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Michael Workman, "Artist Shirin Neshat, in conversation about art and life," Chicago Tribune, March 24, 2017

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Artist Shirin Neshat, in conversation about art and life



Shirin Neshat (Rodolfo Martinez / Handout)

On Wednesday, March 29, Iranian-American artist Shirin Neshat returns to give a talk for "Dialogue 8," a series on contemporary art and artists at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. We sat down with the artist to discuss her views on resurgent American anti-Muslim sentiment, Islamophobia and her shifting artistic perspectives on women, faith, violence and ideology. This is an edited transcript of that conversation.

Chicago Tribune: Is this the first time you've been back to Chicago since your 1999 premiere at the Art Institute?

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Shirin Neshat: Yes, I think that's right, actually. Its been a very long time.

Q: I think one of the big questions I'm curious to hear your opinion on, as an artist who acknowledges the political exigencies of your work, is what you think of the Muslim travel ban.

A: It's a very complicated subject, of course. I think the reason for political events in the U.S. is of concern for people like myself, particularly because I've had a lot of problems with my own government and its hard-liners; and to see that kind of thing happening in this country is not very encouraging because I always felt very secure and at home in the United States, and now I'm feeling a little bit more shaky. You know, it even interferes with people who have immigrated a long time ago and now don't have a way back home, a sense of insecurity happens — "what will happen?" But I think, more than anything, I feel also like an American who's very concerned about if this country might be leaning toward fascism and all of these horrible things that none of us wants to happen. It's a great concern, I think, not just for Muslim immigrants but for all Americans.

Q: You've spoken previously about how artists in Iran have faced "harassment, torture and execution," and I'm curious how you see this nationalist shift in America echoing that or not.

A: Well, I think the lack of freedom of expression is really key, and I have a feeling that that's what we're seeing in the last 18 or so months in this country, which was unimaginable that the freedom of expression would be reviewed or taken away from people the way. ... But of course these days Iranian artists are not at as great a risk of being tortured or killed because, at the beginning, earlier on even during the green movement, for example, we had very severe treatment of people who are openly speaking against the government. But right now in Iran there is more moderation. But really I think this is of great concern for artists, and for international artists, to see this same kind of thing that more backward countries are going through.

Q: It's revealing that you point out the moderation in Iran right now, at a time when the far right image being constructed in the national dialogue is one in which they're threatening Iran with new sanctions, seemingly out of nowhere.

A: Yes, this is really, really unfortunate. It's not helping. And to alienate Iran makes so little sense. You've never ever heard of an Iranian terrorist. Of course there has been conflict between the U.S. and Iran forever, but the terrorists have come from Saudi Arabia, Morocco and other places. But those countries are not penalized, so it's really targeting Iran in a way that actually serves to unify the Iranian people against the U.S. For so long, the Iranian people have been big fans of the United States, and wanted to make peace and have thought very differently from the government. But now the U.S. has really alienated the Iranian people. So it's very disturbing because, on a human level, it's such a bad decision to do what they have done to Iran. They should really look at the

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record of the Iranian people in this country, in the United States, because they are some of the most educated in business, and science and everything. So we have contributed so much to this country, and now for them to be penalized seems insane.

Q: A lot of your work has investigated this nexus of faith, violence and ideology, an intersection relevant to both American and Iranian cultural histories. Do you see the focus of your role as an artist changing in these new contexts?

A: Again, a tough question! You're absolutely right, all of my work has always been about this dynamic between people and power, like governmental institutions, fanaticism, religion and mysticism, the more humanistic aspects of existence as opposed to it all. And I have to say as part of my talk (at the MCA) I wanted to talk about the transformation of my work and how it's changing and evolving — and yet all of these dynamics are still existing. I guess all I could say about what's different about it now is that I haven't been back to Iran for so long, I've turned a corner in terms of no longer just obsessing about the Iranian culture. I'm moving on to questions that don't just relate to Iranian society. My latest work relates to American culture, which I've been working on while I was in Egypt.

Q: And speaking of these shifts, is the depiction of women changing in your work as well?

A: People always ask me, "Are you a feminist?" And I say, just because I focus on the subject of women, and I'm interested in the subject of women's struggles, does that make me a feminist? I recently gave a talk in Canada and somebody got up and said "You are a feminist!" I feel that women's points of view are naturally very different from men, regardless of where they come from. I think our choices of subject matters have a way of breaking in to our points of view on politics, religion — and are vastly different from men. But to just reduce them to these questions of gender, no I would hope we wouldn't. We usually don't discuss a man's perspective as a masculine perspective, we just say its a point of view. I think while my work really deals with the subject of characters that may be gender related, it's from the point of view of a woman and often the story of a woman. But I think it talks about broader issues that happen to be in the experience of a woman. Obviously, that's because I'm a woman, and very often I think my work is reflective of my life experience as a woman, so that's how it's shaped.