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PIVOTAL MOMENTS

Shirin Neshat and the Art of Tragic Euphoria

by Robert Knight, introduction by Shekku Wali

A sense of emptiness pervades all of Shirin Neshat’s work. She is, in a word, a master. It’s evident in her portraits, in her sculpture, in the way she creates and manipulates space using light and other materials to create a sense of space and time. The way she works with materials—she is a true artist. The way her work transforms us, transforms the way we see the world. The way her work challenges us to think about the way we live, the way we interact with each other. It’s a profound impact on her work and on the way we see the world.

In the interview that follows, she speaks about her process of creating, saying that the challenge for her is to find a balance between what she identifies as realistic material—that is, what she sees in the world that has a profound impact on her—and her desire to transform that into a form of art that can challenge our perceptions and make us think about the way we live.

In her new show, "Hijab," Neshat explores themes of identity, religion, and freedom. The show features a series of photographs that capture the beauty and complexity of the human condition. Neshat’s work is a powerful reminder of the power of art to transform and inspire.
of some mysticism, coming from somewhere else... perhaps, and then into the world, so that the art she makes is in her balance between there and here. Issues and poetry often are sources and points of departure for Kienzle, and here too, in the peaks and pull that make balance, but not a fluid equilibrium. Poetry and beauty inhabit their power only when paired with pain and tragedy. It is the evident edge of his work, a core theme that can be read against the warm skin of a beautiful woman from Michelangelo's "David of Perugia," with its well-preserved skin and muscular,flowing...
which we now look at the world in its confused state. Nahshon does this doubling in the art he brings to us.

"Shahin Nahshon's solo exhibition "The House of My Eyes" is presented from May 30th to October 31st at the Museum of the Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar. The exhibition is part of the 37th Venice Biennale, "A Whole New Dream," and is the Gladstone Gallery's first in New York on May 29 and runs until June 17.

The interview with Shahin Nahshon that follows was conducted by phone at his Brooklyn studio on April 3, 2017.

Women crossing: We spoke before the last three bodies of photographic portraits were made, so let's go back and talk about the origins of The Book of Kings.

Nahshon: It came after Women of Allah, when I had been involved in activism for years and July 4th in New York City was a holiday for women and children who had been lynched and murdered in their mother's name. So I thought it would be a good time to have a group of women standing together in front of this image and collecting petitions and letters from people who were being killed. I then turned my lens on this direct political activity, and suddenly found myself again in president, in collecting petitions and letters from people who were being killed.

What was it about The Green Movement that provoked you to get involved in a more direct way? It was the most powerful movement since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. It was that the people of Iran could talk back to the regime, and so I allowed them to be subject to the same kind of repression as in our case. It was the same thing.

I thought my book of images might speak to some of the issues and politicians, which was not different from the time of Women of Allah. But it was all about the fact that women and men were being banned and very submissive to their religion. Here, you had a lot of very young, modern, educated people who were not interested in religion at all. It took 10 days to get them and then at the images of Women of Allah, you can see the change in Iranian society. At the time, I was preparing shows for the Guggenheim and decided to create this large body of work that captured the dynamics of the women who held the power. The women and the men who are the authorities, and their people who are watching them being governed. I started photographing many young Iranian artists whose work I met in New York and also some Arab friends who were activists for their own countries, and created a photo-manufacture that included 65 images.

But you also took inspiration from a book, this time the 30th-century epic poem by Ferdowsi, called The Book of Kings.
THE BOOK OF KINGS

There are photographers who don't need the camera. Photographs are not their product; they are not an end in themselves. They are tools, means to an end. The camera is a medium, a tool, like a brush or a camera or a knife. It's a means to the end of expressing something. In the case of the book "The Book of Kings," the end was to create a narrative, to tell a story, to bring together a collection of photographs that would convey a certain message or emotion. In this case, the message was to explore the theme of identity and cultural heritage.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part is a collection of portraits of people from different parts of the world, each representing a different culture or ethnicity. These portraits were taken in various locations, from the streets of Cairo to the mountains of the Tashkent region. The second part of the book is a series of landscapes, capturing the natural beauty of the places where these people live.

The use of black and white photographs was a deliberate choice. It was a way to create a sense of timelessness, to keep the focus on the subjects rather than the technology. It was also a way to create contrast, to highlight the differences between the people and their environments. The choice of monochrome images was meant to evoke a sense of nostalgia, to remind the viewer of a time when things were simpler, when cultures were more distinct and boundaries were clearer.

The book "The Book of Kings" is not just a collection of photographs. It is a story, a narrative, a way to explore the rich tapestry of human experience. It is a reminder that, despite our differences, we are all part of the same human story, sharing the same hopes and dreams, the same struggles and victories.
In the three postcard-sized photographs that comprise the images, we see a quite formal, almost as if a sculpture. The figures are either standing or sitting on a bench, and the backdrop is a dark blue sky with some clouds. The figures are dressed in black and white, and the light is dramatic, creating a sense of mystery and intrigue.

