

GLADSTONE GALLERY

# ARTFORUM

500 WORDS

## Shirin Neshat

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Left: **Shirin Neshat**, *Ghada*, 2013, digital C-print and ink, 62 1/8 x 40 1/4". From "Our House Is on Fire" series, 2013. Right: **Shirin Neshat**, *Nida (Patriots)*, 2012, ink on LE silver gelatin print, 60 x 45". From "The Book of Kings" series, 2012.

*Shirin Neshat is an Iranian artist based in New York. Her upcoming survey "Shirin Neshat: Facing History" takes a sweeping look at her output and will present her iconic black-and-white photographic portraits—which she discusses below—as well as her nonnarrative videos and her recent forays into cinema. Incorporating archival material to contextualize her practice, the show confronts Neshat's decades-long exile from her homeland. It is on view at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden from May 18 to September 20, 2015.*

**I HAVE BEEN UNFAITHFUL** to any one medium, and my work has gone through cyclical uses of more and less overt political references. In my earlier photographic series, such as "Women of Allah," 1993–97, I addressed the philosophical and ideological principles related to the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Although these photographs were taken after I left Iran and well after the revolution, I was

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trying to face the pivotal moment of the Islamic Revolution. What was my place within this greater historical narrative? It had caused a long and painful separation from my family, which defined my path and life alone in exile. I want “Facing History” to offer not only a sociopolitical reading of Iran but also insight into the challenges of an Iranian female artist interpreting her personal and national history.

In more than one series, I explore repeated conceptual patterns such as the subject of martyrdom. If in the “Women of Allah” series we are faced with militant women who willingly sacrificed their lives for their higher devotion to their religion, in 2012’s “The Book of Kings” series, young activists also put their lives at risk—if not for religion, then for a call to democracy. In the second case, the Persian epic poem *Shahnameh* (The Book of Kings) covers the figures. In a way, all of my photographic work is inscribed with poetry. Poetic works allow us to say everything; they offer a subversive language that can transcend the law. When we were children, these stories were read to us. Both series are similar in depicting how the notions of patriotism, faith, and self-sacrifice always intersect with violence, atrocity, and ultimately death.

For me, “The Book of Kings,” “Women of Allah,” and 2014’s “Our House Is on Fire” are aesthetically and conceptually linked. They are all human portraits that are less about the identity of each individual character, and more about how the collection of images create a portrait of a country.

While working on my upcoming film, *Looking for Umm Kulthum*, I went to Egypt; during my time there, I also made the photographs for “Our House Is on Fire.” If “The Book of Kings” mainly focused on the youth who were in the foreground of the revolutions of the Arab Spring, in Cairo I specifically chose to photograph elderly people. They had endured the loss of their young children during the upheaval. This series captures the tremendous collective sense of despair in Egypt at the time. I set up a studio at Townhouse; people came one at a time. As my collaborator Larry and I photographed them, we asked each person to think of a tragic moment in their lives. I told them my story of exile, and Larry shared the recent loss of his only daughter. A human exchange began. Nothing was recorded, as we had no intention of making their private statements public. This project became one of my most important artistic experiences to date.

I no longer feel like I am in exile but rather I feel like a nomad. I am no longer as nostalgic about Iran as I was in the past, nor do I dwell on the desire to return home. Having worked in many other countries, in particular in the Arab world, I find that being a nomad has become an acceptable way of life.

— As told to Andrianna Campbell