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Artist Shirin Neshat: 'If America was once the world of dreams for foreigners, Donald Trump wants to purify it'

For Iranian-American artist Shirin Neshat's latest work, Land of Dreams, people opened their doors and lives to her

By [Hettie Judah](#)

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Shirin Neshat 'literally went and knocked on doors', introducing herself and asking if she could take people's portraits (Photo: Vittorio Zunino Celotto/Vittorio/Getty)

For as long as I've known of her, the artist **Shirin Neshat** has worn a thick line of kohl painted beneath each eye. She is, anyway, an arresting woman, but the positioning of these emphatic marks beneath her eyes seems to make a point that goes beyond the cosmetic, as if to say: look, here is where the important stuff happens.

Neshat has worked with photography and film since the mid-90s. Born in Iran in 1957, she moved to the US as a student: the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979 would stop her returning to her country of birth for almost 20 years. Her breakthrough series – *Women of Allah* (1993-7) – explored the complexities that lay behind sensational images of gun-toting female revolutionaries. She has turned her attention increasingly to film – directing features *Women Without Men* (2009) and *Looking for Oum Kulthum* (2017); nevertheless Neshat has just been announced as the honorary master of photography for this year's edition of Photo London.

When we meet she is exhausted and sleep-deprived: not-so-fresh off a flight from LA where she was closing a stellar retrospective at The Broad museum. We have only spoken a couple of times before, but she embraces me like an old friend, without pretence or preamble.

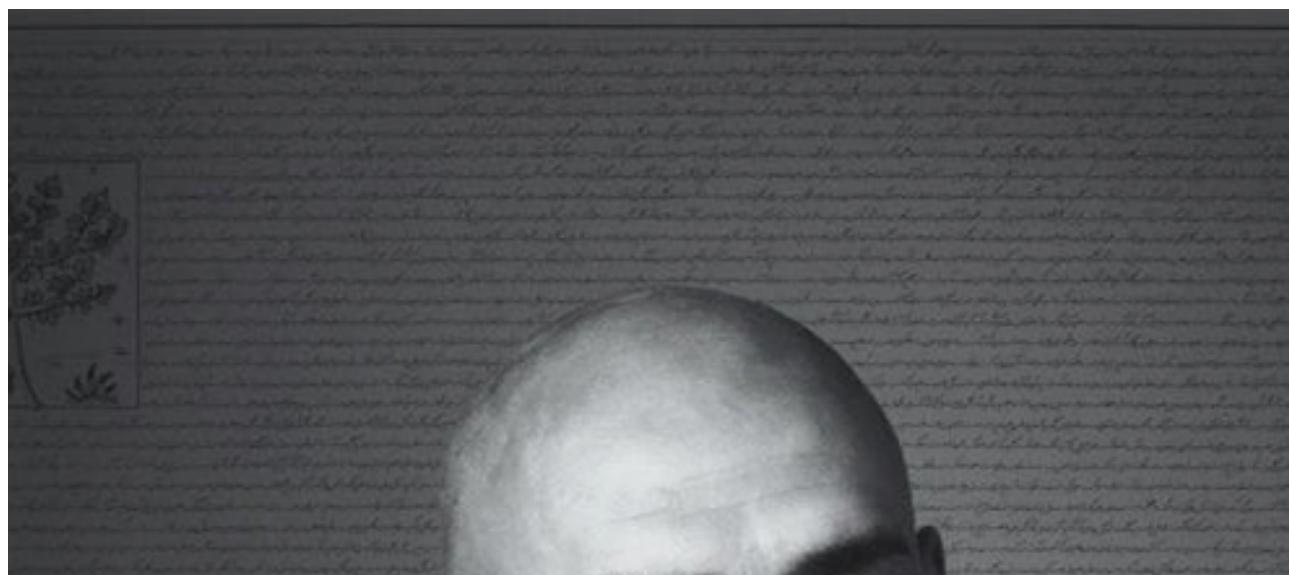
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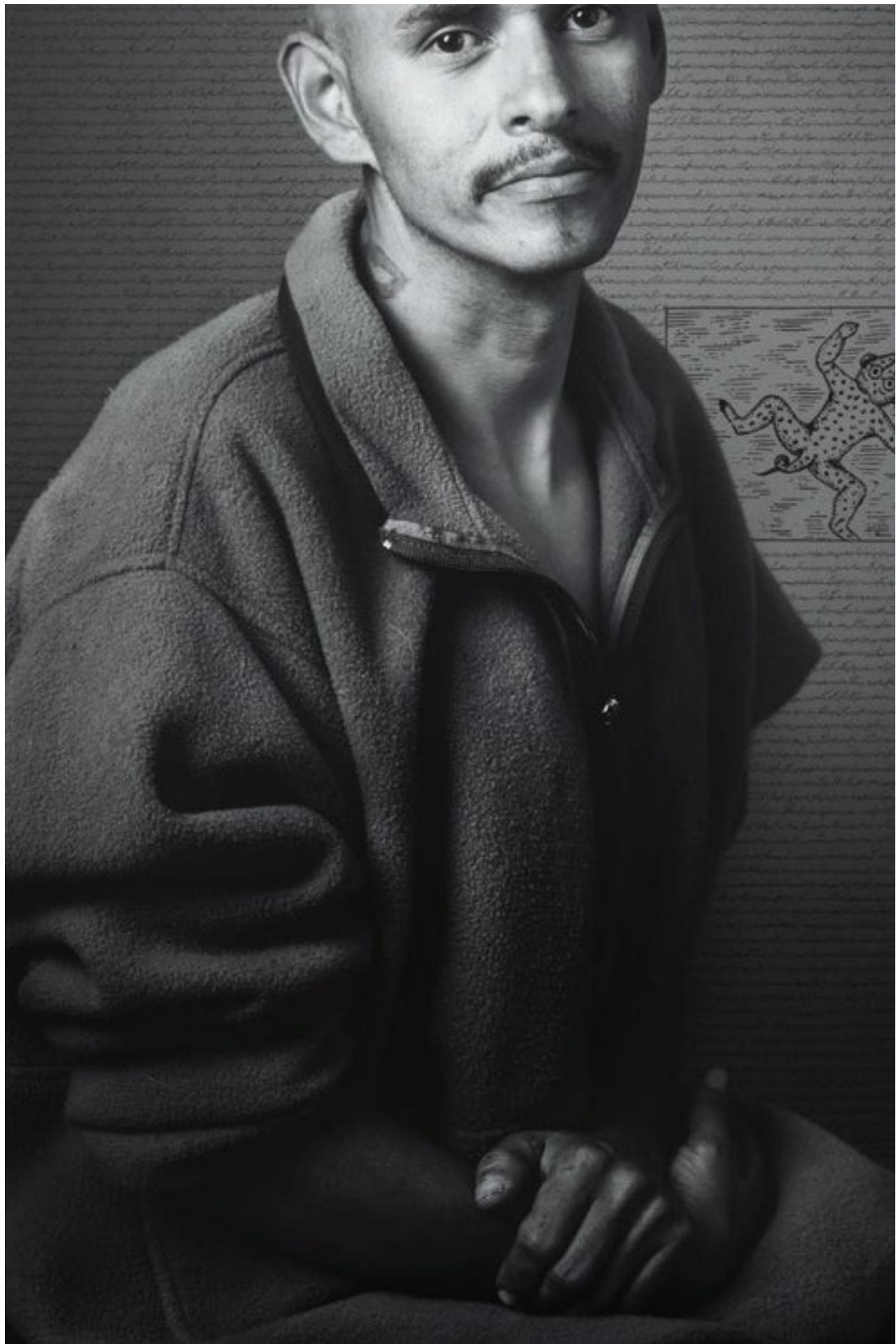


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Such warmth stood her well **working on recent project, *Land of Dreams***. Set in New Mexico, the series started with portraits of residents from all walks of life, shot in private homes and a makeshift studio in the back of a local restaurant.





