

After the Revolution Women Who Transformed Contemporary Art

Revised and expanded edition

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Shirin Neshat: Living between Cultures

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"I'm not satisfied with just explaining my culture. I don't want to be an ethnographic artist." SHIRIN NESHAT¹

In the early 1990s, when Shirin Neshat was emerging as an artist, the art world was caught up in a fascination with the "other." After decades in which an "international" exhibition meant one confined almost exclusively to American and European artists, with the occasional Japanese thrown in for spice, artists from every corner of the globe began to be seen and celebrated. This was the consequence of several factors—the end of the Cold War, which opened up previously closed borders to trade and tourism; the acceleration of technological discoveries that made travel and communication infinitely easier; and, in the art world, the collapse of various paradigms valorizing straight white European or American males over all other groups.

Neshat, an Iranian woman whose early work deliberately employed symbols associated with her culture, was swept up into this embrace of otherness. During most of the 1990s her photographs, videos, and films centered around images of women in black chadors, the enveloping garment worn (sometimes voluntarily, sometimes under duress) by women in Islamic societies throughout the world. From the perspective of a Western audience (and due to the political situation, her work could not be seen in her native country), Neshat was viewed as a messenger from an exotic world. But in fact, critiques that situated her within what would later, post-9/11, be dubbed "the clash of civilizations" and acclaimed her as a symbol of resistance to Iranian repression, miss much of the complexity of her work. Instead, over the years, it has become clear that she uses her position as an Iranian woman artist to speak to a wide range of personal and social issues and to express her point of view from the intersection of many overlapping identities.

It has been Neshat's fate to live a life inextricably bound up with politics and geopolitical upheaval. She was born in 1957, just four years after the CIA-assisted coup that replaced Iran's first democratically elected government with Shah Reza Pahlavi, a leader more sympathetic to Western interests. While the Shah's regime was beneficial to the class of educated, Western-leaning Iranians to which her family belonged, the manner of its instatement left a festering resentment, especially among those who were not sharing the fruits of the country's alignment with the West. In 1975 Neshat left Iran to go to art school at the University of California at Berkeley. She found herself stranded in America in 1977 when the Iranian revo-

lution replaced the Shah with an Islamic fundamentalist government headed by the Ayatollah Khomeini.

For the next thirteen years Neshat was not able to return home. From distant America she received news about further upheavals and conflicts involving her native country. These included the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979 by Islamic militants and the fourteen-month-long hostage crisis that followed, resolved just after Ronald Reagan took office as president. From 1980 to 1988 Iran was engaged in a war with neighboring Iraq. The U.S. covertly funded Iraq, hoping to create a bulwark against the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in the region. The 1989 death of Khomeini ushered in an era of relative liberalization in Iran, which, though still an Islamic state, seemed to be growing more amenable to outside influences.

During these years, Neshat finished school, moved to New York, and married a Korean curator, Kyong Park, who was director and founder of an alternative space called the Storefront for Art and Architecture. The Storefront, located in downtown Manhattan, was a laboratory for innovative art projects involving politics, architecture, art, and progressive notions about public space. It was a place of intellectual ferment and experimentation and served Neshat well as a kind of second education in contemporary art. During this period, she became a mother, helped Park run the space, and worked closely with numerous artists, architects, theorists, and curators. However, for over a decade, she put aside the idea that she herself might become an artist.

In 1990 Neshat returned to Iran for the first time since the revolution and found the country greatly changed. The cosmopolitan, Westernized Iran she remembered had been transformed into a thoroughly Islamicized culture in which women were required to wear chadors, the old Persian street names had been changed to Muslim and Arabic ones, and the once-open mixing of the sexes was forbidden. The distance between her memories and the current realities had an enormous impact on Neshat, and when she returned to the U.S. she began to make art. Instead of painting, the medium she had studied at Berkeley, she turned to photography. This led to her first widely acclaimed body of work, *Women of Allah*, a series of black-and-white photographs that depict Neshat, clad in a chador. She covered the parts of the photograph that expose parts of her body (which by Islamic law were confined to feet, hands and face) with inscriptions of Farsi poetry written by Iranian women poets such as Forough Farukhzad and Tahereh Saffarzadeh. The poems range in content from explorations of female desires and fears to militant calls for women's participation in the Iranian revolution. In photographs from the *Women of Allah* series, the focus is on Neshat's text-covered face or hands, while in others she assumes more provocative stances, brandishing a rifle as in *Rebellious Silence* (see p. 249), and even, in one photo, using her bare feet as a support as she aims the gun barrel at the viewer.

These works were Neshat's reactions to the changed status of women in Iran's Islamic society. They make note, on one hand, of the mandated female uni-

form, and on the other, of the role played by women in the revolution and the war against Iraq. Neshat was particularly interested in women's part in the perpetuation of the ideal of politically motivated martyrdom in a religious state. In retrospect, Neshat criticizes these works for what she sees as their neutral and even romanticized view of women's place in a revolutionary society. Western commentators, however, were more inclined to read into them a critique of Iranian society's violence and repression of women. In such readings, Neshat became a champion of Western ideals of individuality, secularism, and sexual equality.

These works entered the American art scene in 1993, and their appearance coincided with a growing interest in multiculturalism and globalism. Critics and curators focused on notions of cultural difference, seeking voices from outside the art mainstream to better represent a decentered world. From this perspective, *Women of Allah* seemed to offer a glimpse of unassimilatable "otherness," and the series' focus on the veil underscored the Muslim world's apparent distance from the West.