The thin tripod that I found at the train station, where a group of tourists were taking pictures, was a great find. I used it to capture the scene, and I was happy with the results.

I was struck by the way the figures in the photograph on the left are posed, with one figure leaning forward and the other holding a lamp. It's as if they are struggling against the wind, and the light from the lamp is casting a ghostly shadow on the figures. The lighting is dramatic, and the composition is powerful.

In the second photograph, the figures are standing next to each other, with one holding a camera. It's as if they are trying to capture a moment, and the light is soft, creating a sense of intimacy and connection.

I was impressed by the way the figures in the third photograph are posed, with one figure standing tall and the other crouching down. It's as if they are trying to reach for something, and the light is dramatic, creating a sense of tension and anticipation.

The overall composition of the photographs is striking, and I think they work well together as a group. I hope you enjoy them as much as I do.
and production aspects, but we finally found the right mood and tone enough money and we got it going.

You said that in developing the script, “I allowed myself to be naive for two years.” Was part of the reason you thinking to let you could personalize the film by letting in the dream.

Yes, I think at a certain point in your career you wonder about the degree of risk you can take. How far can you go? I remember days when I sat with the script and gave myself absolute freedom to imagine everything. And the more you can get, the more people could trust the right direction. Of course, later we had to be careful with the plot and I added back to reality, but what had happened was that the film had to be turned into my language and that I was impossible to hide it once someone did.

You talked about the complex tapestry of this film, and it seems to me that the complexity comes through the various layers in which you’re acting. This is the first time that you have actually used archived footage; you’re using actors who are playing historical figures like Rasputin and Emile Zola; you have an actor playing an Arab in his own language and you have the dream sequences.

Perhaps the most interesting point about the film is that you’ve put a lot of heart and soul into it, and you have the dream sequences woven into the fabric of the film. We have four layers: the actual film that I’m shooting, the production, which is the story of the filmmakers and their own trajectory as a person; then there are the scenes, and finally the dream sequences. So the question is, how can we write and edit them such a way that those elements would get visually understandable? For example, we are now adding this dream sequences and the actors. I am going to the scenes where the director is by herself and very sorrowful for her role, or the dream sequences, which is really slow and almost silent. We have been thinking about how to create significance by the different layers. So far the transitions have been very difficult.

I arrange that the filmmakers are important for you. One of the ways you work with the archival footage into the film is by having, for instance, crew switch to a screening room. It allows you to compose the colors, dimensions of the film.

Exactly. I’m actually using my research as film’s research and imagination. In the same way you mention she is looking at montage of Kings and ends up with images of the Palms and the films that I saw at the Fantasia Festival of 1999. Which is then integrated into the film she is shooting. You’ll see exactly how she has used the costumes and scenes and set-ups for her film. I think, in the end this film will be characteristically unique because of the way we integrate all these different layers.

In the midst of the complexity of your feature-length film, you make Footnotes. Was that a way of escaping the complexity of narrative you were involved with, making the Footnotes?

Actually, it is a very different film; it really was with Natalie Portman, in 1999. I had to come up with a narrative that could not do with fear and being Muslim. I couldn’t use Natalie Portman as a starting point, as a lot of the people in my films, I decided to make a film based on the jokes of dreams. I’ve written down my dreams over the years and I find there very compelling. After the Footnotes film, which is called Footnotes and Mirror, I thought, “Why not make two more that could be considered a trilogy?” The difference is that Footnotes and Mirror are related to Iran and to my own experience.
The most striking thing about Raia is the way her narrative, in the face of the visual impact the scene makes on Raia, calling her "docile, coming out of the imagination," and referring to her "brutal, hateful heart," that she is the one that ways that scene moves from it. We were coming to updates, and we managed to pull off the scene from the episode that we wrote and to perform. I chose this gun and explained that I had some idea with a woman that would move a woman to tears, that he also had to be capable of being aggressive, but the point of violence. He had a violent look but at the same time he was afraid (for fear of losing). He held a gun and he wanted to be an actor but had never had the chance. What you saw was complete imitations. The gun clearly took instructions very well. He seemed to do research and to describe the right song. It's a 1967 hit by The Beatles called "The U.S. Is Over."

I know what Raia is running from but I wonder what she is running towards. That meeting with the other woman, who I announced was a very determined mother character, is an encounter of a different kind. Why does that woman resist her in the way that she does?

As I said, this was based on my own dream experiences. My mother, who has always been very important to me, is my last attachment to her. She was the only one that was the mother that I was surprised to be present and changing from one scene unfolding in another. When Raia eventually makes her, and this is exactly how she was in the dream—the mother was there on her phone and Raia came back into the bed. I think my mother was about my country, also about my 80-year-old mother. I love her, I appreciate her and love her, love her and want to be part of it, but at the same time I am pushing her away. This is why I say my mother is like the country. Without being melodramatic, I think the only thing that remains to me in a humbled is the motherland.

