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Chloe Wyma, "22 Questions for Shirin Neshat," artinfo.com, February 6, 2012.

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Courtesy the Artist and Gladstone Gallery

Installation view of Shirin Neshat's "The Book of Kings" exhibit at Gladstone Gallery

by Chloe Wyma



Shirin Neshat / Photo © Lina Bertucci

Name: Shirin Neshat

Occupation: Visual Artist/filmmaker

City/Neighborhood: New York City, Soho

What project are you working on now?

I'm working on my second feature length film, a story on the life and art of the legendary Egyptian singer named Oum Kolthum who died in 1975. To this date, she remains perhaps the most iconic and significant artist of the 20th century in the Islamic world, both for her music and for her sense of nationalism. In the past two years, I've been traveling to Egypt for research and pre-production for the film, which we hope to begin shooting in

October 2012. Meanwhile, I have also been preparing a new video installation, commissioned by the National Museum in Qatar, to be shot mostly in the deserts of Qatar sometime in 2013.

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Your new body of work juxtaposes eleventh-century Persian epic poetry with portraits of young Arab protesters. How are these ancient texts relevant to protesters today?

If you look back at all my work up to date, there have been two consistent elements resurfacing in one form or another: literature and politics. Poetry and other forms of texts have been applied either in the form of calligraphy or as songs in the video installations. Meanwhile, every work has also either directly or indirectly framed some sort of political issue, such as the Islamic revolution, political oppression, martyrdom, or the 1953 coup in my film "Women Without Men." But I think this interest in looking back at political and cultural history to draw inspirations and connections took a sharper turn in the making of "Women Without Men" where I had to carefully study history — specifically the CIA-organized Coup of 1953 in Iran — and found fascinating parallels between the popular uprisings in 2009 and the mass protests in 1953. Ultimately, I found that history tends to repeat itself. So in 2010, as I started to plan the new series of photographs inspired by the Iranian and Arab uprisings, a few themes became central to my subject: courage, patriotism, love, devotion, but also betrayal, cruelty, suffering, and ultimately death. Then I looked again at "The Book of Kings," a masterpiece of literature by Ferdowsi, which also focuses on epic tragedies, the themes of sacrifice and patriotism, yet also war, atrocity, and death. I thought that — both conceptually and visually — there could be a powerful connection between the contemporary faces of our courageous youth, an ancient mythological text, and illustrations of heroes.

After spending years making narrative films, you return to an earlier method in your new show at Gladstone Gallery. Most of the exhibition features portraits overlaid with calligraphy, which you made famous in your 1993 "Women of Allah" series. What inspired you to revisit this medium?

There were number of reasons. First of all, after having spent years in making videos and a film that were all big team efforts, I felt the urge to return to studio art where I could have a more solitary experience. I had almost forgotten what that could be like. In addition, ever since I had moved to the moving picture, my work had taken a narrative approach and had all together abandoned still photography, in particular the portrait photography that was the mark of "Women of Allah." So I wondered whether I could challenge myself to return to portrait

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photography where each image had to hold its own tension independent from others. Also, I must say that there was something about using my hand — the craftsmanship of calligraphy on the photos — that I missed so intensely. Of course this process proved to be very difficult. The language of cinema and video art had turned me into a storyteller and now I had to function otherwise. I began shooting these photos in spring of 2010. But it was only after the second and third shoots, when the concepts finally became crystallized, where while there was an overall theme and narrative involved, that each photograph began to work for me individually.

Your "Women of Allah" series featured only women. Why did you decide to include both men and women in your new work?

It is quite simple. If the earlier series of "Women of Allah" became about the 1979 Islamic Revolution where the separation of gender, and hijab (veiling) was central to the religious mandate, "The Book of Kings" was capturing a different era. In 2009, we witnessed a new generation of men and women protesters in Iran who joined forces to revolt against an authoritarian regime. Like everyone else, I found myself fascinated by the powerful images in the media not only from Iran but from all over the Arab world, where Muslim women protested side by side with men in their demand of democracy and freedom. So if with the "Women of Allah" the women were largely submissive, the new images reveal assertive, fearless, and fully defiant revolutionary women.

Although you are exiled from your native Iran, you travel frequently throughout the Middle East and are part of an international dissident community in the Arab World. From your perspective, how has the Arab Spring affected the artistic climate of the Middle East?