Alfonso Garundo, from Shirin Neshat's Land of Dreams series, 2019 (Photo: Courtesy the artist, and Goodman Gallery, London)

Travelling through New Mexico as a crew of "three women and a dog", Neshat "literally went and knocked on doors", introducing herself and asking if she could take people's portraits. The response was often surprising. "You're Iranian?" asked one elderly veteran. "I was in the military: I was in the Middle East, come in!"

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"The Native Americans in Land of Dreams had never met an Iranian before, and I was told: 'Don't go to the reservations, they're very unfriendly to foreigners and they don't like to be photographed and wouldn't like to be in your film,' but it was just the opposite," she recalls. "I cannot tell you the human rapport that happened between me, my team and the people we met."

Two accompanying short films feature a fictional Iranian artist driving around New Mexico knocking on people's doors and asking to take portraits of residents, then collecting their dreams. Although artist and subjects alike are played by actors, some of Neshat's portrait subjects lent their homes and dreams to the films: as with many of her recent works, the lines between real life and fantasy are intentionally blurred.

'For the longest time I did not feel I was prepared to make a work that reflected on the American culture because I always felt that I'm not American enough, or I'm not close enough to the subject'

The landscape of New Mexico is familiar from westerns and road movies: it plays a role in cinematic history as iconic as any film star. Shot, like the photographs, in black and white, Neshat's films ripple with cinematic references, from avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren to Ingmar Bergman, by way of the great Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami. "I myself am this hybrid," says Neshat. "In many strange ways I'm more American than Iranian – my work is a reflection of who I am."

Land of Dreams was first shown as the closing work of The Broad museum show: her first made-in-America work for her first big American retrospective. "For the longest time I did not feel I was prepared to make a work that reflected on the American

culture because I always felt that I'm not American enough, or I'm not close enough to the subject. I always made work about the Middle East and Iran," she explained ahead of the exhibition's opening.

"But after the Trump administration and all these problems that followed – particularly immigration issues and the Muslim ban – for the first time I felt that my freedom in this country was being jeopardised and I felt that I really needed to make a work that expressed an immigrant perspective." Making *Land of Dreams*, she says, gave her "a new eye to America. An America I now know: the landscape, the poverty, the destitution."





Paulita Cowboy, from Shirin Neshat's Land of Dreams series, 2019 (Photo: Courtesy the artist, and Goodman Gallery, London)

A Native American portrait sitter who stayed on to work on her short films

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talking about."

invited Neshat to join a 100th birthday celebration for his mother. When Neshat asked what she could bring to the party, he took her to a ranch in the reservation to buy meat: the ranch workers were all white and had refused to speak to or serve him. "This ranch wouldn't sell to the Native Americans on their own land," recalls Neshat. "They're foreigners in their own land. That's the America we're

Since the oneiric *Women Without Men*, Neshat's work has tended more and more toward the surreal and dreamlike. "Dreams are innocent. You can kill someone in a dream and be innocent: you can't criticise a dream," she says. "I think a lot of people who live in exile end up embracing surrealism because it is a language in which they can be free and it's universal."

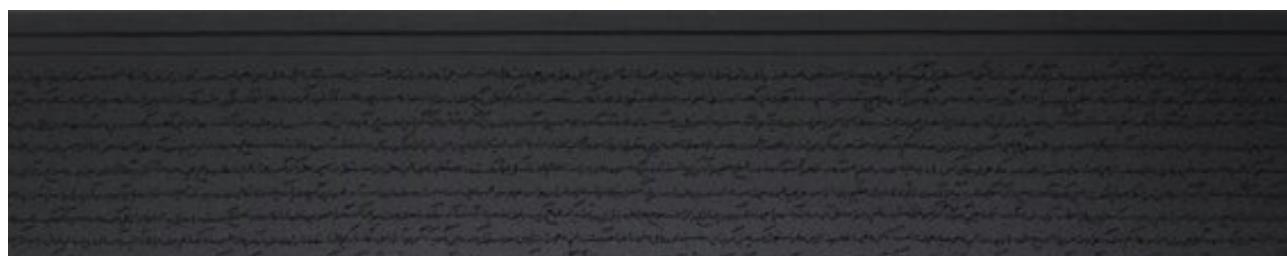


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Dreams here, of course, have a double significance. The US was long the land of dreams in which immigrants could find refuge and build a new, better life. **Trump's infamous border wall and immigration policies** increased restrictions on travel to the US from majority Muslim countries, and related anti-immigrant rhetoric has transformed this land of dreams into something more forbidding.

"If America was once the world of dreams for foreigners, he wants to purify it," says Neshat, of the 45th President. Tellingly, the dreams featured in *Land of Dreams* are nightmares: doomy premonitions of incarceration, alienation and death.





Jenasis Greer, from Shirin Neshat's Land of Dreams series, 2019 (Photo: courtesy the artist, and Goodman Gallery, London)

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Many of the black and white portraits have been inscribed with dream readings taken from an old Persian text, its calligraphy interspersed with mystical creatures. Today, we may think of Freud, but the desire to interpret dreams is an ancient one, shared across cultures. The twist in the fantasy world of *Land of Dreams* is that these nocturnal visions are collected by a colony of exiled

Iranians occupying a secret compound inside a mountain in the New Mexican desert.

A feature-length movie expanding the project is planned to start shooting later this year. So, why make a film for the cinema when contemporary art attracts such a huge audience?

"I think there's a part of me that doesn't just want to make commodities – as soon as you show a work in a gallery, it's for sale – a movie is for sale, but not in that way," says Neshat. "I make money from the art world and put it in the film. There's an integrity in that."

Cinema can carry her work to territories in which the art world has little foothold, and audiences for whom the underlying messages will be particularly powerful. "Maybe the film won't find a huge audience," she says, smiling, those underlined eyes sparkling but determined.

"I think it's important to make films that aren't like other films. It's a process: you need to do things even if you don't know it will be successful. You need to experiment."

