'90s redux

LIVE THROUGH THIS

As art of the 1990s recedes in the rear view, the sustained impact of the decade’s artists comes into sharper focus.

Essay by Ann Wiens

It was a powerful run. But as the wave of the go-go 1980s crashed on the shore of a new decade, we knew something was up. Something was shifting. It had to do with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the standoff in Tiananmen Square and Nelson Mandela walking out of prison. It had to do with falling savings and losses and dissatisfaction with social inequity and a new thing called the World Wide Web. It was confusing and unprecedented and coming from unexpected places. And it felt transformative.

I emerged from graduate school in 1993 as the Gulf War erupted and the American economy was in a recession. My cohorts and I were artists, writers, and curators who had cut our teeth on postmodernism but could clearly see that the art world we’d expected to enter with our shiny new MFA and Ph.D.—with its grand gestures, big personalities, swoon spaces, and voracious collectors—was on the wane.

The party was over, the money was gone. The center—of power, of influence, of stylistic and ideological dominance—was wobbly. But as that center dimmed, the edges brightened. Everything was in flux. We still made and discussed and wrote about painting and sculpture and photography. But increasingly, artists who had kept—or been kept—to the periphery began to claim the center. People whose work addressed aspects of being female, gay, black, Latino, or otherwise “other” were, more and more, initiating the conversations. People opened galleries in uncomfortable or temporary spaces, and they weren’t all in New York. As the decade commenced, no one thought too much about making money because there was, for the moment, little to be made.

Following on a handful of recent reexaminations, an exhibition opening at the Moontan Art Museum in New Jersey February 8 and running through May 17 offers a reflection on the art and artists that defined this shift. “Come As You Are: Art of the 1990s” is billed as “the first major museum survey to examine the art of this pivotal decade in its historical context,” and it includes works by 45 artists whose practice involved installation, photography, painting, printmaking, sculpture, video, and a range of new media that accompanied the rise of the Internet. Organized by the museum’s founding curator of contemporary art, Alexandra Schwartz, the show views the work (continued on page 59).
Shirin Neshat | b. 1957, Iran

Few art viewers failed to be mesmerized by Neshat’s “Women of Allah” series, 1993-97, with its lush photographs of veiled Iranian women—some welding firearms, others in prayer—on whose skin the artist had inscribed verses of Persian poetry. The images seemed in stark contrast to the Western modern visual culture of the time, but dovetailed perfectly with the conceptual rigor of its contemporary forms. Although the series sprang from the artist’s personal history and investigated her experience as a female artist in an oppressive culture (in which she left in 1979, before the revolution), it tended to elide in self-imposed exile, the political nature of the images and their preexistence regarding the powder keg that the region has become cannot be ignored. “She has addressed and rendered nuanced elements of Iranian history throughout her career, so you can really examine the history of the country through the prism of her art, from the military coup of 1953, which gave rise to the rule of the Shah, to the present,” says Melissa Ho, assistant curator of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., which will host “Shirin Neshat: Racing History” from May 16 to September 20. “She’s an incredibly ambitious artist who moves from still photographs to cinema,” says Ho of the artist’s series and projects, which have addressed cultural power and perilously within a theocratic regime. Although Neshat first came to prominence in the West, her auction highs have been earned at Sotheby’s Doha and Christie’s Dubai—most recently for Passage, 2003, an editioned film that earned $265,000 at Sotheby’s Doha last October, suggesting expanding demand.