Of course, prior to the Arab Spring, we had already witnessed an interesting cultural growth in the Middle Eastern artistic climate where it clearly began to challenge the West by building strong markets and important art institutions. But I predict now we will see a new shift that will be less driven by the market but more by the political transformations that have been taking place in the region. As I'm spending a lot of time in Egypt, I see how — ever since the formation of the revolution — a wave of ex-patriots, particularly artists, writers, and intellectuals have been returning to live in Cairo again to join the popular uprising. From what I can see — as difficult as it is — they feel invigorated not only by being present in their country as history is being made, but also to take a part in this movement. Without a doubt in the next years we can expect to see a range of films, books, and artwork that will speak to these individuals' experiences.

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What's the last show that surprised you? Why?

Maurizio Cattelan's show surprised me for being so gutsy and hanging all his work up in the air and refusing to use any of the museum's walls. And Andreas Gursky's last show at Gagosian surprised me, as I found myself puzzled by the scale of the work, and was not sure why — in his mind — the bigger was always the more impressive.

What's your favorite place to see art?

The Islamic Art museum in Qatar, beautifully designed by I.M. Pei, is my most favorite museum in the world and I wish aside from classic art they would show contemporary art. Also, as difficult as the Guggenheim museum's building is, I love to see how each show is challenged by the architecture.

Do you make a living off your art?

Yes.

What's the most indispensable item in your studio?

My laptop computer and my brushes.

Where are you finding ideas for your work these days?

By reading and traveling.

Do you collect anything?

I have unconsciously become a collector of tribal jewelry, particularly earrings.

What's the last artwork you purchased?

I bought a beautiful small painting by Iranian woman artist, Laleh Khoramian, from her New York gallery.

What's the first artwork you ever sold?

A photograph from the "Women of Allah," series at Annina Nosei gallery in 1995.

What's the weirdest thing you ever saw happen in a museum or gallery?

The Maurizio Cattelan show at the Guggenheim.

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What's your art-world pet peeve?

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What's your favorite post-gallery watering hole or restaurant?

Normally, I like to go back to my favorite bar/restaurant in Soho, Fanelli's on Mercer and Prince St.

Do you have a gallery/museum-going routine?

Unfortunately no. I'm much better about making sure that I don't miss any important film than important art exhibition.

What's the last great book you read?

I'm reading a lot of novels written by the new generation of Iranian women writers, mostly because they take me back to the heart of the social, cultural reality of Iran that I otherwise have no access to. Otherwise, I have had to reduce my reading to books that are necessary for my current research about the Egyptian singer Oum Kolthum and the modern history of Egypt.

What work of art do you wish you owned?

I would absolutely love to own a work by Louise Bourgeois. Any of them, particularly the doll series or the hands.

What would you do to get it?

I could never afford it, for now a photo of it is enough.

What international art destination do you most want to visit?

I am not big on international art destinations like art fairs or art biennials. I would rather explore the cultural spaces in countries that are normally off the chart. For example, I'm very interested in going to Tehran or Beirut where I hear there is a very strong artistic climate.

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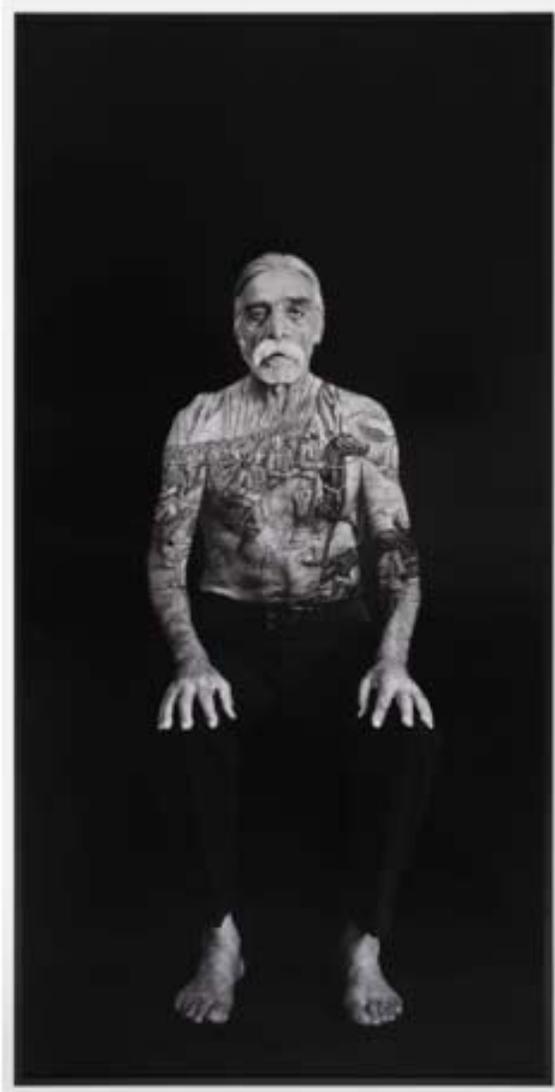
Installation view of Shirin Neshat's "The Book of Kings" exhibit at Gladstone Gallery