Shirin Neshat: Land of Dreams is at the Goodman Gallery, London. The gallery is currently closed

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Shirin Neshat: a stare that challenges us to look away

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By Kelly Grovier 4 November
2019



Forget the Remington rifle that, propped upright in front of the veiled woman's face, boldly splits her being in two. What really blows you away is the double-barrelled blast of her inscrutable eyes. Deepening the penetration of her stare is the alignment of the sniper's 'sight' (that slender ridge at the weapon's tip that a marksman uses for aiming) with the middle of the woman's forehead. Is this a subliminal suggestion of a mystical third eye – a detail that elevates the work to something spiritually universal – or is she, herself, a tragic target caught in the crosshairs?



© Shirin Neshat/ Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

In Rebellious Silence (1994), Neshat reveals competing themes of vulnerability and aggression

I'm talking about Rebellious Silence, one of the most arresting photographs to emerge in contemporary art over the course of the past 25 years. The unforgettable black-and-white portrait, created by the Iranian artist and film-maker Shirin Neshat in 1994, is among the highlights of *I Will Greet the Sun Again – a major retrospective of Neshat's work* at The Broad art museum in Los Angeles, California. Part of a larger series of photographs collectively entitled Women of Allah, the image serves as something of a starting point for the exhibition, which follows the growth of Neshat's art from deceptively simple still photography to more elaborate video, film, and performance art.

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As with all of Neshat's work, Rebellious Silence is layered with intense, tightly-packed meaning. "Every image," Neshat tells me, as she prepares for the opening of the first major display of her work on the west coast of America, "is symbolic of a certain idea, of a certain type of thinking, a certain ideology. And to me, that image is a very ideological image in the way that it embodies contradictions... it's a very loaded image. Because it has issues of feminism, religion, fanaticism – you know, religious fervour – and criminality. So it has all these three elements, and they are all moving in different directions. I feel that the way I approach my photography is in that conceptual way. It's not just like a snapshot, it's like how do you build layers of meanings and intentions that could have multiple interpretations?"

Speaking without words

Rebellious Silence is profoundly multi-layered. The subtle play of shadow that complicates the Islamic woman's striking countenance – dividing it into hemispheres of darkness and light – becomes a gently textured parchment on which a second skin of calligraphic text has been scribbled in Farsi. The intervention is at once alluring and alienating: as much a fragile lattice that draws observers in, as it is a filigreed fence that pushes them away. The handwritten lines, superimposed onto the silver gelatine print, are an extract from Allegiance with Wakefulness – a poem by the contemporary Iranian writer and translator Tahereh Saffarzadeh. The speaker of the Persian verse, which celebrates the sacrifice of religious martyrs, proclaims that her "inflicted body" will "rise again" as she praises the "bullets in the air" that "break my sleep".

The woman may be armed and very dangerous, but her eyes are so vulnerable and fearful and full of uncertainty – Shirin Neshat

"I made Women of Allah and Rebellious Silence back in 1994," Neshat says, when asked about the image's continued resonance, "and now we're in 2019 and I feel like ironically those images are still really relevant. They've become iconic and symbolic of certain

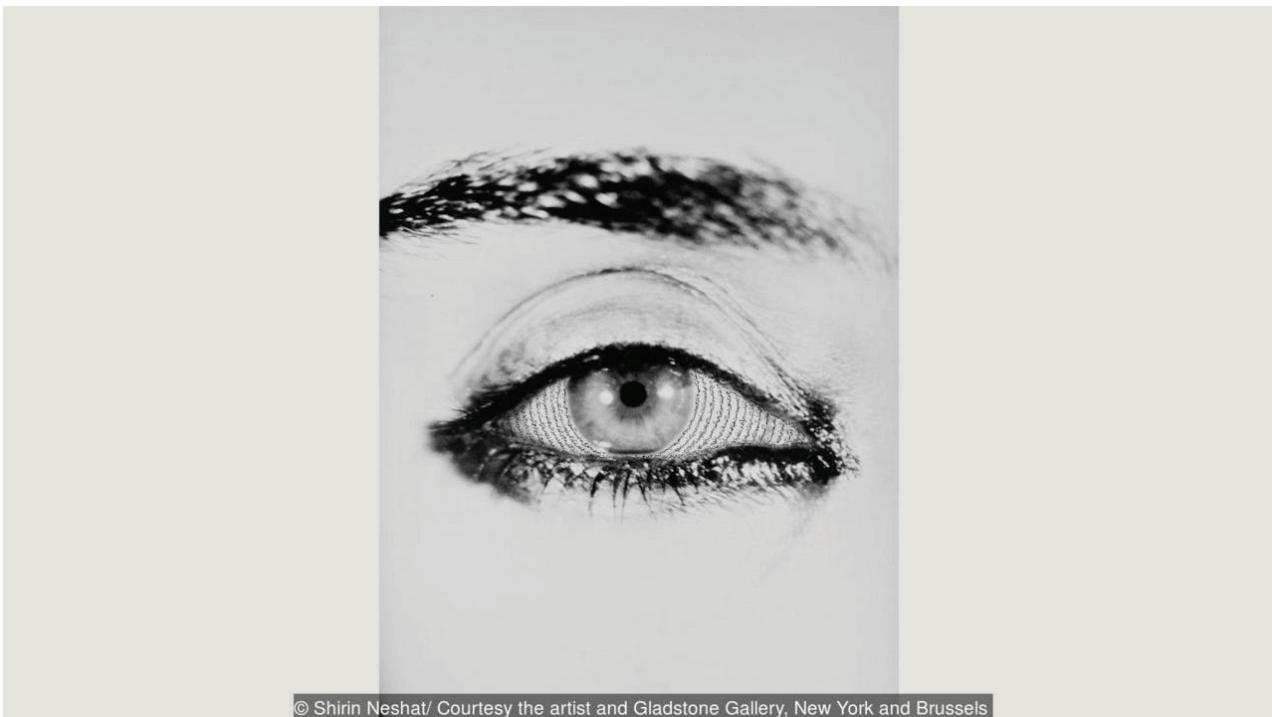
values and continue to be cherished among certain people in the Islamic world." The photographs's ability to compress into a single portrait an array of competing themes and emotions – courage and fear, vulnerability and aggression, feminism and fundamentalism – is at the heart not only of the work's enduring power but of the imagination of the artist who created it. "To me the human body, human expression, is powerful," Neshat says. "The woman may be armed and very dangerous, but her eyes are so vulnerable and fearful and full of uncertainty. To me, that also tells you about us, who are very often brainwashed or controlled by outside forces.



© Shirin Neshat/ Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Ilgara, from The Home of My Eyes series of photographic portraits, showing people from Azerbaijan whose bodies are inscribed with ink

Born in Iran in 1957, Neshat has been reflecting on the power of outside forces since her parents sent her to California in 1975, at the age of 17, to complete her education. Tensions between secularists (who favoured the Westernisation of culture, including expanded rights for women) and religiously conservative revolutionaries were growing, making it difficult to remain in Iran. Following the overthrow in 1979 of the Shah of Iran by rebels led by Ayatollah Khomeini, Neshat found herself unable easily to return from California. After earning an art degree from the University of California, Berkeley in 1983, she established a life in New York, working variously at a hair salon and a textile office, before meeting her husband, Kyong Park, the founder of a not-for-profit contemporary art gallery. Having all but abandoned the making of art herself after graduating, Neshat helped run the experimental enterprise for a decade before shifting her focus back to image-making in the early 1990s.



