

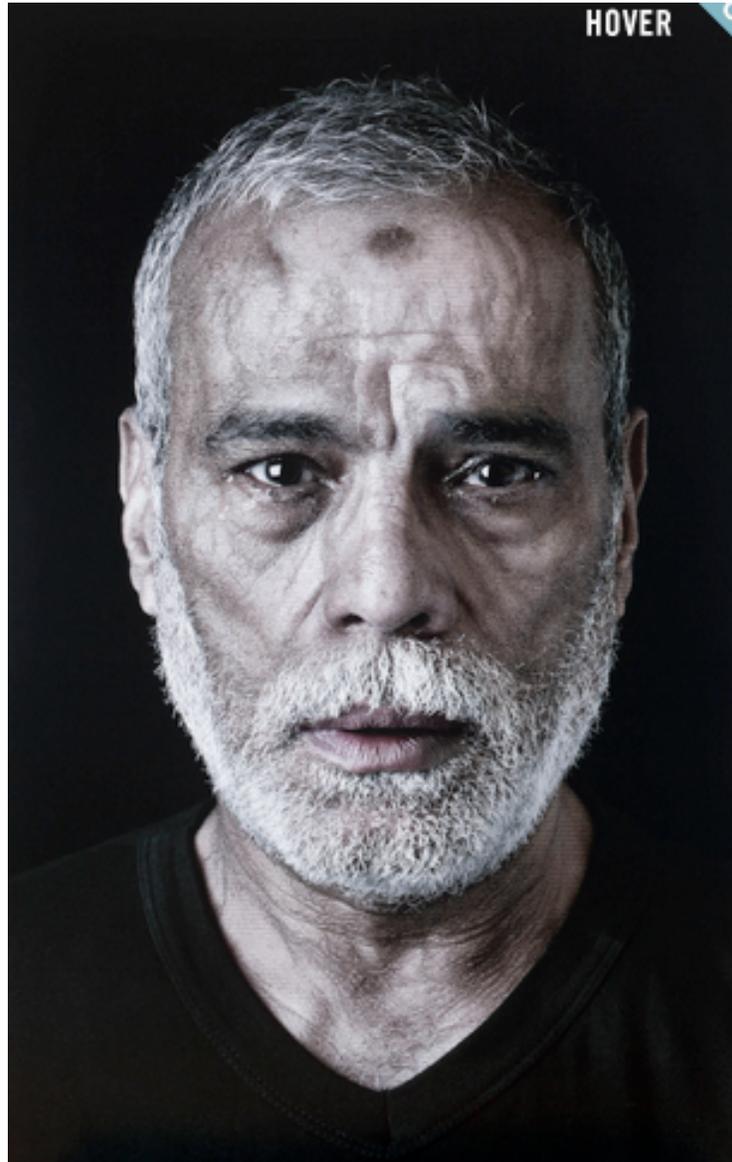
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Shirin Neshat, "Voice of Egypt: Shirin Neshat on Umm Kulthum," Creative Time Reports, November 18, 2013.

Voice of Egypt: Shirin Neshat on Umm Kulthum

By [Shirin Neshat](#) New York, NY, USA

November 18, 2013



Shirin Neshat, *Wafaa (Mourners)* from "The Book of Kings" series, 2013. Photo copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery. Hover over the image or click "expand" to zoom in.

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Acclaimed artist Shirin Neshat shares an exclusive preview of her forthcoming film about the Egyptian singer and international icon Umm Kulthum, whose life intersected with many of the most significant political events in Egypt's modern history.

Nearly forty years after her death, Umm Kulthum is still loved by people from all walks of life: the secular and the non-secular, the rich and the poor, the working class and intellectuals. She is one person—one icon—whom everyone in the region agrees on, from Egypt to Lebanon, from Iran to Israel. I find it deeply important and relevant to return to Umm Kulthum today, as she truly remains a symbol of peace and unity. With my film, tentatively titled *Voice of Egypt*, I want to convey this to an international audience that may be unfamiliar with the singer.

One can tell Umm Kulthum's story in many ways, but given her direct implication in major political events, I think her encounters with political leaders and regimes are essential to our understanding of her trajectory as an artist. For example, when she was first discovered in the 1920s, she became very close to King Farouk and his court. Later, following the 1952 social revolution, her radio program was taken off the air because she was considered too loyal to the monarchy. However, when Gamal Abdel Nasser found out about this, he reversed the decision out of fear that Egypt would turn against him! The singer and the new president became very close in turn, and she became something of an ambassador of his social agenda.

A number of people criticized Umm Kulthum for collaborating with political regimes such as Nasser's. But in the end, she became a heroic figure as a prominent nationalist—regardless of her critics—thanks to the power of her music, which touched millions, as well as her charity work. Notably, after Egypt's defeat in the Six-Day War, she toured the Arab world to raise money for her country's sorely weakened military.

Selfishly, I like to point out how a woman who rose to fame in the 1930s is today considered the most significant Middle Eastern artist of the 20th century. As another female artist from the Middle East whose art is entangled with politics, I consider Umm Kulthum not only an amazing phenomenon, but also a personal inspiration. She succeeded in appealing to people both emotionally and politically in such an unusual way, something I hope to show through an artistic approach that is more like silent film, with little dialogue. My co-director, Shoja Azari and I want to tell the story primarily through the power of visual imagery—and of course, music. I would like to see if we can give our viewers a glimpse into the state of ecstasy that is so central to Umm Kulthum's music and the experience of her audience. People fell apart listening to her music.

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Though I feel very close to the figure of Umm Kulthum, this film will also mark a major departure for me: for the first time, I am crafting a narrative that does not belong to my own culture, but to the Arab culture. The film will be shot in Arabic, a language I don't speak. Ahead of shooting, which will hopefully begin in the fall of 2014, I have gotten to know Egypt more intimately. Over the last few years, I have visited Cairo several times and encountered many different types of people—not only academics, artists and filmmakers, but also political activists and citizens from many walks of life. Together with Azari and our Egyptian collaborator, Ahmed Ibrahim, I have conducted interviews and site visits since 2010, when Hosni Mubarak was still in power. We watched the revolution take place and we have witnessed its aftermath.

Similar to how *Women Without Men* foregrounded four female characters, with 1950s Tehran as an indispensable backdrop, this film will have its eyes on Umm Kulthum as Egypt becomes something of a character itself. We're very committed to revisiting Egypt's modern history as it intersects with the singer's life. Our film spans the period from 1920 to 1975, encapsulating many significant developments—the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, the rule of King Farouk, the fall of British colonialism, the Nasser era and war with Israel—but in an artistic rather than documentary fashion.

At a biographical level, it's important to mention that Umm Kulthum was a private person who fought all her life to remain an image. She has exposed very little about herself. We are not interested in devouring her personal life; rather, we want to get under the skin of an artist who rose to a transcendent level of fame and admiration across gender, class and religious lines. I find her story particularly important to tell to a Western audience whose image of Muslim women is often that of a "victim." Oddly enough, Umm Kulthum not only exceeded the status of her male rivals in Egypt, but also stayed strong whereas iconic Western female singers of her era, like Billie Holiday and Edith Piaf, had tragic endings marked by alcohol or drug abuse. Umm Kulthum's career never had a dip: she worked hard and remained successful until the day she died. Four million people poured into the streets around Tahrir Square for her funeral—the second largest funeral to take place in Egypt, after only Nasser's. It's hard to recollect any artist ever having achieved this level of popular recognition, even in the West.