"Roja," 2012

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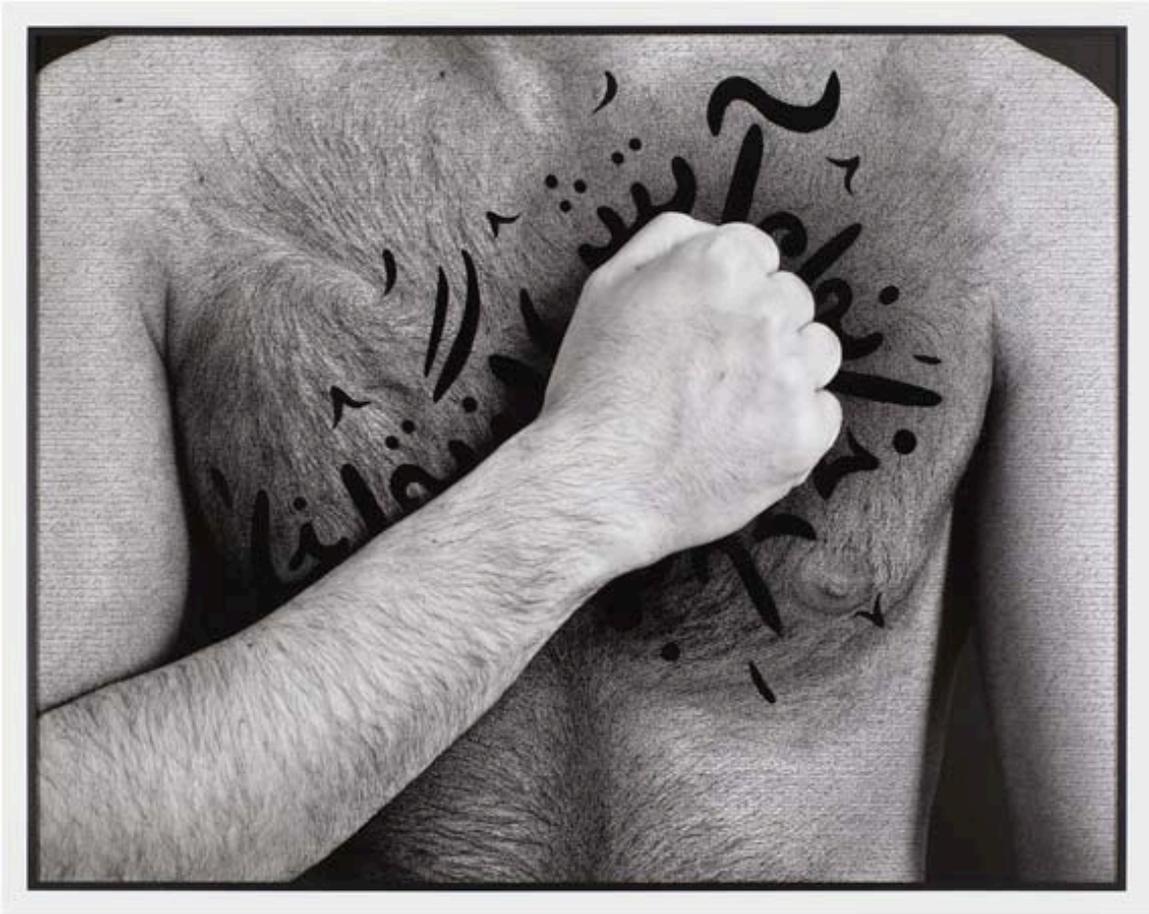
"Bahram," 2012



"Sharif," 2012

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"My House is Burning Down," 2012