For Western observers Neshat's work pulled back a curtain on a hidden world. She focused attention on the desires and ambitions of the otherwise invisible category of Muslim women, placing them in both a personal and political context. At the same time, her apparent critique of female oppression in Iran seemed to reinforce Western values of freedom, autonomy, and individuality. Hence much of the early commentary on her work emphasized its feminist and political underpinnings.

However, as a number of more perceptive commentators began to point out, this interpretation depended on the reduction of the Islamic veil to a emblem of repression. In fact, as writers such as Hamid Dabashi have pointed out, the Islamic veil is a supple and multilayered artifact.² The Arabic word for *veil* is *hijab*, or curtain, pointing to the fact that it marks the border between different realms. In Islamic cultures these borders include the boundaries between public and private space, between sacred or secular realms, and between Islamic culture and the outside world.

As a result, the *hijab's* meanings shift by context. Prior to the Iranian revolution in 1977, the *hijab* had all but disappeared, even in rural areas, where it made work in the fields impractical. When women in Tehran began to don the *hijab* in 1977, it initially served as a revolutionary emblem, signifying the solidarity of these urban and often highly educated women with the ideals of the revolution. It was only after wearing of the *hijab* became mandatory under Khomeini that Iranian women began to chafe at their increasingly restricted lifestyles. After the Iranian revolution, the imposition of the veil was just one of a number of laws that mandated the separation of men and women and limited women's ability to move freely in public. However, in the Western world, the wearing of the veil often retains its symbolic meaning as a statement of resistance to Western hegemony. This is evident in the furor that resulted in France in 2003 when the government banned the wearing of the *hijab* in schools, and in 2000 in Turkey, when an elected member of Parliament was expelled for refusing to remove her *hijab*.



Turbulent, 1998. Film still.
Photo: Larry Barns

In Neshat's next series of works, these complexities became more evident. In 1996, on one of her trips to Iran, she was detained and questioned at the airport, after which she felt it was no longer safe for her to return. This experience helped erode the neutrality that she had been attempting to maintain in her works and turned her toward a more nuanced study of the meaning of her Islamic heritage. Around this time, her marriage was also ending, another circumstance that forced her to reexamine her relationship with her past. Turning to video, she began to explore issues of authority, power, and masculine prerogative as embedded in the social structure and even the architectural spaces of Iran.

The first such work was *Shadow under the Web* (1997), which she filmed in Istanbul—this and subsequent videos were all filmed outside Iran, in landscapes that evoked the native country from which she felt exiled. Neshat filmed herself wearing a black chador and running across four screens through spaces that represented the private, public, sacred, and natural realms. To the sound of heavy breathing, we

see her traverse sites ranging from mosques and plazas to city streets, marketplaces, and urban gardens. The work expressed the Islamic world's gendering of spaces, which are divided into the territories dominated by men or women.

This is an idea that receives fuller articulation in the three video works that followed. These works, *Turbulent*, *Rapture*, and *Fervor*, form a remarkable trilogy. Completed between 1998 and 2000, they represent Neshat's first fully mature work. In these video installations Neshat uses multiple screens to draw the viewer into the work. *Turbulent* (1998), which is presented as a ten-minute loop, comprises two separate but synchronized video narratives presented on opposite sides of a darkened gallery (opposite). One is a black-and-white video of an Iranian man in Western dress who sings an ancient Persian love song to a packed auditorium; Iranian viewers would recognize the words as a love poem by the great thirteenth-century mystic Rumi. (The performer is Shoja Youssefi Azari, who has been Neshat's companion and continuing collaborator on all subsequent projects.) At the end of the performance the all-male audience explodes into applause. Facing this is a screen depicting an Iranian woman dressed in the traditional chador and singing a strange, wordless song to an empty auditorium (she is played by composer and singer Sussan Deyhim, creator of the song and another continuing collaborator). Her song, full of cries, wails, and guttural utterances, is deeply affecting, and the absence of an audience is heartbreaking. The contrast between the two scenes is enhanced by a device that creates a visual bridge between them. The two videotapes are coordinated so that each singer, after completing the performance, pauses and watches silently as the other sings.

Turbulent contrasts the very different realms inhabited by men and women in Iranian society. It suggests a world in which men are empowered with language, while women are speechless, though not without voice. Yet, despite the woman's apparently inferior status, it is clear that her song is the more powerful. Her isolation gives her a freedom of expression that the man, as he respectfully watches her perform, seems to envy. In an interview with *Time*, Neshat noted, "It [*Turbulent*] was inspired by the fact that women are forbidden from performing or recording music [in Iran]... If music is an expression of mysticism and spirituality, how interesting that the man could have that experience but the woman could not. The woman [in *Turbulent*] breaks all the rules, first by appearing in a theater where she's not supposed to be. But then her music breaks all the norms of classical music. It's not tied to language. It's improvised. So we create a sense of opposites... but we also speak about how women reach a certain kind of freedom, how women become incredibly rebellious and unpredictable in this society whereas men end up staying within the conformed way of living."³

Rapture, a thirteen-minute video installation completed the next year, is also presented on two facing screens presenting male and female perspectives and edited so the two groups seem to be reacting to each other (pp. 254, 255). Here the interplay is more complex, as the protagonists on each side line up to face each other