© Shirin Neshat/ Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Offered Eyes (1993) contains lines from the poet Forough Farrokhzad, who was candid about sexual desire

Following a return visit to Iran in May 1991 (her first since emigrating 12 years earlier), Neshat re-entered the art world in 1993 with Unveiling – a sequence of still photographs that reflected on the changes she had witnessed in her home country. Offered Eyes is among the more mesmerising of the works from this initial wave of works that would go on to comprise her breakthrough series, Women of Allah. The black-and-white photograph is an anonymising self-portrait that isolates the artist's right eye. Orbiting around her iris and pupil in the blank sclera, or white of the eye, are tight concentric spheres of cursive writing whose silent whirr evokes a sense of shared hypnotism – a spell into which both the observer of the work and Neshat herself are endlessly falling.

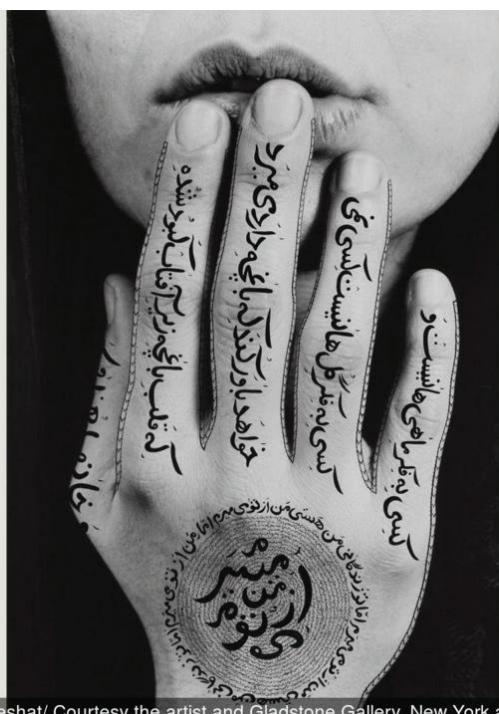
The spiralling words have been appropriated from the Iranian feminist poet Forough Farrokhzad, whose candour in expressing sexual desire was at odds with the religious rules that had been imposed by the Islamic Republic. How, precisely, we are to interpret the static spin of that lyrical language, pulling us into the artist's stare, is teasingly unclear. Are we to see these syllables as articulating the artist's own secret and intimate yearnings, or as something she sees right through? "When many photographs from Women of Allah are installed together," writes the curator of the show, Ed Schad, in the accompanying catalogue, "it is striking how they oscillate between themes focused on a culture that Neshat loves (her identification with motherhood, with family, with eroticism, with the beauty of Iranian art and rituals) and some of the toughest challenges facing Iranian women: the Iran/Iraq War that seemingly empowered women through a call to arms, the mandate of the veil, and the religious and political realities circumscribing their sexuality, expression, and physical freedom."



© Shirin Neshat/ Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Bonding (1995) shows Neshat holding the hands of her young son

In a subsequent work, Bonding, 1995 – among the final wave of photographs to be added to the Women of Allah series – the artist shifts her attention to the impact of these cultural frictions on the mother-child relationship. Set against the echoing darkness of a traditional chador, Neshat’s hands tenderly envelope those of her five-year old son, Cyrus. Once again, we find flesh stained by the ink of an inscribed script, but only that of the artist, whose fingers curl themselves into a heart-shaped nest in which the palms of her child innocently unfurl. However protective her body may be, her skin bears the indelible marks of a lived past – the scars of feeling, experience, and ideology. Her son’s, on the other hand, represent a fresh start – a blank slate.



© Shirin Neshat/ Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

In the 1996 photo Untitled (Women of Allah), a woman's hand is reminiscent of the hamsa, a protective sign bringing health, happiness and good fortune An eloquent choreography of hands is likewise powerfully at play in Untitled, 1996, created the following year. Here, the fingertips of an upraised hand pause on the lips of a woman whose face has been dramatically cropped, as if she is stopping herself from speaking. Though the shape of the hand recalls the *hamsa* – a symbol of protection popular throughout the Middle East and North Africa – its meaning is intensified by the overlay of lines from another poem by Farrokhzad, I Feel Sorry for the Garden – a reflection on humanity's neglect of the world around us. Vibrating at once with outspokenness and self-imposed silence, strength and lament, the photograph is a tissue of teasing contradictions that seems desperate to unravel into a longer narrative – an image that tests the limits of the story Neshat can tell with a single still.

Moving images

"I think this exhibition, if you visit it from the beginning to the end," Neshat says of how the retrospective unfolds from these early iconic images, "shows an evolution... both thematically and in terms of form. In terms of form, I started with still photography, with calligraphy inscribed on the images, then moved on to video installations, then, towards the end of the exhibition," she says, "to more a film-making style". According to Neshat, "Thematically, it seems like the work begins from the eye of an artist who is Iranian, but living in exile, living outside of her country after the revolution. Towards the end of the exhibition, that perspective turns towards the rest of the world."



© Shirin Neshat/ Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, and Goodman Gallery

Neshat's Land of Dreams video (2019) takes the viewpoint of a female photographer from Iran, travelling across the western US

The past 20 years, since Neshat completed Women of Allah, has seen her grow increasingly ambitious and confident in the technical complexity and scale of her art. A succession of video works also on display demonstrates how these images were always

pregnant with the possibility of more sustained cinematic narrative. The dual-screen film Rapture, shot in Morocco in 1999, pits men in white shirts marching through streets, on one screen, against a chorus of women singing in nature, on the other; Neshat's most recent work, Land of Dreams, 2019, follows an Iranian photographer as she travels across the US, chronicling recent changes in America's attitudes, especially towards immigrants.

Neshat's lens has come full circle to focus again on a divided subject

Neshat says that her work evolved in this way, because, after many years of focusing on subjects inside Iran, she felt, as "someone always on the outside, [that it was] important to turn my lens on more of my nomadic life, because I work in Morocco, in Egypt, in Turkey, everywhere. But one thing remaining consistent is that the artist is Iranian. So it's always from the perspective of an Iranian, but it's not about Iran." Land of Dreams, which makes its debut at the exhibition, posits a parallel between America under Donald Trump today and Iran under Islamic Revolutionaries in the 1980s. In many respects, Neshat's lens has come full circle to focus again on a divided subject – one for which the metaphor of a weapon splitting the body into two is surprisingly apt.

