

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

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## Asked and Answered | Shirin Neshat

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*Shirin Neshat/Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, NY*

The cover photograph of the new Rizzoli book, "Shirin Neshat," out this month.

Shirin Neshat's "Women Without Men," which opens Friday in New York, represents this experimental photographer and video artist's first venture into feature filmmaking, and it's already proven to be an auspicious start. Neshat won the Silver Lion for Best Director at the Venice Film Festival last year for her exploration of political and religious oppression in her native Iran. And given the increased international attention to Iranian politics in recent months, the New York-based artist's work — much of which deals with gender and identity in the Muslim world — is more in demand than ever. A comprehensive monograph of her work is out this month from Rizzoli, and she has just optioned the novel "The Palace of Dreams," by Ismail Kadare, for her second film.

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**Q. Were you concerned about making a controversial film that questions Islam? After all, the Dutch director Theo van Gogh was murdered because of his short film, “Submission,” about Muslim women.**

I have never tried to provoke the Muslim community, as I consider myself a Muslim. I, too, found Theo van Gogh and Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s short film disrespectful to Muslims. I believe we don’t need to widen the divide between the West and Islam. Rather, we need to build dialogue to encourage tolerance and respect.

**The movie is based on the book by Shahrnush Parsipur. How have you adapted it?**

The magic realism of the novel was extremely difficult to turn into a screenplay. Also, it was written as a series of five short stories, which followed the lives of five women separately, who in the final chapter converge in a mysterious orchard. We went with four main characters and divided them into two realistic characters and two allegorical characters.

**The film is set in 1953. How historically accurate is it?**

With this film, I had pay attention to fashion as a way to depict the distinct classes and cultural dynamics of the 1950s, a significant period in Iranian history. We had a secular government and a very Westernized and sophisticated society. My team and I did extensive research to understand the architecture, interior design, fashion, hair and makeup of Iranian culture at the time. For instance, women of the nonreligious community did not wear the veil, whereas lower- and middle-class religious women did.

**One of the characters, Munis, longs to take part in political protest but can only do so as a ghost. Why?**

Munis represents an Iranian woman raised in a traditional religious family, which generally keeps women away from the political process. Out of sheer frustration, Munis chooses death over life in stagnation. Of course, Munis is an allegorical character, so her death and resurrection is symbolic of flight and freedom instead of suicide. The metaphor of flight is central to the ideas of mysticism in Persian and Islamic literature. In political terminology, Munis’s death returns to the concept of martyrdom. It is the same with the young and beautiful Neda, who died in the streets of Tehran this past summer and whose unjust death made her an instant martyr.



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### **Zarin, the prostitute, is skeletal. What was your reason for casting her like this?**

Her physical presence had to embody the character's emotional and physical crisis. When it became impossible to find such an actress among the Iranian community, we looked to the international community. I was immediately impressed by the Hungarian actress Orsi Toth, but only later did I discover that she was clearly anorexic. With this in mind, we revised the script to fit her physique and her being non-Iranian. Ultimately, what became the force of Zarin's character was her silence and her devastating body.

### **Which out of the four main characters is the closest to representing you?**

I feel closest to Zarin, perhaps because of how she quietly suffers and inflicts her pain onto her body, an experience that many women, including myself, are familiar with. Zarin's body becomes a tool — she punishes herself for all that is wrong with the world, the social stigma, religious taboos and her own feelings of guilt, shame and sin.

### **In the film, utopia is an enchanted garden where the women escape from men. Is the solution a world without men?**

Absolutely not. The story of "Women Without Men" evolves around the journey of four women as they each try to change their lives for the better. In fact, most of the women's problem are not men, but the larger social, political, and religious structure of the culture they live in.

### **Would you call yourself a feminist?**

This question has been asked many times before, and I am afraid my answer often disappoints, as I don't claim myself a feminist in the conventional sense. I believe and support the feminist movement, but I am not generally interested in considering women's rights in relation to equality with men, or in a competition with men, but rather within their own rights and feminine space.

### **But the men portrayed in your movie are oppressors, rapists and thugs.**

Some male characters are negative, but it is absolutely not my style to make clichés about Muslim men, or to identify them as systematically oppressive and barbaric. The character of the Gardener, for instance, is the guardian of the women as they try to cope with life in exile.

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## **You are an exile yourself, for more than 30 years. Do you consider the United States home?**

The first years of my life in the U.S. were very difficult. Today my life in New York is much happier because I am surrounded by a loving Iranian community. Frankly, I can't imagine moving back to Iran with the current situation there, but I do long to spend more time in the Middle East.

## **Do you think your film will ever be shown in Iran?**

Not legally, as long as this government is in power. The book has been officially banned for many years; there is nudity in the film, and my own work has always been considered controversial. But I have just found out that the film is being distributed underground. Most films find their way into the country through piracy. I am delighted by this news.

## **Why did you choose to shoot in a magical realism style?**

Censorship, harassment, arrests and imprisonment are a way of life for any Iranian artist or intellectual who dares to cross the boundaries of what the country deems acceptable forms of expression. So artists have consistently relied on the power of allegory and poetic language to express everything that is not possible to express directly. Magical realism allows an artist like myself to inject layers of meaning without being obvious. In American culture, where there is freedom of expression, this approach may seem forced, unnecessary and misunderstood. But this system of communication has become very Iranian.

## **Where is your enchanted garden?**

I have been in search of that enchanted garden all my life, not sure where it is, and what it might look like, but I still have not arrived there. I only hope one day I will.