Every single Raia is dramatic, the architecture of the building, the interior of the active stage and the dramatic encounter between Raia and the mother. This has helped that theatrical qualities quite effectively in your work. In a hatchet day are always wanted about being overrelentless and overinvolvement. I have observed that theatrical qualities have a distinct quality quite effectively in your work.
GLADSTONE GALLERY

realistic way because they weren’t meant to be real like that. But I did mean for every one of them to have a sense of reality.

You’re not ruled by any means, but it seems to me that you are somehow hopeful.

I think that is my nature. Between the two of us, my husband, Shoji, says I am the optimist. I am a fighter and every time I fall, things are less desirable, I tend to pick myself up. I have a survivor and I’ve been in dealing with a lot of changes in my life. First of all as a young woman here and then going through different family situations. So to this day when I have to go back to myself, I always try to be optimistic.

The characters portrayed in my films, or in the photographs, seem to take off from my personality.

A lot of artists have drifted into film: Julian Schnabel, David Salle, Matthew Barney, Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo—I could compile a long list. When you make that move, do you have to locate your work along a spectrum that chooses between art and cinema? You have said on many occasions that you think of an artist rather than a cinema artist.

It’s funny but two days ago I was working with this woman at the Metropolitan Opera who is my stage director. I think she has been at the Met for 15 years. We were going through the different acts and scenes of Aida and she was always looking to me for answers.

Here is a woman who can read music and is a singer, and she is looking to someone who can do neither of those things. I found myself responding very naturally and saying, “Let’s do this and let’s do that.” I realized that even you put yourself at the mercy of another language, your artistic response is automatic. It’s like your intuition kicks itself out. At first you have a tendency to say, “I can’t do this,” but when faced with a stage, the actors and the music, I think, “Okay, how would I want to make these people on the stage right now? What would I do?”

The answer is not that complicated. As artists we are sometimes too afraid, and the reality is that our minds work by responding to things as they come our way. We think we are good at only one thing, but whatever approach we have in terms of our convictions, we can apply to anything. It could be a flower decoration. It could be the way we make a building. It could be opera, cinema or photography. Next to the people I’m working with, I always feel I’m underprepared and I have to work more than them do, but then I recognize I have prepared. I see the fear and the anxiety that live inside me, but at the same time that anxiety is positive because it forces me to trust myself and my instincts.

So with Aida, you have said that you have taken liberties to change the power dynamics and the fatalism in the original opera. How liberal have you been?

Two things don’t change in opera: the music and the script. What you can change is the interpretation. While Aida is very popular in the West, it is extremely problematic for the Middle East. A number of intellectuals, including Edward Said, have written extensively about Aida, drawing in particular into Middle Eastern culture. As I tried to envision my interpretation of Verdi’s Aida, many questions came up. So what I’ve done is to give it some contemporary relevance by shifting around the identity of who is the supernumer and who is the victim. Also, the inspiration for my concepts of the program comes from Fritz Lang’s Metropolis, so it is extremely futuristic but also very ancient. Ancient Egypt in my program is a hybrid, which you see in the costumes more than anything. The other significant change is that the priests become a large group that represents the really horrible part of all religious fanaticism. I also used the Ethiopians to make some subtle reference to refugees from Africa and the Middle East.

In Metropolis the sets are expressionist. Does your set design look like that?

We pay respect to the monumentality of ancient Egyptian culture and architecture but keep it very minimal. I’m also including a video. There are four acts in the opera and so there will be one three-to-four-minute-long video in each act. But what’s important is that the stage setup and sets rotation give you a completely different point of view, like a Richard Serra sculpture. It becomes a different animal when you see it from different angles.

At the beginning of the opera, the “Triumphal March” affords an opportunity to deploy the victorious army combined with some various choruses.

One of the problems is that Verdi created this quasi-Oriental ballet, which we are not doing. Our choreography is more realistic. We have only eight people, as well as the chorus and the extras, so there will be very simple movements that even the chorus can do. The choreographer specializes in working with people who are not dancers. I want the body movements to be realistic, so we’re incorporating Sufi dances, Shalata dances, Polyvalent dances and steps from Pina Bausch. Everything is a hybrid.

Ten years ago you said that your own work “has a very sharp knife in it in a quiet way.” Do you still think of your work as sharp but quiet?

Yes, we all agree, me more than anyone, that the last thing we want to do is to make a political and didactic piece out of Aida. We don’t want to be doing propaganda. But the “Triumphal March” is a celebration of invasion and killing and bringing out slaves. That’s not something to be celebrated and I don’t participate in anything supporting that. I’m going to turn it around. So the audience will have to catch the more subversive intervention of not allowing such a thing to slide by, that killing and recruiting and taking slaves are not okay.

Is quiet subversion more effective than the noisy variety?

For me, people come for the line of the music, and if I can instill some meaningful message that they didn’t think about, then even better. I don’t know how few people from the Middle East will respond, but I certainly don’t want to be heavy-handed. I can name artists from the Arab world who sometimes go overboard in terms of this whole identity thing. I always find it best when you are allegorical or as minimal as possible, otherwise it is just too much like preaching.