



Shirin Neshat/MATRIX 187 Turbulent

September 21 - November 12, 2000

**University of California
Berkeley Art Museum**

Shirin Neshat/MATRIX 187

The reality of contemporary feminism in Iran is that resistance is an essential part of a woman's experience. As a result, women are very tough, the exact opposite of the outside image we have of these women. My attempt has always been to reveal, in a very candid way, the layers of unpredictability and strength that are not so evident on the surface. — Shirin Neshat¹

Born in Qazvin, Iran, in 1957, Shirin Neshat moved to the United States when she was sixteen years old. She attended the University of California, Berkeley, earning her B.A., M.A., and M.F.A. here. In the past few years, Neshat, who used to work primarily in still photography, has begun to work in film. The issues explored in her film and video installations are both contemporary and timeless. She uses the specifics of her personal background and of Islamic culture to create works that communicate universal ideas about loss, meaning, and memory.

Film and video installations, arguably the fastest growing medium within contemporary art practice, have become ubiquitous—appearing everywhere from commercial galleries to international group exhibitions. The display of single, double, or multi-screen mural-size video projections shown in manufactured architectural environments is a strategy employed by such diverse artists as Doug Aitken, Stan Douglas, Tracey Moffatt, and Gillian Wearing. At the same time, many contemporary artists, including Anne Chu, Kerry James Marshall, Shahzia Sikander, and the late Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, use their work as a means to explore the balance of dual and often conflicting cultural roles and backgrounds. In her own extraordinary work, Shirin Neshat uses the former to achieve the latter, presenting a fresh and startling vision.

Neshat's work addresses the social, political, and psychological dimensions of women's experience in contemporary Islamic societies. More than one billion people, one-sixth of the world's population, follow the teachings of Islam, a word roughly translated as "the submission."² Neshat became fascinated with the situation of women in her native country after visiting Iran in 1990 for the first time since the rise of the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979. The gender politics of Islam—embodied by the image of the veiled woman—are often subjected to caricature in the West. Neshat's installations resist stereotypical representations, and instead explore the complex intellectual and religious forces shaping the identity of Muslim women throughout the world. Asked whether her work is polemical, Neshat says: "From the beginning I made a decision that this work was not going to be about me or my opinions on the subject. I put myself in a place of asking questions but never answering them. The main question and curiosity, however, was being a woman in Islam."³

In 1993, then working in the medium of still photography, Neshat began a series of images entitled *Unveiling*. In these seductive, controversial, life-sized, black and white



photographs, Neshat and other Iranian women are draped in *chadors*, the traditional black clothing worn by Islamic women which exposes only the eyes and hands, revealing solely those body parts allowed to be seen in public under Islamic law. Farsi script of texts by feminist Iranian women writers and poets or pro-Islamic writers covered the unveiled hands and feet. In her subsequent series, *Women of Allah* (1994), Neshat photographed herself in various poses holding a gun or rifle.

Neshat's MATRIX exhibition, the dual-screen sound and video installation, *Turbulent* (1998), for which she won an International Prize at the 1999 Venice Biennale, has an intoxicating and seductive power.⁴ The work was inspired by the artist's visit to Istanbul, where she encountered a young blind girl, one of many migrant workers from the provinces, trying to earn a living by singing on a street corner to the music of an off-tune electrical keyboard played by an older man. Although the lyrics were untranslatable, the girl's penetrating voice as she performed with closed eyes, without a formal stage or audience, seemed to Neshat the embodiment of the isolation of female singers in contemporary Iran, who are forbidden by Shiite Muslim laws to sing in public.⁵

