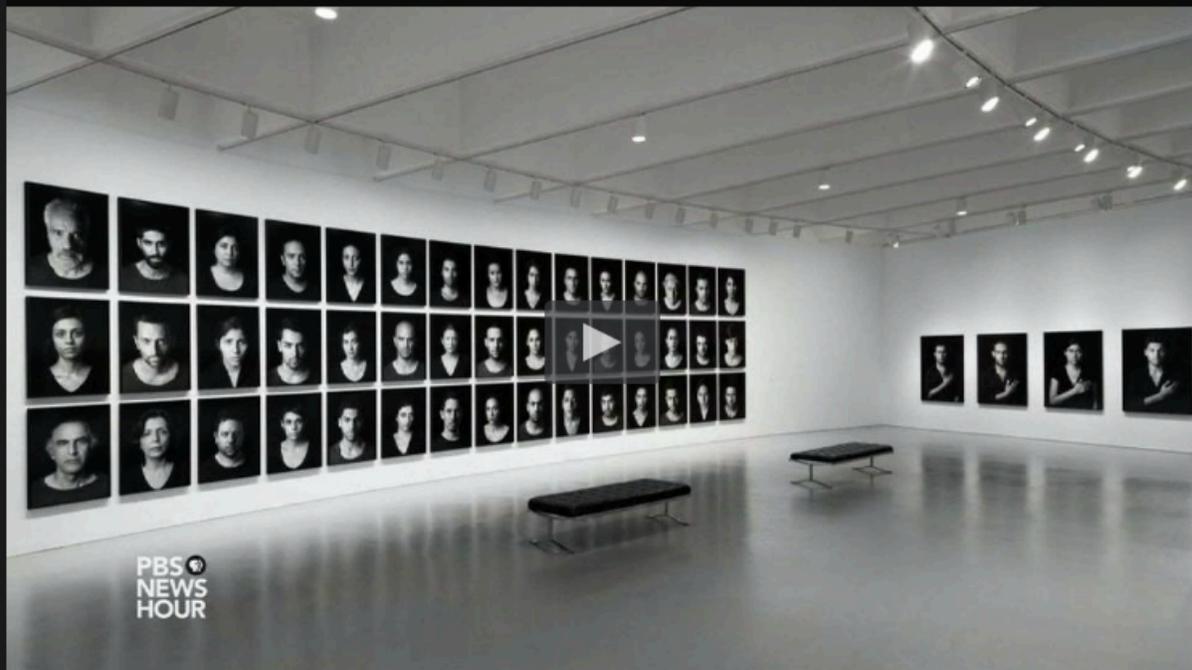


Shirin Neshat translates Iranian political unrest through an artistic lens

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For Shirin Neshat, "art became a kind of an excuse to build a relationship, even from a distance," to her homeland and history. Neshat grew up in pre-revolutionary Iran, then came to the U.S. as a student in the 1970s and is now an internationally recognized artist. She joins Jeffrey Brown to look at her latest exhibit, "Facing History" at Washington's Hirshhorn Museum.

TRANSCRIPT

GWEN IFILL: And finally tonight, an artist examining pieces of history, her own and from her native land of Iran.

Jeffrey Brown has our report.

JEFFREY BROWN: Faces from Iran, still images, and films, the work of an artist looking from afar at the dramas and traumas of her native land.

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SHIRIN NESHAT, Artist: I would say that I make fictions. And I think...

JEFFREY BROWN: You make fiction.

SHIRIN NESHAT: Yes.

JEFFREY BROWN: But out of reality.

SHIRIN NESHAT: Exactly. I think the creative imagination, art is in essence something that takes reality, and yet transforms it into something that is fictional.

JEFFREY BROWN: Shirin Neshat grew up in pre-revolutionary Iran. She came to the U.S. in the 1970s as a student and became an internationally recognized artist with exhibitions around the world.

Her latest at Washington's Hirshhorn Museum is titled "Facing History."

Do you see yourself that way as an artist, facing, looking at history?

SHIRIN NESHAT: On a subconscious level, yes.

When I first went back to Iran, after the Islamic Revolution, when I had been absent for 11 years, when I arrived in Iran in 1990, I was quite blown away by the transformation of the country. And I had also an incredible urge to reconnect to Iran. So, art in a way became an excuse to reconnect to my home, my family and the country.

JEFFREY BROWN: The exhibition begins in the period of the U.S.-backed overthrow of the government of Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953. But this is history through poetic imagery, as in Neshat's film "Munis."

Here, a young Iranian woman falls to her death and then has a magical conversation with a slain protester, in which she ponders her own role in society. Neshat's series "Women of Allah" explores the impact of the Iranian Revolution and perceptions of Muslim women as being victimized and submissive.

These are staged photographs created in her New York studio.

SHIRIN NESHAT: Of course, the situation Iran in has been very oppressive, but opposite of what the image is, the women are extremely rebellious, they're very vocal, very confrontational, and by no means submissive.

JEFFREY BROWN: Neshat herself appears in much of her work, embodying the character she seeks to portray. Layered onto many of her images, she adds intricate calligraphy.

SHIRIN NESHAT: I handwrite the calligraphy on the surface of the photograph. It's the labor of the artist. I'm very interested in literature, Iranian contemporary modern literature. They're not decorative. They're not Qur'anic text. They are my favorite poems by favorite poets.

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JEFFREY BROWN: Give me an example. Here's one of an eye...

SHIRIN NESHAT: Yes.

JEFFREY BROWN: ... that has the writing right in the eye. Right?

SHIRIN NESHAT: Yes.

This image was actually created, one of the first images that I produced. It was in 1993. It's called "Offered Eyes." And was the poetry that inspired me to shoot this photograph. The poem is called "I Feel Sorry for the Garden," obviously, the garden being a metaphor for a woman.

JEFFREY BROWN: A more recent body of work is a response to the 2009 green movement that was violently put down by the Iranian regime. It's called "The Book of Kings," a reference to an ancient epic poem about the Persian empire the Shahnameh.

The series, again using models, is divided into three parts, the masses, the patriots and the villains.

SHIRIN NESHAT: This body of work is more about the question of people vs. tyranny, people who fight power and people who hold power. People who desire and believed in whatever it is, is always intersected with violence and atrocities.

JEFFREY BROWN: They're beautiful images. Do you feel that tension of beauty and violence?

SHIRIN NESHAT: Absolutely. I think that notion of contradiction, paradox, opposite is at the core of my work.

I feel, as a woman, as an Iranian, completely conflicted by who I am in nature, someone, again, very healthy and strong, but also extremely fragile, but also my identity as a Muslim, as a person, as a Westerner, as an Easterner. So, my work is exactly that expression of that sense of duality that I feel that is the core of who I am.

JEFFREY BROWN: "Shirin Neshat: Facing History" is on exhibition through September 20.

From the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., I'm Jeffrey Brown for the "PBS NewsHour."