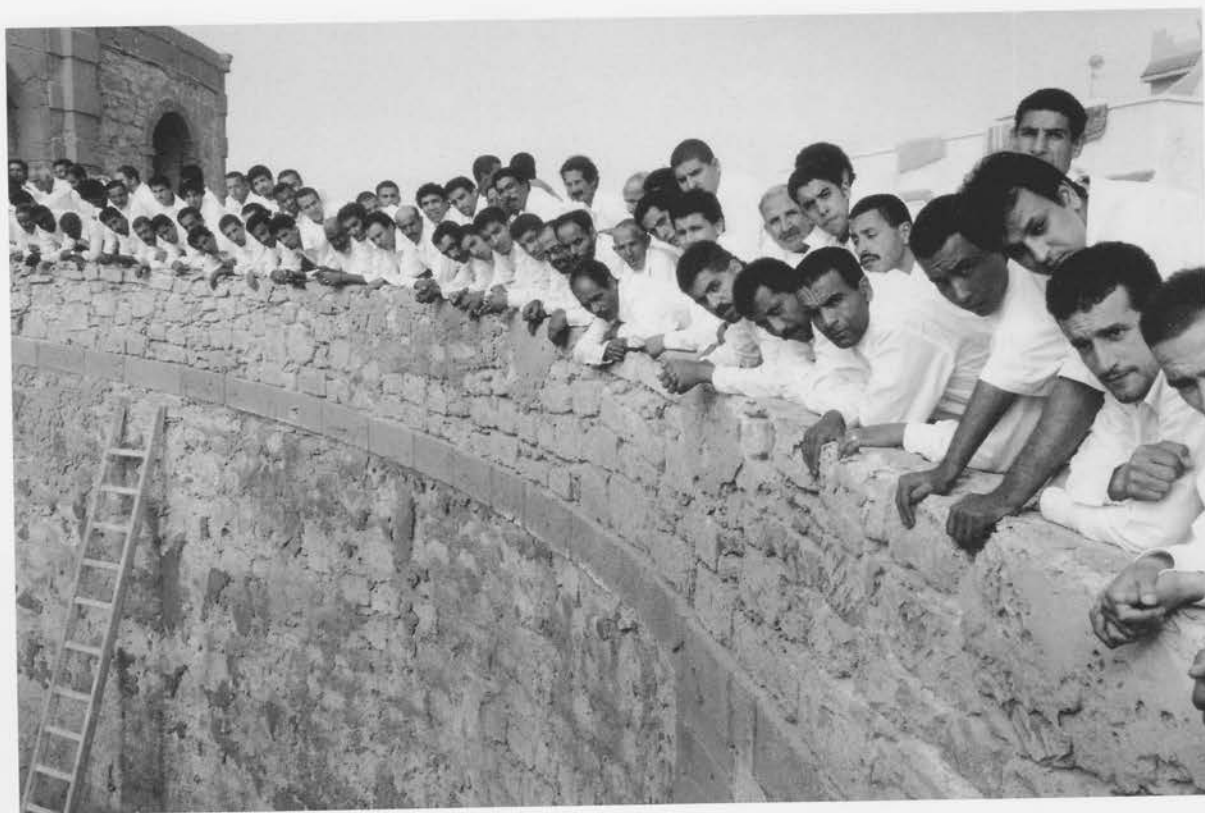


Above and opposite:
Rapture, 1999. Film stills.
 Photo: Larry Barns

at the onset of the videos and throughout periodically interrupt their activities to watch the other's activities on the facing screen.

On one screen, a large group of men wearing an identical uniform of Western white shirt and black pants move through the corridors and ramparts of an ancient fortress by the sea. On the other, an equally large group of women in black chadors move over a desert landscape to the sea. The men march purposefully through the fortress, engage in wrestling matches and wash their hands in preparation for ritual prayer. The women stride through the desert and line up before the camera to hold out tattooed hands, the only part of their body besides the face which Islamic law allows them to expose. Toward the end of the narrative, they pull a small wooden boat across the beach. Several women get in and push off to the open sea. At this moment, the men line the parapet and communally wave goodbye.

What might be a schematic representation of Islamic gender roles—with men identified with culture, authority, and modernity and the women associated with nature, isolation, and tradition—is deepened by the mournful beauty of the images. The women in black chadors, faceless and fleshless from a distance, fan out



across the desolate landscape or pull back together like a flock of birds. The men surge like a river through the ancient battlements, mutely line the parapet, or crouch in a circle for ritual hand washing, their gently undulating movements recalling the rustle of the petals of a giant blossom.