"There was this general sense of democracy, and the inclusion of immigrants was a part of this American history," Neshat says of what motivated her to reflect on the soul of the country she moved to 40 years ago, "and everyone comes from another place, and you just felt that this truly was a land of dreams, and that's why I ironically gave that title to my video... But things have shifted in the way that that very pillar idea of democracy is becoming compromised. There's so much corruption, there's so much political injustice, there's so much chaos and uncertainty and I would even say fanaticism and racism (particularly to people who are immigrants and Mexican)... It's really a frightening idea for me that this country is starting to look more and more like Iran."

I Will Greet the Sun Again is at the Broad Art Museum in LA until 16 February 2020.

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Shirin Neshat: Unraveling the American Dream

bjp-online.com/2020/02/shirin-neshat-unraveling-the-american-dream

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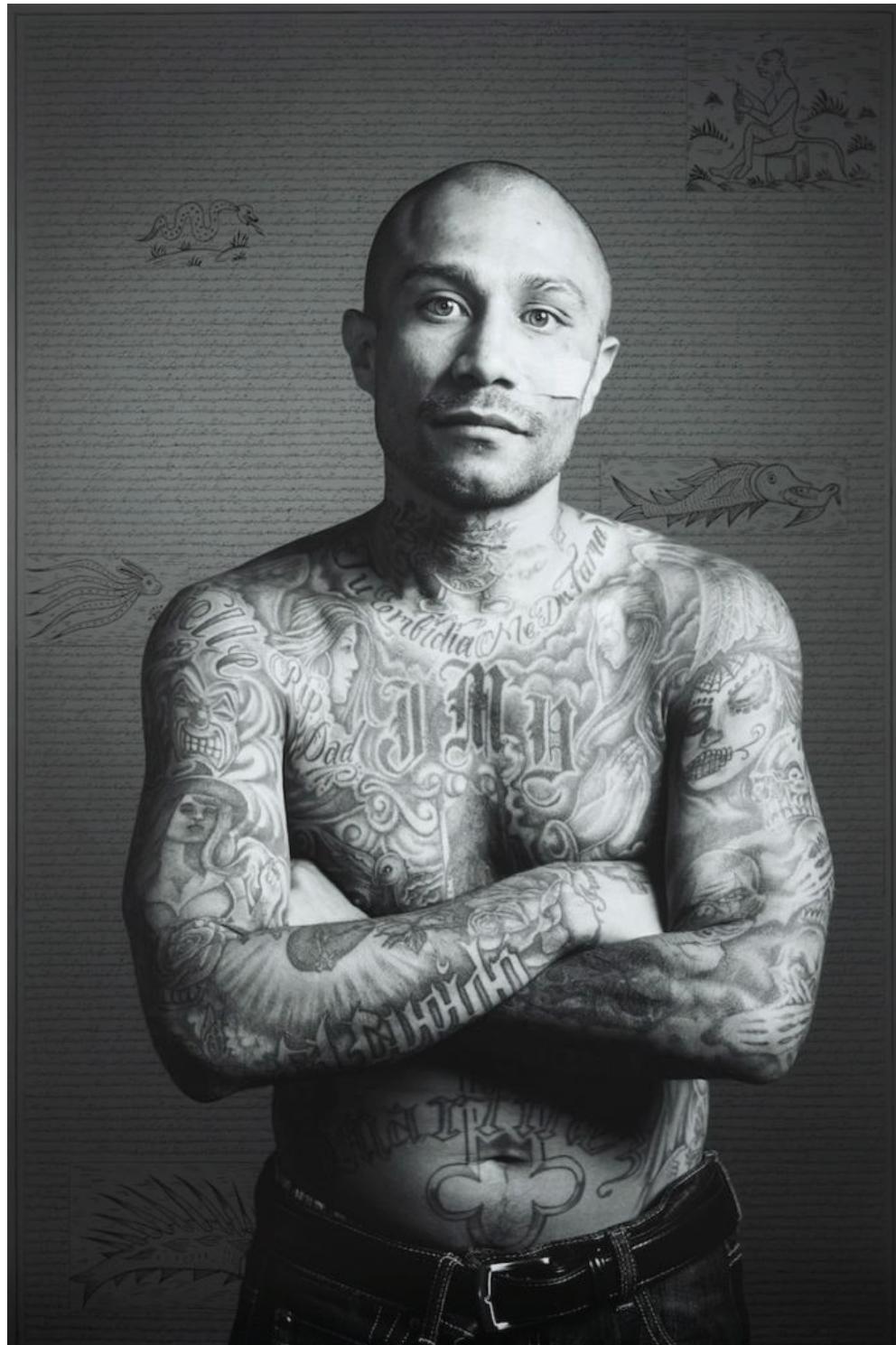
In her latest body of work, the Iranian artist turns her lens to America, her host-country, offering a fantastical response to the tumult of the contemporary moment

Shirin Neshat wanders across the upper floor of the Goodman Gallery in London, gesturing around her. Dozens of faces gaze down, staring out intently from the walls of the space. An ex-convict with a tattooed torso, arms folded; a serene-looking man with mental health problems, neck gently crooked; a woman, whose blonde, blow-dried locks fan outwards, clutching a pup to her stomach. "It is like a portrait of America," says Neshat, referencing the salon-style installation. "It is not about the single person but the whole – I find that very moving when you are in a room surrounded by faces that are looking at you."

The experience is profound: despite the subjects' anonymity, locking eyes with them is intimate — they surround us, and it is hard to look away. As Neshat, who oozes elegance with thick, black kohl framing each eye, glides across the space, she speaks of her subjects with fondness. "This guy, look at his face, isn't he beautiful," she exclaims, "and this woman, I love her. That guy, he owned the restaurant, where we shot the photographs in Albuquerque." The images depict an assortment of characters who Neshat recruited and who found her by chance. Hispanic, Native American, white, black, rich, poor, young, old, mentally ill, homeless — collectively, the individuals represent a segment of American society, monumentalised in the artist's often almost life-sized frames.

The photographs, over 60 of which are currently on show at Goodman Gallery, London, were taken by Neshat, who will be Master of Photography at Photo London 2020. They are a fragment of the 111 portraits that make up her most recent project *Land of Dreams*, however, in the context of the series, the images belong to someone else — an Iranian photographer named Simin: the fictional protagonist of two video installations exhibited on the lower floor of the gallery space, which comprise the remainder of the work. The films follow Simin, a covert Iranian agent, posing as an art student, as she photographs individuals at home across New Mexico, recording, and eventually, penetrating their dreams. Simin is one of many Iranian agents reporting back to a secluded bureaucratic

colony where Americans' dreams are collected and analysed to reveal the country's "malice", as Neshat describes it. "In many cultures, especially those that are religious, governments have been interested in dreams because they are regarded as a way of reading the future: as though God projects the future through people's dreams — calamities, rivalries, environmental catastrophes," she explains.



Manuel Martinez, from Land of Dreams series. 2019 © Shirin Neshat.



Jenasis Greer, from Land of Dreams series. 2019 © Shirin Neshat.

