

Artist Commentary
Shirin Neshat

by **Craig Judd**

b. Qazvin Iran 1957, lives Works New York

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

'Women assist men by taking charge - not dominating - the private space so as to nurture a family and raise decent Muslims. Furthermore, when a woman crosses into the public domain she enters a male space (...) Therefore she must respect male codes of behaviour. These codes are based on men's need to concentrate on social and religious responsibilities without the interference of personal or domestic affairs...while in public space, a woman must be contained, silent and invisible. In other words, she must be "veiled"... During the Iranian Revolution, in which Iranian women revolted against "oriental" stereotypes, the veil became a form of political protest, as a way to identify with Islamic values and a rejection of the Westernising process instated by the Shah. In 1978... we began to see images of proud militant Muslim women carrying heavy machine guns. These representations were powerful and shocking, and definitely shattered the classical western image of Muslim women as weak and subordinate'.

Excerpt from Octavio Zaya, "Bounds of Desire, Zones of Contention, A Conversation Between Shirin Neshat and Octavio Zaya" *Voiceovers*, 5th Guinness Contemporary Art Project, Curator Victoria Lyn, Art Gallery of New South Wales 1999, p. 39

"With the photographic work, I always found a danger of falling into didactic imagery. Also, since I was applying text (Farsi calligraphy) over the photos, there often came the problem of translation. However I found with film and video work, I can escape such issues. The pieces tend to be freer of reductive conclusions. I can tell a complete story. The recent challenge for me, particularly with the new films *Rapture* and *Turbulent*, has been to create work that, while remaining uncompromisingly authentic to the roots of the subject, do not become too ethnographic and do not alienate those who are not quite informed about the culture. With video I feel like I have finally arrived at a point where the work has become universal in its motive.... 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. I try to convey these elements to convey as sense of human crisis and emotion. One feels surrounded by these kinds of pressures in Islamic culture. They are not necessarily good or bad, but they are very real Islamic conditions. "

Interview, September 1999, p.165-66

CRITICAL STATEMENTS

"In Neshat's work there is always a degree of ambiguity as to whether she is mocking, or wilfully exploiting our ignorance of Islam: our intimacy with the figure of the East, our fantasy of a mysterious and palpable Orient. She presents us with what we may interpret as Islam's exoticism, only to deflate those assumptions by contradicting us. The power of her work then, is in its disarming simplicity, in its bare essentiality.... These images destabilize the idea that if something is beautiful it must be easy to swallow"

Okwui Enwezor, *Cream*, 1998

'The history of Shirin Neshat's bodily portrayal of this "Islamic woman" is the unwritten chronicle of a mute and concealed femininity. Her photographs show and tell what has been forbidden to show and tell. That she manages to do without violating the bodily codes of an "Islamic woman"'.

'Against that history of bodily abuse, Shirin Neshat turns the female body into a roaring carnival of quiet yet seductive protest'.

Hamad Dabas-I catalogue entry "on Life, Beauty, Translations and Other Difficulties" *The 5th International Istanbul Biennial* edited by Emrye Baykal Vol 2, p. 1161

"Describing the narrative of Neshat's video installations is ultimately no more revealing than summarising the story-line of an opera: suffice to say that her art is fuelled by a tumultuous and surprising sensuality, a heady mix of violence and seduction that is conveyed in both her striking cinematography and powerful sound track. *Rapture* proceeds to knock down our own clichés about Islam as even as it poetically dramatises the suppressed tension on which that culture's equilibrium rests"

Ralph Rugoff "Global Art reaches Santa Fe" *Financial Times*, 31 July - 1 August 1999

COMMENTARY

The content of Shirin Neshat's work deals intimately with her memories, experiences and interpretations of gender construction.

Shirin Neshat explores the intersections of the worlds of men and the worlds of women. She is also attempting to reconcile her identity as a woman in the throes of diaspora. Neshat was born and lived in Iran until the age of seventeen.

Initially Neshat came to critical recognition with *Women of Allah*, a series of still photographs of women in chador with Farsi text inscribed across their face and hands. Guns also feature as a major motif. This series was made in 1990 after Neshat's first visit back to Iran after the revolution of 1979. In *Women of Allah*, the texts, the veil and the gaze of Neshat's subjects tends to emphasise separation and difference of these women not only within Islam but in the wider contexts of women's experiences.

More recently Neshat's art has moved to encompass large-scale video installation. Like her photographs, Neshat's video works do not reveal but further complexify the European fascination and desire to unearth and to understand elements and key signifiers of the exotic Near East. Like her photographs, the video work is made in black and white. In *Rapture* Neshat presents 2 simultaneous video projections that depict a distant but poignant encounter between groups of men and women. The word rapture suggests a transcendent spiritual union however the large, separate screens initially underline and compound the sense of a physical, intellectual and spiritual separation of the genders that is maintained through the tenets of Islam.

Filmed at Essaouira in Morocco, the viewer encounters, on one of the screens, a castle by the sea. The camera reveals a large group of neatly dressed men walking purposely toward the viewer through the tight alleyways and mysterious shadows of an ancient city. Some of the men carry ladders. Some jostle and fight. Soon the men reach the ramparts of the fortress that protects their town. In dramatic, real and sweeping shots Neshat shows men performing ritual actions. Food is passed around. Carpets are laid out. At regular intervals the men stop to stare directly into the camera. Their gaze is at once impenetrable, yet querulous. The men then move towards the guns that face outwards to the old enemy. Is this old enemy of Nature or the old enemy of the Other? The men watch and wait.

On the other screen is a desolate desert landscape. Suddenly from this earth black clots of fluttering fabric emerge. These amorphous shapes are women in chador. Implacable sentinels, the women move closer and closer to the camera. The viewer sees that there are the faces of generations and generations of women. They stare into the camera. Then a sudden ululation pierces the installation space. We are not sure whether this sound is a greeting or a cry, of joy, or of anguish. The women then return to the earth to the empty desert only to emerge again. This time they lift their hands to the camera. They are inscribed with text. The women then pray and return to the desert once more. Suddenly we see some women moving to the beach. Some of the group drags a boat to the seashore. The women in the boat soon become a small dot on the ocean. On the opposite screen the men are distracted from their repetitive ritual actions to wave.

Is this limited communication between the genders the rapture of the title? Is the women's seeming escape into the sea, rapture? Or is the transcendent union or sense of ecstasy, the very recognition of the fixity of gender roles? Men trapped by the structures of their own making - by religion, by civilisation itself. And women trapped by their unconscious links to each other, to Nature.

There is a tantalising ambivalence to this, Neshat's *Rapture*.

FURTHER READING

Ronald Jones "Sovereign Remedy; The Art of Shirin Neshat", *Artforum* October 1999

Neery Melkonian "A Not Yet Names Third Space" in "Shirin Neshat *Turbulent*", Whitney Museum of American Art at Phillip Morris, 1998

"Voiceovers", 5th Guinness Contemporary Art Project, Curator Victoria Lyn, Art Gallery of New South Wales 1999, p. 39