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Lisa Johnston, "Shirin Neshat exhibition: Pain and power," *Financial Mail*, August 25, 2016.

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Shirin Neshat exhibition: Pain and power



Untitled, from the Roja series

Iranian-born Shirin Neshat says of being an artist in exile in the US: "Politics doesn't seem to escape people like me ... politics has defined our lives."

In Iran, as a result of her political, feminist works, she faces censorship, torture and even execution, while in the West she is confronted with the pain of being separated from the people and country she loves.

It is this push-pull that shapes much of her photographic and video installations, which investigate "issues of gender, power, displacement, protest, identity, and the space between the personal and the political", but it is the following statement that I found particularly relevant to an SA audience. We are fighting "two battles in different surrounds. [We are] critical of the West ... of the image that is being constructed about us, our women, our politics, about our religion ... we are there to take pride and insist on respect. At the same time we are fighting another battle that is our regime, our government, our atrocious government."

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Historically, there are certainly parallels with SA artists. But for me, Neshat's words bring to mind the #Khwezi protests — four strong African women standing in silent protest to remind all South Africans about the woman who accused Jacob Zuma of rape and was forced to flee and live in shame, while the president has gone on to survive numerous scandals.

I mention all this as a background to Neshat's solo exhibition, *Dreamers*, at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg. It is her first African showing.

The exhibition features two video installations, *Roja* and *Sarah* (accompanied by stills from the short films). While the beautifully shot, black-and-white films deal with aspects of the artist's own recurring dreams, the emotional and psychological narratives deal with common anxieties and trauma, memories and longing, particularly when ascribed to women of a similar (politically charged) background or those living in a strange land.

In an interview with exhibition curator Natasha Becker, Neshat says: "I have been haunted by the power of dreams for years, in how it is only in the state of dreams that human beings are truly free and naked. I am fascinated by how, in a state of dreams, the boundaries between madness and sanity, reality and fiction, conscious and subconscious are blurred and broken. ... *Roja* and *Sarah* are an effort to make sense of the more subliminal emotional and psychic universe that lives deep inside of us, but is difficult to explain through words."

Neshat manages to achieve this haunting, surreal quality through simple, nonlinear narratives and effective use of subtle camera techniques. In all the works the landscape and distinct monolithic architecture are important side characters.

The film *Sarah* deals with a global experience of violence and war and the ancillary anxiety it provokes.

Neshat tells Becker that *Sarah* is "about the unfolding journey of a woman as she recollects and breathes annihilation, as she faces residues of destruction, violence, genocide and mortality in a state of dream.

"Sarah's anxieties and fears ... force her to plunge into imagining her own death."

In *Roja*, the protagonist sits in a theatre watching a middle-aged man singing *The Carnival is Over*. He is shirtless and initially appears vulnerable and *Roja* is moved by the experience, but he turns on her and the situation soon becomes abusive and demonic. *Roja*, says Neshat, deals with "the fear of the stranger and the strange land; desire for a reunion with home, with mother, and with a motherland that seems welcoming at first but becomes terrifying ..."

The protagonists in these shorts, *Sarah* and *Roja*, aren't trained actresses. Both are part of an Iranian community that frequents art events in New York City, and were approached by Neshat because of a particular mannerism or personality that appealed to her.

Neshat tells Becker: "For me, nothing is more intriguing and emotionally charged than the human body and facial expressions. A simple gaze, a hand gesture, body postures can convey so much about a human being's inner and outer worlds. As a minimalist, my interest remains in how to capture my characters' most intimate sentiments in absolute subtlety."

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Dreamers runs at the Goodman Gallery until September 14 and is well worth a visit. Be warned: despite its minimalist layout, this is an exhibition that needs some time to digest and ruminate on. If given the proper respect, it will, like a dream, stay with you and offer fresh insights long after the event.

* Dreamers is at the Goodman Gallery, Jo'burg, until September 14