The narrative is fictional, but dips in and out of reality, a device embraced by Neshat since she began experimenting with it for her first feature film *Women with Men* (2009) — an adaptation of a 1989 Shahrnush Parsipur novel of the same name, which follows the unsteady lives of four female characters in pre-revolutionary Iran during the 1953 US and UK-backed coup that ousted the democratically elected leader Mohammad Mosaddegh. The story centres around Munis, Faeseh, Fakhri, and Zarin, and the effects of political upheaval on them. Neshat employs elements of magical realism, with the characters and their storylines veiled in symbolism, to make political statements that extend beyond the literal plot. “I felt exhausted by the criticism and judgement,” she says, referencing her earlier and more overtly political work, “employing magical realism, political satire, and dreams, is a means to escape all of that.”

Magical realism is rife in *Land of Dreams*, which is replete with symbols, metaphors, and layered meanings. The clinical and claustrophobic colony, where uniformed employees work silently and abide by strict rules, is emblematic of the suppressive culture of Iran. While the sweeping, open planes, traversed by Simin to find her subjects, embodies the myth of the American Dream, which is shattered by the difficult realities and nightmares of the individuals that she encounters. The character of Simin is herself a surrogate for Neshat, and visually she evokes her: a slight woman with ebony hair dressed in black; a camera slung around her neck as she moves from house to house searching for subjects — an approach that mirrors that which Neshat took to make the work. “Everything that you see [in the video installations] is my story — and the photographs depict the people I found,” she explains.



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Simin from Land of Dreams series. 2019 © Shirin Neshat.

Neshat has always been present in her work, whether directly or via some other form — a muse, or a reference to her culture or past, which has been tumultuous. Born in 1957 in the city of Qazvin, just north-west of Tehran, Neshat grew up in a religious yet largely liberal Muslim household. In 1975, aged 17, she was sent to Los Angeles to finish school, before attending the University of California, Berkeley in San Francisco. Four years later, the Iranian Revolution shook Neshat's home as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's conservative regime repressed a society that had become increasingly open to Western influence. The following year the Iran-Iraq war, which was provoked, in part, by the establishment of Khomeini's Islamic Republic, began, and, in America, which actively supported Iraq, anti-Iranian sentiment intensified.

Neshat could not return home and found herself exiled in a place that was becoming increasingly hostile towards her. She built a life in New York, working at the independent art space the Storefront for Art and Architecture run by her former husband; she was, however, making little art of her own. In 1993, Neshat returned to Iran for the first time and was shocked by what she discovered: a country transformed under the tyranny of Khomeini. In response to this, and her attempts to make sense of it, Neshat's artistic vision began to take shape.



Film still from Land of Dreams. 2019 © Shirin Neshat.



Film still from Land of Dreams. 2019 © Shirin Neshat.

In one of Neshat's earliest series, the politically-charged *Women of Allah* (1993), the artist is the central protagonist. The haunting images — which depict veiled women, their bodies inscribed with modern poetry written in Farsi, holding, or standing aside, gleaming pistols — address conceptions of femininity in the context of the Islamic fundamentalism and militancy that had pervaded Neshat's home. However, the artist's breakthrough came with her black-and-white video installations *Rapture* and *Turbulent* (1999), the latter of which won a Golden Lion at 1999 Venice Biennale. Exploring a theme that would continue to dominate Neshat's work, *Turbulent* interrogates the strictly defined roles of men and women in Iran with a female singer challenging societal restrictions via an impassioned performance, which interrupts that of her male counterpart.

Neshat's work has largely focused on Iran and her complex relationship with it as a woman living in exile. However, the ascendency of Donald Trump, and the discrimination that has accompanied it, changed that, compelling her to turn her lens to America. She speaks of the shift she has observed across her host country: a divisive and discriminatory atmosphere driven, in part, by the current administration — Trump's Muslim ban, for instance, or his unwavering commitment to constructing a border wall between Mexico and the US. The president has also exacerbated the historically fraught relationship between Iran and the US, with his economic sanctions, withdrawal from the nuclear deal negotiated by Obama, and, most recently, with the assassination of the country's most powerful military commander, Major General Qasem Soleimani. "I felt that everything was changing in America," reflects Neshat, "a place where I had felt very safe and secure as an immigrant, despite knowing that there has been a long antagonism between Iran and the US".



Film still from the Colony. 2019 © Shirin Neshat.

Likening the current political situation, in both the US and Iran, to “a theatre of the absurd,” Neshat decided that employing absurdity would be the most fitting way to approach the subject. “The way that Trump is acting in America parallels the absurdity of the Iranian government,” she explains. The resulting work is extraordinary. The dreams, around which the films’ narratives centre, are fantastical and transcend social divisions: “When you delve into such realms, the narrative becomes universal — all people dream. It is not possible to tie surrealism to one nation,” she explains. The dreamers, however, who are, or who are based on, individuals Neshat met while travelling across New Mexico, represent a sample of US society. A white, middle-class, Christian woman in her elaborately-decorated home, and an elderly, lower-middle-class man anxiously dreaming of a nuclear holocaust. A Native American mother whose nightmare of having her child taken away unfolds in an empty convent, where the US government systematically relocated Native American children to assimilate them. And finally, a displaced Bosnian woman verging on the edge of insanity, whose dreams and memories have become one.



Film still from the Colony. 2019 © Shirin Neshat.

“When you delve into such realms, the narrative becomes universal — all people dream.
It is not possible to tie surrealism to one nation”



Film still from the Colony. 2019 © Shirin Neshat.

The female protagonists who populate Neshat's work have always resisted repression, rebelling and escaping in myriad ways, from protest to madness. The film's protagonist Simin is no exception: she eventually enters into her subjects' dreams, despite being forbidden from doing so, and, on returning to the colony attempts to make sense of them in secret. “The biggest fighters in Iran today are women. The most unafraid people in Iran are women. I've always tried to say this,” Neshat explained in an interview with the *LA Times*, speaking of her commitment to challenging the Western perception of Muslim women as victims. In *Land of Dreams*, Simin disrupts the regimented world of the

Iranian colony by allowing her curiosity to prevail: "She took her camera and she was free," says Neshat. Simin may be read as a symbol of the refusal of Neshat, and Iranian women at large, to fall in line — to bow to social or political repression. The artist's work has always signified defiance, and Simin's dramatic exit from the colony, camera in hand, after her transgressions are discovered, likely represents this.

Ultimately, despite addressing the current situation in the US, *Land of Dreams* goes deeper. It stems from Neshat's history of exile but speaks to the experience more broadly: exploring how fear and displacement are universal, crossing borders and social divisions. With the ascendancy of far-right politics and discrimination worldwide, the artist calls for her fellow artists to be politically conscious and aware of how their work fits into the contemporary discourse. With her distinct visual language – at once poetic and political, factual and fantastical — Neshat does just this. She addresses a host of urgent subjects in nuanced and thought-provoking ways.

Shirin Neshat Land of Dreams is on show at [Goodman Gallery, London](#), until 28 March. Neshat will be Master of Photography at [Photo London 2020](#), taking place from 14 to 17 May 2020 at Somerset House.



