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INTERVIEW

Shirin Neshat: cast against type

As a major retrospective opens in Washington, DC, the artist reflects on 20 years of challenging Western stereotypes of Iran

INTERVIEW

Shirin Neshat entered the art world in the early 1990s armed with an MFA and a gun. *Women of Allah* (1993-97), her first major series, featured black-and-white photographs of veiled women, including herself, holding handguns and rifles. It was not entirely well received (a New York Times critic described it as "radical chic").

Since then, guns have largely disappeared from Neshat's work, but "the knife has got sharper", she says. Her videos and photos have been bought by major museums including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Critics have warmed to her work, too. In 2009, Neshat won the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival for *Women Without Men*, set during the 1953 Iranian coup. "I always thought my work was very personal, but I've come to realise that it has

always been in conversation with history," she says.

This week, Shirin Neshat: Facing History (18 May-20 September) opens at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC. The survey brings together three bodies of work by the Iranian-born artist, each of which touches on a major moment in the country's history. For the first time, Neshat's work will be presented alongside archival material that inspired her, including video footage and newspaper clippings.

The exhibition also marks a new chapter in Neshat's relationship with Iran, which she last visited in 1996. "I no longer want to return," she says, speaking from her studio in New York. "I'm a true nomad."

The Art Newspaper: How does it feel to revisit the Women of Allah series?
Shirin Neshat: For a long time, the reception of that work was more negative than positive. There was a level of suspicion, from both the Iranian community and Westerners,

that I was being intentionally provocative, which caught me by surprise. I had come back to Iran after 12 years and was trying to make sense of the revolution. But to this day, I feel that these images resonate. In the divide between Islam and the West, from Islamic State to Al Qaeda, you see this extreme connection between religion and violence.

You work in photography, video and cinema. How do you negotiate these different media?
Whenever you embrace a new medium, it's really frightening. Each one has not only a different artistic language, but also different partners. If I'm making a movie, I'm dealing with producers, actors, production designers. If I'm working on a photograph, I'm working with two or three people in the studio and it's much more solitary. But they do inform each

other. When I first started out, I just photographed myself. I had to teach myself to convey emotion. But slowly, I became the director, telling other people how to pose and convey the emotions.

You've said that one of the biggest challenges for artists in Iran is the expectation that their art must be political. How does that shape their work?
Artists know that if you do anything with the veil or calligraphy, critics write about it and people buy it. It cultivates a mediocre culture. Western culture thrives on the idea of the oppressed artist; it makes them feel as though they are superior. But in reality, it's a stereotype. I know an Iranian director who is living here. His latest film is about American culture. It has not been accepted by any film festivals. If you're Iranian, they want to see something about Iran, even if you've lived here for longer than you lived there.



A still from the Iranian-born artist's video *Soliloquy* (1999)

What are you working on now?
I've been working on a feature film about the Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum for nearly five years, and we are finally happy with the script. She is, without exaggeration, the most iconic artist of the 20th century in the Middle East. She died in 1975. I can hardly believe that I allowed myself to be that ambitious: even Egyptians haven't done it. But in this climate, where there are continuing misconceptions about Islamic cultures, I wanted to return to a moment in history where Egypt was very cosmopolitan, where there was a more secular, democratic existence, like Iran in 1953 [the setting of Neshat's film *Women Without Men*]. It's been difficult to balance all this material for Egyptian and Western audiences – that's why it's taken so long.

What advice would you give to a young artist?
I do not think that we are born with talent. You have to suffer a little bit. You have to search for ideas. So many young artists are looking at their family, their lovers. There's a poverty of ideas because there is a poverty of experience. One doesn't want to add to the trivial and mediocre art in the world. That's why I didn't make any work for ten years after graduating from art school. I was smart enough to know that I didn't have anything to contribute. You have to live a meaningful life and take risks outside school. We don't have to be rich; just look at all the actors working as waiters. We do have to have integrity.

Interview by Julia Halperin

SOLLOQUY © SHIRIN NESHAT. COURTESY OF GLADSTONE GALLERY. NESHAT: FOODO/MARTINEZ