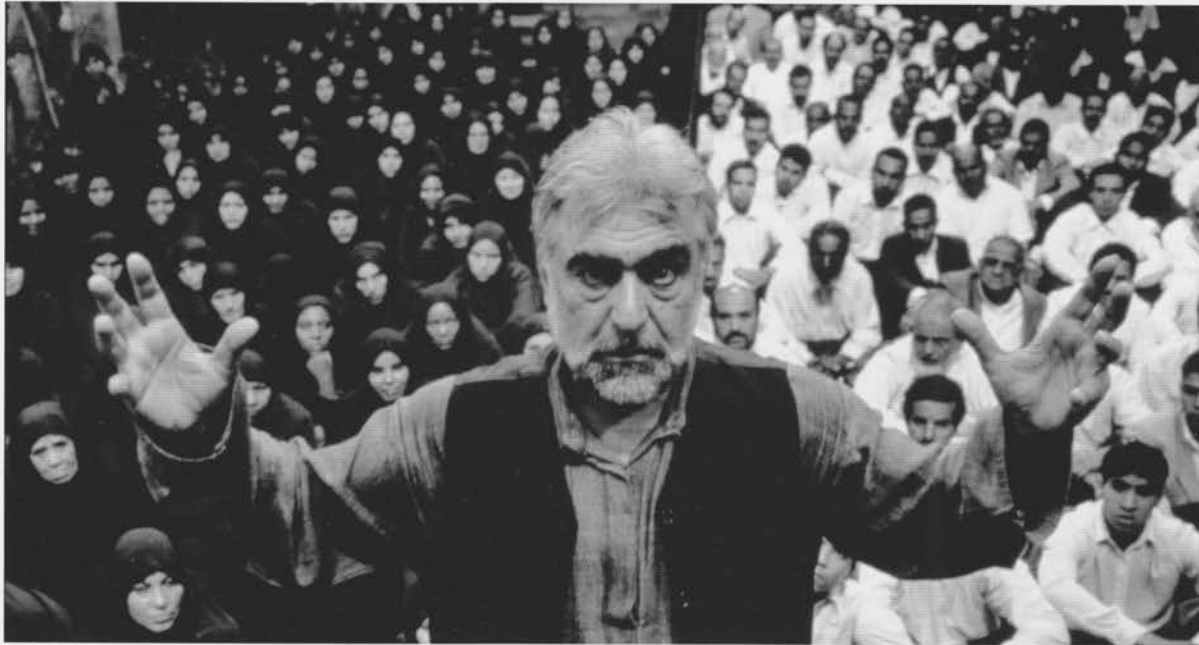
The message of the work is ambiguous. As in *Turbulent*, the apparently superior status of the male world is undercut by the anarchic freedom of the females. Nor is the outcome clear. The women's ultimate gesture of liberation—the launch of a tiny dingy crowded with a small coterie of their number, seems less an outright act of defiance than a symbol of sorrowful desperation. As the tiny craft sails out to the horizon, dwarfed by the ocean vastness, it is hard to say whether it is floating forward toward an uncertain secular future or back to the never-never land of the golden past.

The third work in this trilogy, *Fervor* (2000), is a ten-minute video installation (pp. 256, 257). Here split screens are lined up side by side so we view the male and female realms simultaneously. The action centers around a man and a woman who eye each other in passing on the street before ending up sitting on either side

of a large meeting room that has been partitioned by a curtain dividing male and female congregants from each other. In the front of the room, situated so he is visible to the men and women who cannot see each other, is a man preaching a sermon about sexual transgression. Though the Western viewer is given no translation, it is clear from his angry words and gestures, as well as from the discomfited reaction of the women, that his target is female wickedness. Like the speaker, the viewer is able to follow events on either side of the partition. We see that the man and woman seem to be communicating wordlessly, casting glances at each other that somehow penetrate the thick curtain. Suddenly the woman rises and flees the room. The man soon follows. Back on the street, they pass each other, but again are prevented by law and social custom from communicating.

Below and opposite:
Fervor, 2000. Film still.
Photo: Larry Barns





Fervor is marked by an undercurrent of sexual desire, made more intense by the way the narrative unfolds in a society in which the interactions of men and women are strictly regulated. This work, more than *Turbulent* or *Rapture*, also underlines the role that religion plays in defining these interactions. As Neshat notes, "In Iran, you can't separate religion from anything else. Everything is controlled by religion. It defines space, the relationship between men and women, the nature of sexuality, changes in human behavior and the way you are supposed to think about other races."⁴

These three works gained Neshat a huge international reputation; *Turbulent* was awarded the prestigious Golden Lion prize at the 1999 Venice Biennale. They also made it more difficult for commentators to peg her simply as a purveyor of identity politics. It was increasingly clear that Neshat was using her experiences as an Iranian woman exiled to the West in deeply original ways, drawing on her experiences to explore larger personal and social issues. After all, as an exile who left her country as a student, her vision of Iran was anything but documentary. Instead, Neshat's Iran is as much a creation of her imagination and memory as it is of any concrete, verifiable reality. As she explained to one interviewer, "I'm interested in juxtaposing the traditional with the modern, but there are other more philosophical aspects that interest me as well—the desire of all human beings to be free, to escape conditioning, be it social, cultural, or political, and how we're trapped by all kinds of iconographies and social codes."⁵