Film still from the Colony. 2019 © Shirin Neshat.

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ART

Filmmaker Shirin Neshat Probes the Iran-U.S. Divide in Surreal New Satire

“I think that it's even more important that artists are vocal,” the artist says in an interview about her latest video, which she is developing into a feature film.

BY ANDREW RUSSETH

January 16, 2020

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Shirin Neshat, still from "Land of Dreams," 2019.

It has been more than 20 years since the artist and filmmaker Shirin Neshat last visited Iran, where she was born in the city of Qazvin in 1957. “I represent a part of the Iranian community and diaspora who voluntarily, and somewhat

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involuntarily, doesn't go back because the current regime is quite impossible," Neshat says by phone from her studio in Bushwick, Brooklyn.

Most of Neshat's family still lives in her home country, though, and so, as the United States and Iran have moved to the brink of war over the past few weeks, following the U.S. assassination of Qassim Suleimani in Iraq, the artist has been thinking carefully about her choice of words. "I'm really worried about what I say because I fear not just for myself but for them," she says.

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The fraught relationship between the two countries is the focus of one Neshat's newest video, and in a coincidence that is both poignant and painful, it is now screening in her expansive retrospective at the Broad in Los Angeles, which runs through Feb. 16. Titled *Land of Dreams* (2019), the short two-channel piece follows a young Iranian woman, a spy posing as an art student who photographs Americans and investigates their dreams. An ex-military man has recurring nightmares about nuclear holocaust. A woman dreams about being expelled from her home by the military. The spy "somehow starts identifying with them and understanding that their anxieties and nightmares are not so different than hers," Neshat says.



ALL STORIES PREVIOUS NEXT

Though Neshat has lived in the U.S. since 1974, when she came to study art in Los Angeles, she has largely trained her attention on political and societal dynamics in Iran and the Muslim world, in moving films and indelible black-and-white portraits photographs that she adorns with Farsi and Arabic text. And so *Land of Dreams*, which is set in America, represents a profound shift. “It was after Trump and this whole experience that came with the Muslim ban that I got this feeling that this is where I need to turn my attention to,” she says. (“This U.S. government is looking more and more like the Iranian government every day,” she told the press last year.)

Scouting for a location for the video, Neshat traveled around the United States with her husband and longtime collaborator, Shoja Azari. “We were basically looking for desert landscape that in strange ways look like Iran while it was still really visibly American,” she says, explaining that “we wanted to have this possibility where at some point the viewer wasn’t sure whether we were in Iran or in America.” They settled on New Mexico, a state that she noted is home to large Native American and Hispanic communities that have had to deal with issues of displacement and immigration.

Land of Dreams centers on Shiprock Peak, a sacred place for the Navajo people. “You really feel like it’s a living thing,” Neshat says. “It’s like a God, it’s a mountain that looks truly auspicious.” The spy moves between peoples’ homes in the outer world and “a modern, claustrophobic authoritarian space that looks like the Soviet Union” within that stunning mountain, where the spy’s findings are analyzed and interpreted, she adds. “I like this kind of parody and this opposition between what took place inside and what appeared outside.”

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Shirin Neshat, Simin, from "Land of Dreams" series, 2019, digital c-print mounted on black sintra.

The piece is characteristically dreamy and, at times, dark, but it is also playful and even wry (“the idea that the Iranian government would spy on peoples’ dreams, that’s really absurd,” Neshat says), which is another surprise from an artist whose work has tended toward a precise, elegant sincerity. “My work is never very funny,” she admits with a huge laugh. Explaining her new approach, she mentions Spike Lee’s discussion of his film *BlacKkKlansman* (2018) and his point that in “moments of crisis sometimes political satire is the most efficient and interesting way of making social critique.” (She is currently developing the video into a feature.)

Discussing the dire political situation she and her fellow exiles experience living between Iran and the U.S., “we seem to be battling on two fronts,” Neshat says. In America, “with Trump it’s become increasingly problematic to live as an immigrant, where you worry about your future.” And then one looks to Iran, and “we’re very concerned about their safety, about their economic situation, their lack of freedom.”

Following Iran’s claim last week that it accidentally downed a commercial airliner with nearly 200 aboard, people in the country have taken to the streets, facing death, torture, and imprisonment from authorities. Fear is everywhere, Neshat says. “If you’re in Iran, should you go to the protests or should you not go? I ask a lot of my friends ‘if you were in Iran would you actually go?’ Because, believe me, I don’t fancy going to Iranian prison. It’s really frightening shit.” She plans to travel to London for a presentation of *Land of Dreams* at the Goodman Gallery in London next month, but “I’m literally afraid of going and not being able to come back,” she says.

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What role do artists have in such a climate? “I think that I take my work now more seriously than ever before,” Neshat says. “I think that it’s even more important that artists are vocal.” She has clearly thought deeply about her own position, and proposes that she deals with part of the art world that is “more about money and the market. So it’s a bit of a challenge. I feel like my work is also very aesthetic and very poetic. It’s not just political. But nevertheless, I do feel a little bit like going against the stream here, trying to respond to not only what’s going on in Iran, but what’s going on in this country.”

(Artworks courtesy the artist and Goodman Gallery, London)

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Shirin Neshat

(Portrait by Rodolfo Martinez)

25 Feb 2020

PROFILE

Why Shirin Neshat Is Turning Her Gaze Away From Iran

Shirin Neshat's first London solo exhibition in two decades represents a marked new direction for the artist, as she turns her gaze away from her homeland and towards her host country, America, in the midst of tense political relations between the two nations.

Words by Charlotte Jansen



Still from *The Colony*, Shirin Neshat, 2019, Courtesy Goodman Gallery

“I’ve lost my lost nostalgia about Iran”, says Shirin Neshat. We are sitting in a room at Goodman Gallery London, where her latest exhibition, *Land of Dreams*—her first in London in two decades—is being installed. Neshat has also just been announced as Photo London’s 2020 Master of Photography and will have a solo exhibition at Somerset House from 14 May to 21 June. *Land of Dreams* marks a shift in the Iranian artist’s gaze, turning her camera towards the United States, a country she’s lived in since the 1990s. Though her work has always

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adopted country in such a direct way before.

This new body of work, comprising two video installations and a symbiotic, monumental portrait project of more than one hundred photographs (sixty of which are showing at Goodman) also comes at a time of heightened tension between her native Iran and America. Her recently closed retrospective at the Broad in LA opened as protests erupted in Iran and was running when in January the US assassinated Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad. With the threat of war boiling, Neshat's work—which is “very much about the antagonism between the two countries”—became especially charged. She recalls visiting the Broad and seeing visitors in tears.



Still From Land of Dreams, Shirin Neshat, 2019, Courtesy Goodman Gallery

A prescient tilting of her lens towards the US under Trump, Land of Dreams is a complex reimagining of the myth of the American Dream, and of the social fabric of contemporary America. “I’ve decided to never make another purely ‘Iranian’ work; I’m so tired of living with this feeling of always wanting to go back. I don’t even care if I go back,” the artist reflects.

