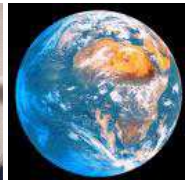




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## FOTOS

# SHIRIN NESHAT



Woman of Allah © Shirin Neshat

## Interview

John LeKay: I see that your work addresses political, sociological, psychological and spiritual dimensions; particularly in relation to an Islamic woman's point of view and much more. Have you shown your work recently in Iran or other regions near that part of the world and is one of your intentions to investigate or subvert stereotypes?

Shirin Neshat: It's been rather problematic to show my work in Iran both in respect to the nature of my work because of its controversial themes, and lack of appropriate venues. However, during the President Khatami's period when cultural censorship was briefly relaxed, the *Museum of Contemporary Art of Tehran*, headed by the courageous director, *Mr. Sami Azar*, took the risk and exhibited two of my videos, (2004 & 2005). This was indeed Iranians' first chance to see my work in person. Since then of course, with the new regime, all prospects of showing work such as mine are lost.

Of course, it's important for both my Western and Iranian audience to understand that while my work investigates social and political issues of Iran, it remains conceptual, not at all claiming to be 'actual' or 'realistic' about the subjects. Another important factor to keep in mind is that the work is made from the perspective of an Iranian living abroad, therefore it bears an exilic point of view.

My themes always seem to develop as a personal inquiry toward certain issues that I am faced with as an individual; for example my resentment and questions toward political powers or events such as the Islamic revolution (1979) that has determined the course of my life and so many other Iranians'. Consequently this path naturally has pulled me toward a larger cultural investigation, which I happen to care deeply about. Therefore, to properly analyze my work, one must always consider both its personal and social context that always run in parallel. Of course in process I seem to frame and raise many questions, which naturally bring me to investigate, confront and at times deconstruct all kinds of stereotypes such as the notion of 'orientalism'.

In regard to your other point, my interest in the subject of women is partially due to the fact that as a woman I feel closer and more sympathetic toward their situation living under oppressive societies. But also, because I believe in Islamic societies such as in Iran, by studying the predicament of the women, one could learn about the overall ideological structure of the political system that rules the country.



Guardians Revolution.© Shirin Neshat

JL: Your work is really beautiful, but also has this kind of exotic Sufi mystical undercurrent. Not only through the use of poetry and religious text imposed on many of the people's hands and faces, but also your choice of subject matter. How much of an influence has Islamic religion, or more esoteric sects like Sufism, or poets like Mowlana Jalaluddin Rumi or others, had on your work?

SN: I think what you sense in the work is an inherent aspect of my Iranian background and upbringing. Although I have lived many years in the West, it appears that my aesthetic and

sentiments remain effortlessly non-Western. I don't believe it's a conscious rather an intuitive tendency to see the world with an eye that is less rational but more emotional. As an Iranian, I grew up with literature of great masters, such as the mystic *Rumi*, *Hafiz*, *Khayam*, *Ferdousi*, to name a few. Iranians relate to poetry philosophically; in a way, it can easily be said that poetry becomes an expression of their existential angst, a way to cope and transcend the reality--the perpetual political oppression that they seem to endure by one dictatorship or another. In formulation of my art, I too seem to be constantly infusing important specific political themes with a poetic language that is timeless and universal.

JL: Your work brings to mind Hazrat Inyat Khan and his philosophy about the "music of life"; what philosophy do you follow when making your work?

SN: I don't follow any particular set of philosophy. Rather, I think my art becomes a canvas to face my own personal existential anxieties, and to raise questions regarding the world that I live in. Often this philosophical aim leads to the creation of specific characters or narratives that are melancholic or rather mystical. I've come to realize lately that all of my female protagonists are somewhat tragic, either 'mad', 'outcasts,' or a 'sinners.' In strange ways, none ever quite 'fit' the society, just like I remember Dervishes living on the streets of Iran, never seemed to belong to anywhere.

As a young person, I was always drawn to religion -- 'Islam' and the idea of a 'faith.' In fact I prayed daily even if I didn't understand the meaning of those Arabic words that I recited everyday. For us, religion functioned as a collective activity that offered emotional and psychological security and comfort. I remember as I arrived in the USA, and as my mild religious practice dissipated, came an overwhelming feeling of 'loss' and 'displacement,' that I have never completely recovered from.



JL: There is also a solemn sense loss and death in many of your earlier works; as well as violence - in the use of the gun etc. Would you say that this is a recurring theme and if so, why do you think this is?