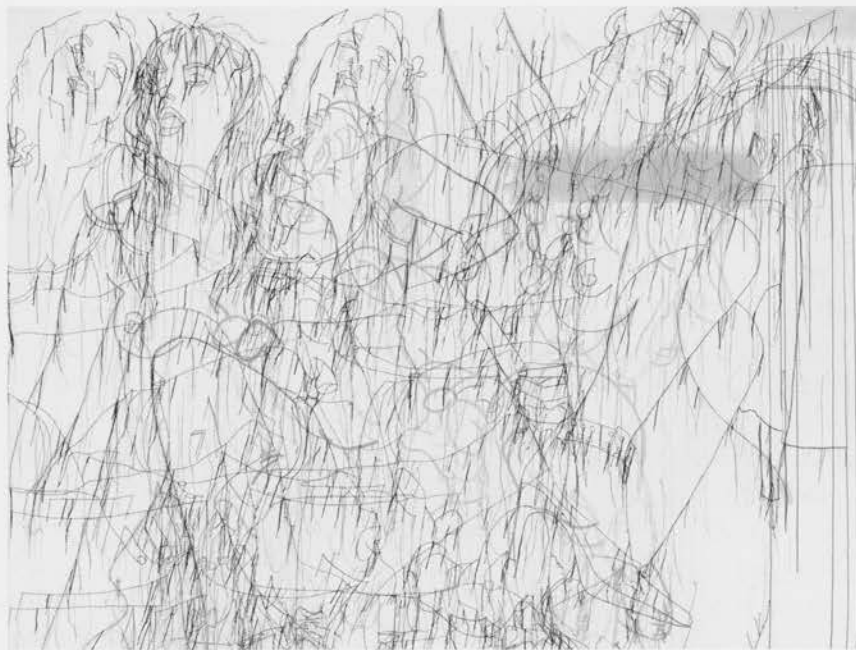
Soliloquy, 1999. Film still.

Photo: Larry Barns

While working on this trilogy (which only emerged as a trilogy in retrospect), Neshat also created *Soliloquy* (1999) (above), a split-screen two-channel video intended to mirror her own increasingly divided sense of self. By immersing herself in narratives based on the post-revolutionary Iranian reality, she was increasingly aware of the ways her years in the West had made her a stranger to that world. In *Soliloquy*, she eschews actors, instead presenting herself in various landscapes that signify the contrasting and possibly irreconcilable worlds of Iran and the West. Also shot in Turkey (again a surrogate for Iran) and the United States, it highlights the distance between these two worlds. Neshat is a solitary wanderer through barren landscapes, crowded plazas, ancient architectural structures, modern highways, and postmodern buildings, apparently never at home anywhere. Thus the work becomes a metaphor not only for her own conflicted inner life, but also for the divisions between the Islamic and Western worlds. Neshat's reliance in these works on such dichotomies as Islam/West, male/female, and tradition/modernity



SHAHZIA SIKANDER
Who's Veiled, Anyway?, 1997. Vegetable color, watercolor, dry pigment, and tea wash on wasli paper, 14 x 11 in. (35.6 x 27.9 cm).
 Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co.



GHADA AMER
Knotty but Nice, 2005. Acrylic, embroidery, and gel medium on canvas, 108 x 144 in. (274.3 x 365.8 cm).
 © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2012.
 Photo: Rob McKeever, Courtesy of the artist and Gagolian Gallery, New York

led to charges that she was simply perpetuating stereotypes about the exotic East. Such critiques frequently invoked the concept of Orientalism first proposed by Palestinian critic Edward Said, which analyzes the Western tendency to reduce the Orient to a set of clichés based on Near Eastern cultures' supposed femininity, irrationality, and authoritarianism.⁶ This formulation, Said argued, made it easier for Western critics to dismiss non-Western cultures as inferior to those of the West.

But while Neshat was clearly working from a female perspective, she was less interested in political critiques or demonstrations of cultural superiority than in the complicated mix of spirituality, eroticism, and poetry at the heart of Islamic culture. The structure of her works, with their visual interplay between masculine and feminine perspectives, their use of poetry, music, and song, and their resort to complex visual and aural metaphors, reveals an ambition that goes far beyond ethnography or theory. She explains her aims thus: "Beauty has always been a major aspect of my work, partially because it is inherent in the nature of the Islamic tradition—it is an essential aspect of Islamic spirituality, particularly in the mysticism associated with Islam such as the Sufi tradition, in which beauty is a fundamental vehicle of meditation with God. We are told, 'God loves beauty' and therefore, so much focus is given to creating beauty. Beauty is a mediator between human and divine. I have always stressed this aspect of my culture to neutralize some other rather negative associations with the Islamic cultures, such as violence. I still use that tactic continuously in my work."⁷

Passage, 2001. Film still





Neshat's focus on the sensual side of Islam mirrors that of several other women artists from Muslim backgrounds. Egyptian-born artist Ghada Amer creates apparently abstract embroidered canvases in which colorful fields of twisting thread only partially conceal delicately embroidered line drawings based on images from porn magazines. While these are in part a send up of the ejaculatory excesses of macho Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, they are also related to eroticism concealed behind the Muslim veil.

In a similar way, Shahzia Sikander, who was raised in Pakistan and lives now in the United States, takes on Western stereotypes about sexuality and Islam. She studied miniature painting techniques as an art student in Pakistan,

Possessed, 1998.
Film still.
Photo: Larry Barns

where she became adept at mingling the supposedly antithetical styles of Hindu Rajput painting with Muslim Mughal miniatures (p. 259). Mixing motifs from both these traditions along with images from Western art, she creates a representation of female beauty that crosses cultures. In her works the Muslim veil, which may serve as a diaphanous cover for a female nude, is as much about revealing as concealing. Instead of serving as a symbol of female oppression, it becomes a celebration of femininity.