“I’ve decided to never make another purely ‘Iranian’

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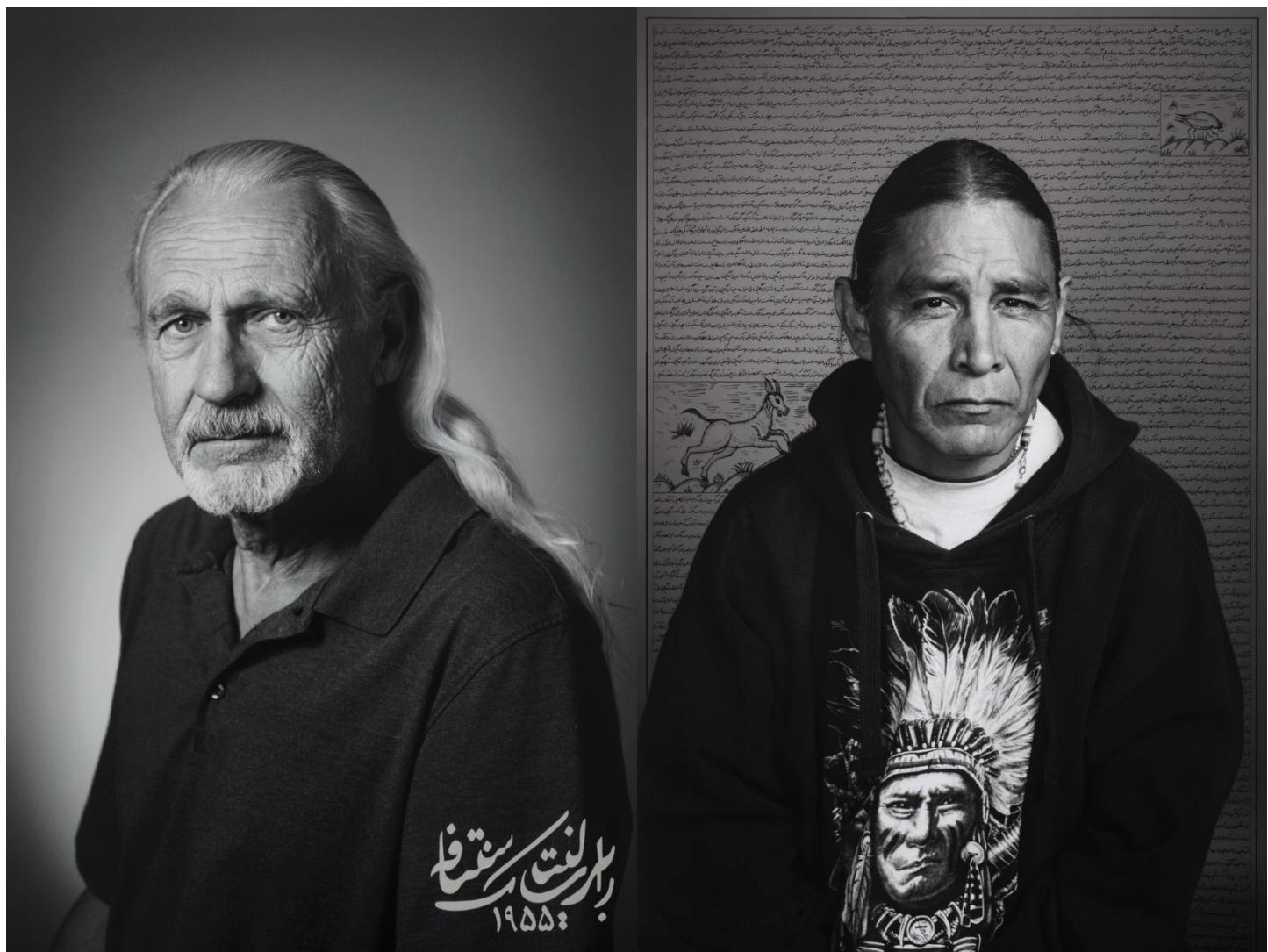


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wanting to go back”

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She is dressed in her trademark dark colours and eyeliner, strikingly beautiful—much like the protagonists of her films, who each represent, to an extent, the artist and her personal story. Simin, the star of the two new films, Land of Dreams and The Colony, for example, is a young immigrant artist from Iran who travels the US taking portraits of locals and documenting their dreams. The film traces the exact process of Neshat herself in making her photographic document, the results of which hang in the gallery.



Left: Robert Lenick. Right: Herbie Nelson. Both from Land of Dreams series, 2019

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some way, she will never make another work that creates “a make-believe Iran”, as she did in her acclaimed films, *Rapture* (1999) or *Women Without Men* (2009). “Talking about all these heavy political issues over the years, I learned I never want to be that direct”, Neshat explains. *Land of Dreams* marks a completely new direction for the artist.

Though aesthetically and conceptually connected with her previous work, moving between open landscapes and closed interior scenes, between black and white, the rational and the subconscious, the political and the personal, *Land of Dreams* makes the US, not Iran, the focus. It is based on both Neshat’s own encounters with the country as an artist and an immigrant, and on the new discoveries she made while creating the work about American society. The work touches on religious fanaticism, racism, poverty, and the political situation in the US, merging surrealism, satire and Neshat’s glorious cinematic vision.



Still from *Land of Dreams*, Shirin Neshat, 2019, Courtesy Goodman Gallery

During the project, Neshat traveled across New Mexico—terrain that has attracted many artists, from Agnes Martin and Judy Chicago to Georgia O’Keefe—to take portraits of Native Americans. “I was so glad to experience how they live and to understand the situation,” she reflects, saying she was left heartbroken by some of the destitution and alcoholism she

“The Native Americans have been sidelined throughout history.”

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culture, language and heritage with “dignity and pride”.

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“Sometimes I have a hard time, I feel isolated and outcast in the art world”



The portraits of Land of Dreams are printed at different scales, a deliberate inversion of power dynamics. Meanwhile in the films, we view the US through the eyes of a non-western woman, a narrative that becomes increasingly illusory from one film to the next, a portrait of a place that is absurd, fractured and fragile. It complicates the hierarchies between immigrants and non-immigrants, east and west, men and women, artist and subject, and is far the image of the omnipotent superpower America we're used to.

In her own life, Neshat tells me, it's the community she has created around her over the last thirty years that has enabled her to thrive in New York. “Sometimes I have a hard time, I feel isolated and outcast in the art world—but I feel happy knowing I'm going back to that.” Making this work has been an

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at the situation but ultimately empathy for all the people who have come to this land to make their dreams come true. “In New York, you don’t feel it, but doing this project has opened my eyes and made me realise; I am part of this community.”

Shirin Neshat, Land of Dreams

Until 28 March at Goodman Gallery, London. Photo London takes place from 14-17 May at Somerset House, London

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