SN: I see everything in the form of duality — paradoxical -- in the inevitable cycle of life/death, good/evil, beauty/violence. One side never exists without the suggestion of its opposite. For example in the “Women of Allah” photographic series, we are confronted with threatening images of women embracing the gun, yet there is something terribly submissive, erotic and sensual about the female bodies and gazes. In the videos, such as in “Passage” we are faced with a ritualistic scene of funeral where a group black outfitted men were in a journey delivering a corpse to a group of black veiled women in the heart of barren desert. Yet a young beautiful girl dressed in colorful clothes sits outside of the circle and watches the funeral from outside. For me the young girl and the eventual fire that breaks out surrounding the funeral are metaphoric representation of the notions of renewal, rebirth, revival, regeneration.

JL: How do you think your work is perceived in the East by Muslim men?



*I Am Its secret*, 1993

SN: With a lot more suspicion than Muslim women, since generally my work tends to always take side with the women.

JL: There is also this highly charged atmospheric eroticism that you create with the subtlest of gestures, light, shadow and in the hypnotic eyes of some of these beautiful women in your portraits. The eyes disclose a certain sexual danger, which maybe is a result of your investigation into taboos, regarding matters of concealment and exposure. What are your thoughts on this and do you think this could be a sublimation of something else?



*Mahdokht* © Shirin Neshat

SN: Part of what you are bringing up is not really how I depict Muslim women that makes them more sensual and erotic, rather how Western culture generally tends to mystify women behind veil. It seems ironic but true that the more a female body is covered, the more desirable it becomes. Therefore much of the credit goes to the phenomena behind Islamic culture that by controlling female sexuality, it ironically heightens the notions of temptation, desire and eroticism. In a way then, indulging into the 'forbidden' becomes the very heart of the pleasure for many.

In my work, indeed I very consciously put these issues at play and subversively question the power that these women hold through their 'tabooed' sexuality, and yet at times they themselves fall victim to it. For example in my recent film "Zarin" a young and beautiful prostitute suffers from anorexia and self-mutilates herself due to social and religious pressure. But in the "Women of Allah" photographic series, we are faced with self-assured and dignified women who seem proud both by the power of their militancy and sexuality.



Shirin Neshat Zarin 2005  
Production Still  
© 2005 Shirin Neshat  
Photo: Larry Barns

JL: Can you tell me about your creative process in terms of your photography; do you prefer working out of a studio or onsite?

SN: At the very beginning, with the “Women of Allah” photo series, I shot all the photos in my studio but ever since then, my work has been taking place outside of my studios, within my film productions.

JL: Is there any other artist or photographer that has had an influence on your work or that has inspired you?

SN: Not really. I admire many artists and follow their work very closely, but can't say I am influenced by them. I think these days, I find myself more influenced by filmmakers who in their work also incorporate a great deal of visual imagery, such as Andre Tarkovsky, and more contemporary directors such as Kar-Wai Wong.





Shirin Neshat Zarin 2005  
Production Still  
© 2005 Shirin Neshat  
Photo: Larry Barns

JL: Can you please tell me about the work at your latest exhibition "Zarin" at the Gladstone gallery and what this work means to you and how it differs from your earlier work?

SN: Stylistically and formally, "Zarin" became truly a challenge, since it took a big leap from my previous work and it became very cinematic and narrative. Most importantly, "Zarin" is a character driven film, an experience that I didn't have prior to it. In the past, for the most part, the characters of my films, whether singular or in a crowd, were treated more on symbolical--sculptural terms, without individual identities. But with "Zarin", the scenario was deeply psychological. I had to convey to my audience, how this woman suffered from self-image, and social, sexual taboos without the use of any words. Of course, I had the pleasure and luck of working with a superb actress who needed little direction; but certainly, I learnt a great deal in how I might expand my visual vocabulary into a more narrative style of filmmaking.

JL: What else are you working on?

SN: I am in the process of making my first feature length film. I have just finished re-adapting a novel into a script, written by an important female author Shahnush Parsipur, titled "Women Without Men". This novel is a well-known and controversial book that has been banned in Iran since the 1990's. The story is at once philosophical, political and mystical. This script has been a three year project. I have never written before; all my films were created by storyboards, so I have worked in collaboration with many professional script writers to produce this script.

The film takes place in 1953, during a CIA Coup in Iran. We are doing a lot of research regarding this period and the political history involved with this Coup. The scale of the film in general is quite massive in comparison to my past work, but making "Zarin" which is an aspect of this feature enabled me to gain the necessary confidence, experience and more importantly, to detect the style of the film. We are shooting the film in Morocco in the city of Casablanca and

Marrakesh, so I will have to spend several months there. The shooting hopefully will start sometime in late 2006.

Photos courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York

[www.gladstonegallery.com](http://www.gladstonegallery.com)

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