With such works, Amer and Sikander join Neshat in looking beyond the specifics of the female role in Islamic culture. Instead, all three take aim at worldwide taboos against the expression of female sexual pleasure. Neshat's interest in beauty, eroticism, and mysticism become even more evident in her second trilogy—a set of videos created in 2000 that delve more closely into the inner lives of their protagonists and dispense with the formal and conceptual division of space into male and female realms. With the presentation of these works, it was no longer possible to interpret her work as a simple statement about female oppression in Iran or as a call for resistance to the authoritarian rule of the Imams.

Instead, these works create haunting, psychologically charged scenarios that deliberately eschew simple lessons. With *Passage* (2001) (p. 260), a single-channel, thirty-five-minute film, Neshat eschews her usual black and white palette for color. In this work a mesmerizing Philip Glass score commissioned for the piece accompanies a meandering narrative that alternates between the advance of a group of men carrying aloft a body dressed in white and depictions of a group of women in chadors gathered around a grave. The men wind across the desert (the work was filmed in Morocco) toward the women, who are digging in the sand. Eventually stopping not far from the women, the men lay the body on the ground. A third component enters as we see a small child in the foreground who plays at a distance from the women. She arranges stones in a circle and lays twigs as if to build a fire. Finally, the camera pulls back to encompass men, women and child in a single shot. Fire erupts from the child's pyre and creates a ring of flames encircling the still separate groups of adults.

This work, created in part as a response to nightly news images of the escalating conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis, is also a broader meditation on death and mourning, and was completed not long after the death of Neshat's father. The introduction of the child, who seems to stand outside the action and may represent the possibility of rebirth and renewal, presents a change from the dynamic of the works in the previous trilogy, with their call and response between the male and female realms. Here gender differences are less important than a sense of the continuity of life in the face of tragedy.

Possessed (2000) (p. 261), is a single-channel nine-and-a-half-minute video. This work, which returns to the stark contrast of black and white, focuses on a disturbed woman who wanders the streets of a notionally Iranian city. Unlike the properly veiled women on the street, her hair is uncovered and uncombed and

she wears an embroidered caftan rather than the mandated chador. The camera focuses first on her distraught face and then follows her through crowded streets to a crowded public square. Her screams and erratic behavior draw a crowd. As some bystanders attempt to subdue and others to protect her, her madness seems to transfer itself to the crowd. In the ensuing melee, she manages to slip away unnoticed, leaving the mob to rail loudly in her absence.

Issues that have long preoccupied Neshat return here, but in modified forms. Here the gender-based boundary between public and private space is breeched by the action of a woman who seems at home in neither sphere. In this, she serves as a symbol of exile, which has become increasingly important to Neshat as she finds herself excluded psychologically and physically from the world of her childhood. Her madness might also be seen, as Neshat herself has noted, as a metaphor for the

Pulse, 2001. Film still.
Photo: Larry Barns



creative madness of the artists, whose expressions may be seen by unsympathetic observers as lunatic ravings.⁸

On the other hand, while the woman in *Possessed* exhibits aberrant behavior, it is not at all clear whether this behavior is voluntary. This distinguishes it from the actions in *Turbulent* and *Rapture*, where women push against the limits of their role with full consciousness of their transgressiveness. Instead, *Possessed* looks ahead to future works in which Neshat would return to the theme of female madness and the traps laid by social expectations.

The third work in this trilogy is *Pulse* (p. 263), an eight-and-a-half minute color film. Here, in place of a dialogue between public and private space, we find ourselves in the bedroom of a young woman as she dreamily sings along to the strains of a religious love song wafting from the radio. The male world enters only through the voice of the male singer, where it serves simply as backdrop. This single channel work has been filmed in a single take as the camera meanders through the shadows, finally resting on a view of the woman, sitting with her back to us in a shaft of light, her face unseen behind a cascade of black hair.

Tooba, 2002. Film still.
Photo: Larry Barns





Taken together, the works in this second trilogy offer a meditation on the nature of freedom, which is achieved through death in *Passage*, through madness in *Possessed*, and through withdrawal in *Pulse*. By focusing on the possibility of individual freedom in a heavily controlled society, Neshat is able to move beyond the rigid dyads of East/West, male/female, and modern/traditional that formed an armature for her earlier work. As her characters become more fully rounded and begin to manifest interior lives, we begin to see the world through their eyes. In the process, they begin to suggest the commonality of human dreams and desires.

The Last Word, 2003.
Film still

With the second trilogy, Neshat found herself coming closer to the mechanics of traditional cinema and its coherent narratives and more fully developed characters. Although, as she notes, she was never trained in filmmaking (or in photography or video art, for that matter) she closely follows Iranian cinema and in particular the work of Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami, who has gained an international reputation for his poetic, lyrical films about everyday life in contemporary Iran. As she has progressed more deeply into this terrain, Neshat's works have become increasingly collaborative, and she works frequently with a team that includes Sussan Deyhim, photographer Ghasem Ebrahimian, and, of course, her companion, co-writer and sometime performer, Shoja Youssefi Azari.

