a rare perspective. For those artists caught up in conflict or restrictive regimes in the Middle East, there is perhaps little opportunity to take anything other than a pragmatic approach to their situation. In the case of those who have left their homelands for the West, however, it is the nature of their long and distant relationship with these territories that affords them the space to observe and interpret events through their work.

Few Middle-Eastern artists have enjoyed Neshat's international acclaim. In 1974, at the age of seventeen, the New York-based Iranian left Iran for Los Angeles to study art at Berkeley. Returning to her homeland as an exile in 1990, she was shocked by the dramatic changes that had occurred during the Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution. Inspired by the mandatory veiling act of 1983, Neshat's renowned photographic series *Women of Allah* (1993–7) marked the beginning of her preoccupation with the chador and the potential of female resistance to oppressive regimes via aesthetic means. It's a preoccupation that shows no signs of ceasing. "As the political environment in the Middle East worsens, and my dream of reunification with



homo slowly dissipates, my frustration and resentment grows with even more intensity toward any political order that has the power to define and control one's personal life.'

Neshat turned to making black-and-white films in 1998. The frequent use of dual projections in her highly choreographed works communicates her sense of geographical dislocation and, more importantly, the gendered divide of Islamic culture. In works such as *Turbulent* (1998) and *Rapture* (1999) the artist used this device to oppose groups of men and women and to investigate the ideological implications of public and private space. The reductive stylization in these early works has, on occasion, drawn accusations of Orientalism. Such claims, argues Neshat, only serve to reveal preconceptions and stereotyping of Middle Eastern cultures. 'The very concept of 'the Orient' was an invention of the Occident. Much of the criticism towards my work is more reflective of Western critics' own inability to accurately analyze non-Western artists,' she concludes.

In Neshat's most recent film, *Zarin* (2005), the artist relies less on binary oppositions and moves beyond the specificities of Iranian culture. Shot in Morocco, it tells the story of a young prostitute who begins to fear for her sanity after she starts to see her clients with featureless faces. Convinced that she has is being punished by God for her indiscretions, the girl flees the brothel to scrub herself raw at the public baths.

Based on the novel *Women without Men* (1998) by Shahrnush Parsipur, and closer in structure to a feature film than her previous works, *Zarin* is still underpinned by the notion of collective experience and an interest in archetypes. '*Zarin* is, on the one hand, directly reflective of specific social, cultural and religious issues that belong to Iranian society; and, on the other hand, it goes beyond cultural boundaries by focusing on a universally significant subject, that of female self-mutilation to justify the social, cultural and religious pressure, and taboos.'

Where issues of female oppression were previously expressed through the use of metaphor, they are now communicated via a form of magical realism, and a character-driven narrative. As the protagonist's dementia worsens, the distinctions between her dreams and waking states become increasingly confused. Through increasingly ambitious and nuanced productions, Neshat continues to question the legitimacy of any single, intransigent point of view.



The Lebanese artist Walid Raad takes this blurring of lived experience and fiction a stage further through his lectures, films and photographic work. Raad was born in Chbanieh in 1967, and grew up in the predominantly Christian area of East Beirut. He moved to the US in 1983 to attend art school, and currently teaches at New York's The Cooper Union. Since 1999 he has continued to research and document the events of the Lebanese Civil War under the guise of The Atlas Group – a project he now frames as having being completed between 1989 and 2002.

In his installation *My Neck is Thinner than a Hair: Engines* (2000–3), Raad meticulously catalogued details pertaining to the spate of car bombings that killed thousands between 1975 and 1991 and left Lebanon's major cities devastated. When developing such archives, the artist adopts reportage techniques, enlists the help of imaginary colleagues and often invents his own witnesses in an attempt to subvert the authenticity of other supposedly factual documentary practices. Like Neshat, Raad uses these tactics to critique Western constructions of the Arab World, and to reveal the methods by which past events are recalled and interpreted.

'MUCH OF THE CRITICISM OF MY WORK IS MORE REFLECTIVE OF WESTERN CRITICS' INABILITY TO ANALYZE NON-WESTERN ARTISTS'
SHIRIN NESHAT

This spread
Shirin Neshat *Zarin*,
2005, production stills
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