In *Turbulent*, two black-and-white videos are simultaneously projected on opposite walls. As they begin, the title and the author of the work appear in Latin and English on one and in Arabic and Persian on the other. Then, one screen reveals a veiled woman standing with her back to the camera, while the other focuses on an auditorium filled with men uniformly dressed in white shirts and black pants. A male performer, Shoja Azari, similarly dressed, stands before them on the stage, his back to the audience. He begins to sing a classical Persian song with lyrics by thirteenth-century Sufi poet Jalal ed-Din Rumi. The soulful, incredulous voice is an overdub of the popular Kurdish-Iranian classical singer Shahram Nazeri. Although the text is about divine love, the music is so passionate that the piece might be mistaken for a secular love song, addressed to the woman. As the song concludes, the singer ignores the audience's applause and turns his attention to the opposite wall where the veiled woman, Iranian vocalist and composer Sussan Deyhim, begins to perform. Dressed in a *chador*, the female singer is seen standing in the same auditorium; the seats are empty, however, an allusion to the prohibition on women singing or playing music in public. The camera swirls around her as her face contorts with the rhythmic, guttural cries. Facing the rows of empty seats, she sings a wordless, sensuous, wailing lamentation, an abstract expression of loss. Deyhim has a penetrating, almost

Turbulent, 1998, video still. Photo courtesy of the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York, NY.



otherworldly voice, which makes the heart ache. Due to the rhythm and tension, or turbulence, inherent in the juxtaposition of these synchronized videos, despite Deyhim's facing an empty auditorium, Neshat creates a scenario in which her singing seems to mesmerize her male counterpart.

Turbulent captures the patriarchal nature of contemporary Iran while simultaneously addressing certain dualities—those of men and women, Farsi and English, East and West. Neshat examines the boundaries of specified gender roles in contemporary Iranian life and comments metaphorically on a society wrestling to reconcile the preservation of the past with the incorporation of change.

Turbulent is the first in what Neshat loosely describes as a trilogy of videos exploring related themes. Neshat continues the installation technique begun in *Turbulent* in her next work, *Rapture*, again projecting videos on opposite walls. By projecting images on opposing walls, Neshat engages the viewer, who stands in the middle of this work, in a visual conversation. The passivity associated with traditional cinematic situations is absent as the viewer actively experiences both screens. *Rapture* questions how mythic notions about the nature of femininity and masculinity might be reconciled with life in a society where the dominant male hierarchy strictly controls women and their activities.⁶ In one video, a group of men, all dressed in white shirts and black pants, parades into the enclosure of a fortress. Simultaneously, on the facing wall, the viewer sees a throng of women in black veils, or *chadors*, marching into the desert. The two groups interact, but minimally, primarily confining their actions to often gender-specific rituals: praying, *kelling* (a vocalization made by women through the use of the tongue), and wrestling. Neshat has set the scene so that the men appear entirely dependent on performing a litany of rituals in order to express their identity. In obvious contrast, the women wandering through the environment are uncomplicated and uninhibited. Looking out onto—and ultimately beyond—their immediate landscape and its corresponding reality, the women shape their own destiny by fleeing their community and embarking on a seaward voyage with an unknown end.⁷ Neshat explains, "Muslim men tend to conform more to the rules of society because the restrictions on them are less severe."⁸

The third work in this group is *Fervor*.⁹ The first of Neshat's installations to juxtapose the projections on the same wall instead of on opposing ones, *Fervor* encourages the viewer to construct a more associative relationship between the male and female protagonists.

Turbulent, 1998, video still. Photo courtesy of the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York, NY.



Following the classical paradigm of star-crossed lovers, *Fervor* records the intense physicality that can result from romantic emotion. In the videos, the characters make their way to a mosque to join their respective gender group. The increasingly animated, agitated crowds on the screens are witnessing the bombastic sermon of a charismatic preacher. While the sermon is in Farsi and thereby incomprehensible to the majority of Western viewers, the implication is of modesty, purity, and sexual restraint. Unnoticed by their peers, the male and female leads stare at each other longingly through the scrim that divides them. As in all of her work, Neshat leaves the narrative ambiguous. Yet the subject is another instance in Muslim society where, despite their individual hopes or desires, men and women continually fail to connect ideologically, emotionally, and, here, romantically.

The beauty and power of Neshat's work resides in the combination of saturated, sublime imagery and hypnotic, complex soundtracks. The lasting effect results not only from expanding perceptions and combating stereotypes, but the latent realization that the issues Neshat presents, seemingly exotic and culturally specific, are in fact essential and universal: identity, empowerment, and freedom.