However, in an important departure from cinema, Neshat's films rarely use language, and when they do, as in *Fervor*, the actual meaning of the words is less important than the cadences of the singing or chanting. Instead, Neshat substitutes



Zarin, 2005. Film still.
Photo: Larry Barns

music for the voices of her characters. Whether it is the mesmerizing Philip Glass score in *Passage*, the alternating musical performances in *Turbulent*, or the radio song in *Pulse*, music is crucial to the work's emotional effects. As Neshat told one interviewer, "The music is what is going on inside the characters' heads, we purposefully drop all speech, all realistic sounds. We see what's going on outside, we hear what happens inside."⁹

With *Tooba* (2002) (p. 264), Neshat moved even further from the cultural specificity of her earlier work. This two-channel color video, filmed in Mexico with

native Mexican actors, is in part a response to the horrors of September 11, 2001. It deals with the universal longing for a place of refuge, using the metaphor of the tree, or Tooba, as it is called in the Koran, which stands in paradise and provides sustenance and shelter for those in need. As in earlier works, there is a clash of realms here as a group of men mass and approach a giant tree, set off by a low adobe wall. Inside this boundary an old woman in black stands by the tree, her face and hands as lined as the ancient bark she leans against. The men line up along the outside of the wall and then leap over it, but the woman has already disappeared, apparently absorbed into the tree. In a magical way, this work dwells on the fragility of individuality threatened by the social mass, while also suggesting that there is, or should be, a necessary wall between the secular and sacred worlds.

Tooba is deliberately cross-cultural. Not only has Neshat abandoned any reference to the Muslim veil and for the first time used exclusively non-Muslim actors, the work also draws a connection between Koranic notions of paradise and the Mexican veneration of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who is also depicted and who serves as a symbol of Mexican liberation. As with Neshat's preceeding videos, the politics of *Tooba* are allusive rather than direct, though one may read into it various thoughts about the meanings of freedom.

Neshat followed this with her most overtly political work, *The Last Word* (2003) (p. 265), which deals with the suppression of writers in her native country. Even with its political subtext, this video maintains a sense of mystery and poetry. It is a narrative about a woman who is evidently being interrogated and condemned by a group of men in a disheveled library/courtroom. The woman, who is free of the traditional chador, sits on one side of a wooden table while the men leaf through books and present open volumes as evidence of her turpitude. Dressed in white shirts, the men bustle about like busy ants while the woman sits silent and almost motionless before them. Then the chief interrogator unleashes a tirade in Farsi, after which the woman recites in her defense a poem, "The Window," by Iranian writer Forough Farokhzad, about the power of love. Even for those unacquainted with Farsi, the contrast between the music of her recitation and the angry diatribe of the man is obvious. She then stands up and silently departs.

This work, which was inspired in part by Neshat's own frightening interrogation seven years earlier, underscores the importance of poetry in Neshat's work. A feature of her early photographs, in which poetic texts were inscribed across her face and arms, it reappears at various moments (the love songs in *Turbulent* and *Pulse*, for instance) as a symbol of eroticism and mystery which no social or religious order can erase.

Neshat's most ambitious project to date is based on the 1989 novel *Women Without Men* by the Iranian novelist Shahrnush Parsipur. This story takes place in Iran in the 1950s, during the U.S.-assisted coup d'état that replaced Iran's first democratically elected government with the Shah. The book follows five Iranian women from different classes, illuminating personal dilemmas that intersect only

marginally with the larger political upheaval. Nevertheless, a sense of strife dominates Neshat's telling of the story, as each woman deals with her individual brand of madness. Finally, their very different conflicts bring them all together in a paradisiacal garden, where, it is suggested, redemption may be possible. Because of its outspoken depiction of the lives of women and the explicit treatment of sex and desire, the book was banned in Iran and Parsipur was imprisoned for five years.

Neshat has presented this narrative in two formats. Each woman's individual story has been the subject of an independent video installation and the whole story, much modified, is the subject of Neshat's first feature-length film. The individual videos function as character studies, one centered on the tale of Mahdokht, a woman in her forties who is deeply sexually repressed, yet consumed by an obsession with fertility (below). She escapes to her family garden and, in an echo of *Tooba*, attempts to transform herself into a tree. Finally, in an image that deliberately recalls John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (1851–52), she is seen floating motionless in a pond, overlaid with fragmented images of her past and feverish mental state.

Contrasting to this is the equally fantastic story of Zarin, a prostitute who one day descends into madness and is unable to distinguish the faces of her male clients, whose features fade and become an empty blur. In horror she flees to a bathhouse, where she attempts to scrub herself clean of her physical and mental transgressions (p. 266). In a frenzy watched with disgust by the other patrons of the bathhouse, she finally rubs until her skin is bloody, then wraps herself in a black robe. She then stumbles on to a mosque, only to discover that even there, the male worshippers have also been wiped clean of facial features.

Mahdokht from *Women Without Men* series, 2004.
C-print, 36 x 92 1/4 in.
(91.4 x 234.3 cm) framed





Women Without Men,
2009. Feature-film still

Other characters are more earthbound. They include Farrokh Legha, a wealthy older woman in the process of leaving her husband, who is a general; Munis, a young woman who yearns to leave the sheltered life enforced by her brother; and Faezeh, her deeply religious friend who longs to marry Munis's brother. But even these figures have their fantastical moments, as when Munis dies, is buried and then reborn when Faezeh digs her out of the earth, or when Faezeh's mind separates from her body when she is raped by soldiers.

