Politics comes first

Yoneh thought I was ordering his government. The government thought I was criticising their policies. The parties thought I was supporting their candidates. The politicians thought I was preaching to the converted. The philosophic thought I was entertaining their ideas. The imaginations thought they were being entertained. The images thought they were being entertained. The reception thought they were entertaining. The reactions thought they were being entertained. The audiences thought they were entertaining. The publishers thought they were entertaining. The critics thought they were entertaining. The reviewers thought they were entertaining. The reviews thought they were entertaining. The opinions thought they were entertaining. The feelings thought they were entertaining. The emotions thought they were entertaining. The reactions thought they were entertaining. The thoughts thought they were entertaining. The beliefs thought they were entertaining. The doubts thought they were entertaining. The uncertainties thought they were entertaining. The above all thought they were entertaining.
No sooner am I through the door of Shirin Neshat’s New York studio than we are talking politics. The artist, whose work over two decades, which she describes as “subversively candid”, has precluded her from returning to her native Iran, is excited about the fragile diplomatic agreement reached in Geneva at the beginning of this month. “It may be my naïve reading but I think it’s a very positive thing,” she says. “President Rouhani is a smart but cautious person — and the chief negotiator, Mohammad Javad Zarif, has become a hero embraced by the people.”

Next month, a retrospective of Neshat’s work will open at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, in Washington DC; it is the inaugural exhibition for the organisation’s new director, Melissa Chiu. And rather than present the artist’s oeuvre, a remarkable mix of hard-hitting politics and lyrical aesthetics, in chronological order, the show will tell a story of Iran’s relationship with the west. The timing seems perfect.

“Who would have thought that the Iran talks would be progressing in the way that they are?” laughs Chiu. “This idea of narrating history came to me because I think that Shirin’s work has often been conflated under the idea of talking about Islam and talking about women. For me, it has always been about Iran. If you look at her historical trajectory, the way she created it, there are specific moments in Iranian history that informed the creation of her work.

“As an Iranian in exile, she has always been very articulate about the idea of a condition of diaspora and, with that, the complexity of feeling connected to a culture, but living outside it,” adds Chiu. “It’s a very personal approach to history, through Shirin’s own eyes.”

The show will focus on three moments: the British- and CIA-backed coup that brought about the downfall of the democratically elected Mosaddeq government in 1953; the immediate aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution; and, finally, the protests of 2009 that have become known as the Green Movement.

“Munis” (2008), the video that paved the way for the feature film Women Without Men (2009), which won Neshat a Silver Lion at the Venice Biennale the same year, opens the show. Dipping in and out of magic realism, the work centres on one woman’s experience just before the 1953 coup which, as Neshat sees it, paved the way for the 1979 revolution. “You can see the rage that developed,” she says. “The embassy where the conspiracy was hatched in 1953 became what they called the House of Spies. But I think the American public are largely unaware of the US intervention in Iranian modern history.

Like many of her compatriots Neshat, now 58, was sent abroad for her education in the 1970s. She studied art at Berkeley in California but did not practise as an artist until more than 10 years after graduating. Her first trip back to Iran, in the late 1980s, inspired “Women of Allah” (1993-96), a powerful set of images of veiled women with guns, their bodies inscribed by hand with Farsi poetry, through which she explored the experience of the women who had lived through the revolution and fought in the Iran-Iraq war.

The images brought her recognition as an international artist, and some notoriety. “Some people thought I was endorsing the Iranian government, the government thought I was criticising them and the critics thought I was just being provocative,” she says. “At that stage, I didn’t even have a career or a point of view. It was only later my work came to have a sharper knife.”

Neshat is happy to define herself as a Middle Eastern artist but she is not alone in distancing herself from the label “feminist”. “Many female artists in the region deal in their work with the experience of being a woman but I don’t think they are dealing with those issues as explicitly as they were in the 1990s,” says Omar Kholeif, a curator at London’s Whitechapel Gallery. “It has shifted into a more implicit critique.”

Reem Fadda, associate curator for Middle Eastern art at Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, agrees: “The artists I see do not define themselves in any one box. In the Arab world and Iran there are multiple causes that people are struggling with: women’s issues are just one of many.”
Politics comes first

Film & photography | Shirin Neshat has powerful new multimedia shows in Washington DC
and Azerbaijan but remains in exile from her native Iran. She talks to Jane Ure-Smith

If Neshat broke new ground in the 1990s in terms of drawing the world's attention to her art, her strong focus on politics is part of a tradition. "Politics has always run through the work of artists from the Middle East, and its representation has changed with the great uprisings and conflicts," says Kholeif. "The six-day war of 1967, for example, created a whole different language in visual culture."

In the aftermath of the six-year effort involved in making Women Without Men, Neshat returned to monochrome portraiture: The Book of Kings (2012) about Iran's Green Movement; Our House Is on Fire (2013), about the Arab Spring; and, last year, she accepted a commission to create Home of My Eyes, a series of 55 portraits of Azerbaijanis for the opening exhibition of the Yarat Contemporary Art Space in Baku. Neshat asked her subjects what the word "home" meant to them and inscribed their answers on their bodies. Azerbaijan evoked the Iran of her childhood. "Baku felt old-fashioned, in a good way," she says. "There was a poignancy to the project; I was half an hour's flight from Iran."

Three years ago, Neshat told an audience at Oxford university: "I am a restless, anxious, nervous person: I thrive on struggle. I need to feel I am growing." So portraiture will take a back seat while she embarks on a second feature film, due for release next year, this time about the famous Egyptian singer Oum Kultum. "She's the most significant artist of the 20th century in the Middle East, loved by Egyptians, Israelis, Palestinians, Syrians," says Neshat. "It will tell the story of an Iranian film-maker trying to find a way to make a film about a famous Egyptian singer. Neshat is not just directing — she has just completed her first script.

Another project, slated to take place in 2017, will take Neshat farther into uncharted waters. This time, she will be directing and designing the sets for an opera. The details are still secret but preparations involve backstage visits to the Metropolitan Opera and weekly coaching from a dramaturge. "It's thrilling," she says, "I'm a complete student."

Neshat is not the only Iranian artist enjoying the limelight this year in the US. Pioneering Iranian artist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, working in glass and now 91, has a show at the Guggenheim, while Parviz Tanavoli, "father of modern Iranian sculpture", has his first full US retrospective at the Davis Museum in Massachusetts.

"It's definitely the spring of Iranian art in the US," says Kholeif, who commissioned this year's Middle East-focused symposium at the Armory show in March. "We have a lot of work to do now to make sure the conversation continues."

'Shirin Neshat: Facing History', Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, May 18-September 20; hirshhorn.org
'The Home of My Eyes', Yarat Contemporary Art Space, Baku, until June 23; yarat.az