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson
Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator

1 Conversation between Shirin Neshat and the author in the artist's studio in New York, May 9, 2000.
2 James Rondeau, "Shirin Neshat *Rapture*," Focus series brochure, [Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1999] first panel.
3 Ibid.
4 Neshat created *Turbulent* in collaboration with four Iranian artists: Ghasem Ibrahim, director of photography; Shoja Azari, an actor who plays the male singer; Shahram Nazari, a classical singer who provides the voice for Azari's character; and, Sussan Deyhim, a vocalist and composer who plays the role of the female performer.
5 Neery Melkonian, "Shirin Neshat *Turbulent*," [New York: Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, 1998] p. 9.
Women do, however, participate in other spheres of contemporary Muslim society including the military, politics, education, and filmmaking. Ironically, prior to the enforcement of these laws under the Khomeini regime, female singers in Iran represented a rich tradition dating back 150 years to the decline of the Ottoman Empire.
6 Rosa Martinez, "Looking for a Place: The Third International Biennial," [Santa Fe: Site Santa Fe, 1999] p. 30.
7 Ronald Jones, "Sovereign Remedy," *Artforum*, October 1999, vol. 38, no. 2, p. 112.
8 Leslie Camhi, "Lifting the Veil," *ARTnews*, February 2000, vol. 99, no. 2, p. 151.
9 Neshat's newest video, *Sallioquy*, is her most autobiographical and tells the story of a Muslim woman who is in constant negotiation between East and West, between tradition and present-day pressures.

Rapture Series (Men Seated on Circle [ablution]), 1999, color photograph, 40 x 60 inches. Photo courtesy of the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York, NY.



Shirin Neshat was born in 1957 in Qazvin, Iran. She attended the University of California, Berkeley, where she received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1979; her Master of Arts degree in 1981; and her Master of Fine Arts degree in 1982. Currently, Neshat lives and works in New York City.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2000
Serpentine Gallery, London, U.K.
Pitti Discovery, Florence, Italy
Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, Austria
Wexner Center, Columbus, OH

1999
Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
D'Amelio Terras Gallery, New York, NY
Henie Onstad Artsentre, Oslo, Norway
Malmö Konsthall, Malmö, Sweden

1998
Tate Gallery, London, U.K.
Whitney Museum of American Art, Phillip Morris Branch, New York, NY
Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris, France

1997
Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco, CA
Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana, Slovenia
Lumen Travo, Amsterdam, Holland
Artspeak, Vancouver, Canada

1996
Centre d'Art Contemporain Kunsthalle, Fribourg, Switzerland
Marco Noire Contemporary Arts, Turin, Italy
Lucio Amelio Gallery, Naples, Italy
Haines Gallery, San Francisco, CA

1995
Annina Nosei Gallery, New York, NY

1993
Franklin Furnace, New York, NY

Rapture Series (Women on Beach Scattered), 1999, color photograph, 40 x 60 inches. Photo courtesy of the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York, NY.



Selected Group Exhibitions

2000
The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh Festival, Edinburgh, Scotland
"Continental Shift," Ludwig Forum, Aachen, Germany
"Kwangju Biennale," Kwangju, Korea
"Whitney Biennial," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY

1999
"Shirin Neshat: Rapture/Pipilotti Rist: Sip My Ocean," The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA
"Project 70: Shirin Neshat, Simon Patterson, Xu Bing," The Museum of Modern Art New, York, NY
"La Biennale di Venezia," curated by Harald Szeemann, Venice, Italy
"Exploding Cinema," Rotterdam Film Festival, Boijman Museum, Rotterdam, Holland
"Video Cultures," curated by Ursula Frohne, ZKM/Museum of Contemporary Art, Karlsruhe, Germany
"La Ville, Le Jardin, La Memoire," curated by Carolyn Christov Bakargiev and Hans Ulrich Obrist, Villa Medici, Rome, Italy
"SITE SANTA FE: Looking for a Place," curated by Rosa Martinez, Santa Fe, NM

1998
"Unfinished History," curated by Francesco Bonami, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
"Transatlantic," curated by Octavio Zaya, Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno, Canary Islands, Spain
"Genders and Nations: Reflections on Women in Revolution," curated by Salah Hassan, Johnson Museum, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY

1997
"On Life, Beauty, Translations and Other Difficulties," 5th International Istanbul Biennale, curated by Rosa Martinez, Istanbul, Turkey
"Trade Routes: History and Geography," 2nd Johannesburg Biennale 1997, curated by Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya, Johannesburg, South Africa
"Triple X: Contemporary Investigating Arts," International Art Festival, Amsterdam, Holland

1996
"Jurassic Technologies Revenant," Sydney Biennial, curated by Lynne Cooke, Sydney, Australia
"Inclusion/Exclusion," curated by Peter Weibel, Kunstlerhaus, Graz, Austria
"Imaginary Beings," curated by Jeannette Ingberman and Papo Colo, Exit Art, New York, NY

Selected Catalogues and Publications

Continental Shift: A Voyage Between Cultures, Ludwig Forum Aachen, Aachen, Germany, 2000.
The 2000 Whitney Biennial, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, 2000.
Cream: Contemporary Art in Culture, Phaidon Press, London, U.K., 1999.
Shirin Neshat, Marco Noire Contemporary, Turin, Italy, 1997.
Échoes: Contemporary Art at the Age of Endless Conclusions, edited by Francesco Bonami, The Monacelli Press, New York, 1996.

Fervor, 2000, production still. Photo courtesy of the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York, NY.



Selected Bibliography

Alimanestianu, Irina. "Shirin Neshat," *Art issues*, September/October 1999, no. 59, pp. 49-50.
Bertucci, Lina. "Shirin Neshat," *Flash Art*, November-December 1997, vol. XXX, no. 197, pp. 84-87.
Camhi, Leslie. "Lifting the Veil," *Artnews*, February 2000, vol. 99, no. 2, pp. 148-151.
Danto, Arthur C. "Pas de Deux, en Masse: Shirin Neshat's Rapture," *The Nation*, June 28, 1999, vol. 268, no. 24, pp. 33-36.
Gellatly, Andrew. "Just add water," *frieze*, September-October 1999, pp. 67-70.
Jones, Ronald. "Sovereign Remedy," *Artforum*, October 1999, vol. 38, no. 2, pp. 111-113.
Miller, Paul. "Motion Picture: Shirin Neshat's Turbulent," *Parkett*, 1998-99, no. 54, pp. 156-160 [English], 161-164 [German].
Saltz, Jerry. "New Channels: Shirin Neshat & Doug Aitken," *Village Voice*, January 12, 1999, vol. 44, no. 1, p. 113.
Schjeldahl, Peter. "Pragmatic Hedonism," *The New Yorker*, April 3, 2000, pp. 94-95.
Schorr, Collier. "Turbulence and Rapture," *Harper's Bazaar*, May 1999, no. 3450, p. 152.
Wallach, Amei. "Shirin Neshat: Striking a Balance Between Western and Islamic Values," *The New York Times*, November 21, 1999, Arts & Leisure, pp. 42-43, 46.
Zaya, Octavio. "Shirin Neshat," *Interview*, September 1999, pp. 164-166.

Work in MATRIX

Shirin Neshat
Turbulent, 1998
Video installation, black-and-white, sound; 10 minutes.
Courtesy of the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

Please Note:
Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson will give a curator's walkthrough of the exhibition on Thursday, September 21, 2000, at 12:15 p.m.
Behrouz Sadeghian and Mohamad Sayareh will perform classical Persian music on Sunday, September 24, 2000, at 3 p.m. in Gallery D.
Shirin Neshat will give an artist's talk on Sunday, November 5, 2000, at 3:00 p.m.

The MATRIX Program at the UC Berkeley Art Museum is made possible by the generous endowment gift of Phyllis Wattis.

Additional donors to the MATRIX Program include the UAM MATRIX Council Endowment, Ann M. Hatch, and the California Arts Council.

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cover: *Untitled (Turbulent series)*, 1998, black and white photograph, 11 x 14 inches. Photo courtesy of the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York, NY.

Untitled (Turbulent series), 1998, black and white photograph, 40 x 60 inches. Photo courtesy of the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York, NY.

above: *Fervor*, 2000, production still. Photo courtesy of the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York, NY.