To transform this material into a feature-length film (above), Neshat discovered that she had to alter many of her usual working methods. While videos and films share various elements, the film has much more material, shifting back and forth in time and blending reality and fantasy while fleshing out the story in a way that interweaves each woman's personal story with the tumultuous political events of 1953 Tehran. Working, for the first time, not just with her long time collaborator Shoja Azari, but with a whole team of producers, script consultants, editors, and writers, Neshat drew on her love of avant-garde film, in particular the works of Soviet filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky and more contemporary directors such as Hong Kong-based Wong Kar-wai. The demands of cinematic narrative required Neshat to

rework her materials in radical ways. The character of Mahdokht, for instance, was all but eliminated from the film, and is alluded to by the presence of an apparently magical tree in the garden. Other stories were expanded, and Munis, who evolves into a political activist, becomes the pivotal figure and offscreen narrator of the film.

Despite the film's more coherent narrative, it retains the dreamlike quality and poetic allusiveness of Neshat's videos. She suggests that this may be an inevitable effect of her own history and context, noting, "Magic realism seems to suit me well because generally I feel most comfortable with surrealism, a strategy not only to avoid the obvious but a way to make art that might transcend the specificities of time and place."¹⁰ In 2009 the film version of *Women Without Men* won the Silver Lion award for best director at the Venice Film Festival.

Neshat has continued to explore new formats in the ensuing years. As part of the 2011 Performa festival in New York, Neshat collaborated with Azari and his son, Behrang Azari, on a multimedia performance work titled *Overruled*. The work harkened back to Neshat's 2003 video *The Last Word*. These two works share a very similar plot line and visual environment but their messages are subtly different. Both works center around a trial presided over by a stern cleric. But while *The Last Word* is a jeremiad against the censorious authorities of Iran's contemporary theocracy and offers a plea for artistic freedom, *Overruled* takes on the meaning of spirituality itself. It opposes two views of religion—one hierarchical, authoritarian, and unforgiving and the other sensual, immersive, and grounded in experience rather than law. While the earlier work was based on the trial of Shahnush Parsipur, author of the novel *Women Without Men*, the later one used as its historical source the 10th-century trial of Sufi mystic Mansur Al-Hallaj, who was convicted of blasphemy and executed by dismemberment. In the performance, four actors, each representing a different aspect of the defendant, spar with the judge who invokes a fearsome, distant deity who speaks only through his human deputies. The defendants, by contrast, argue for an immanent God who exists in nature, the body, and the senses. And while the trial ends with a death sentence for the unrepentant defendant, the real verdict is issued through an electrifying musical interlude that silences judge, jury, and real life audiences with its evocative poetry and its non-verbal argument for the notion of freedom as an internal state which cannot be destroyed by external authorities.

This focus on individuals who appear, from the perspective of unbending religious or political authorities, to be mad, is a recurring theme in Neshat's work, having also been explored in *Possessed*. There is an interesting kinship between this aspect of her work and that of Finnish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila, who also explores the interior landscape of madness. Both artists focus on female characters, bringing us inside their heads, where both the terror and the beauty of their visions are evident. Neshat differs from Ahtila, however, in the way she suggests there are exterior social sources for the descent into irrationality. In Neshat's narratives, madness seems connected to a rigid and uncompromising social structure.

As a result, one has the sense that in Neshat's work, madness is not entirely a negative thing, aligned as it is with imagination, freedom, and creativity. Neshat draws a parallel between these extreme mental states and the effects of social, political, and mental restrictions. The madwoman becomes a metaphor both for the artist and for the exile, who like the lunatic, is an outsider who will not and cannot fit in. She remarks, "Living in your imagination, you develop an internal world based on the power of the imagination. When all else is controlled, the poverty of your possibilities becomes a source of creativity."¹¹

Neshat's development as an artist has paralleled the evolution of art world ideas about identity and globalism. From an early focus on cultural and ethnic identity, she has moved outward toward more universal themes and toward a recognition that all identities are necessarily hybrid.

Neshat's work reflects her multiple worlds, offering a powerful mix of personal, cultural, and cross-cultural references. She makes art through her identities as an Iranian and as a woman, but reshapes them to speak to larger issues of freedom, individuality, societal oppression, the pain of exile, and the power of the erotic. Mingling the personal with the political and expressions of identity based on gender with expressions of identity based on ethnicity—suggesting the tensions and convergences between East and West—she presents the experience of coexisting in many spheres. In this she offers a powerful model for the complexity of life in a global reality.

1. Leslie Camhi, "Lifting the Veil: Shirin Neshat Uses Video and Photographs to Explore the Status of Women in Islam," *ARTnews* 99 (February 2000): p. 151.
2. Hamid Dabashi, "Border Crossings: Shirin Neshat's Body of Evidence," in Dabashi, RoseLee Goldberg and Giorgio Verzotti, *Shirin Neshat* (Turin and Milan: Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea/Charta 2002).
3. Susan Horsburgh, "The Great Divide: An Interview with Shirin Neshat," *Time* 56, no. 9 (August 28, 2000).
4. *Shirin Neshat*, interview with the author, July 2006.
5. "Shirin Neshat," interview with Octavio Zaya, *Interview*, September 1999.
6. Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).
7. Shirin Neshat, interview with David Shapiro, *Artkrush*, September 2002.
8. "Shirin Neshat: Where Madness is the Greatest Freedom," interview with Adrian Dannatt, *The Art Newspaper* 12, no. 115 (June 2001): p. 76.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Eleanor Heartney, "Shirin Neshat, an Interview," *Art in America*, June 2009.
11. *Shirin Neshat*, interview with the author, July 2006.