ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

VOICE OF THE VEIL

Can a video artist bring the lives of Iranian women to the big screen?

BY LAUREN COLLINS

Shirin Neshat’s “Rapture” (1999) is a twelve-minute video-and-sound installation, shot in black-and-white. On one screen, the viewer sees the silhouette of a seaside fortress; a second depicts a rock-littered wilderness. The sound of rushing wind gives way to strange music—guttural chanting, underlaid with ominous themes. On the first screen, a corps of white-shirted men march toward the camera; the other screen fills with a mass of women in black chadors. The men begin to move through the alleyways of a town toward the fortress and, arriving, prop ladders against its walls to ascend the ramparts. As some of their brethren, and the camera, watch from above, a group of the men break into a stylized bravado, their outstretched arms forming geometric patterns, like the cells of a honeycomb. Suddenly, on the other screen, the women erupt in a shrill lamentation. They pray and then, in birdlike configurations, cross the plain, eventually reaching a beach. Their chadors flap in the breeze as they push a rowboat toward the water. From the other screen, the men wave to them. The camera lingers on the boat, bobbing in the middle of a vast ocean.

Neshat is a visual artist who works primarily in video. Born in Qazvin, Iran, a provincial capital northwest of Tehran, in 1957, she has lived in the United States since she was seventeen. She began making videos in the late nineties, and they soon became celebrated examples of the genre. “Turbulent,” a tense split-screen installation that featured a man and a woman in an anything-you-can-do-I-can-do-better singing contest (women are not permitted to sing alone in front of a mixed audience in Iran), won first prize at the Venice Biennale in 1999, and Neshat’s work is in the permanent collections of the Guggenheim, the Whitney, and the British Museum. The vagaries of biography and recent history have meant that her concerns have often coincided with those of the evening news. A number of critics have viewed her work through a lens of identity politics, taking her to be some sort of oracles of Muslim womanhood. Others have scoffed at her tendency toward the melo-dramatically picturesque. Writing in The New Republic in 2001, Jed Perl criticized Neshat for not having a viewpoint. “All that a viewer gets,” he wrote, “is a generalized mood, a kind of artier MTV.” Neshat does have a viewpoint, but it is an idiosyncratic, psychological one that, rather than offering sweeping political prescriptive (she, like you, is unsure about how to achieve peace in the Middle East), tries to make sense of the particular discompositions of geography and culture that have beset her own life. The beauty of her art tends to arise from its elemental contrasts: men and women, silence and sound, earth and sky. She has said that she wants people to “take away with them not so much a political statement but something that really

The videos are crafted with a draftsman’s attention to detail. Klaus Biesenbach, the chief curator of media at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, says, “She has accomplished a quality of composition and image construction at the highest artistic level.” Peter Schjeldahl has written, in this magazine, “Neshat’s elegant, two-screen meditations on the culture of the chador in Islamic Iran emit an icy heat of suppressed passions; they are among the first undeniable masterpieces of video installation.” In a medium that often prizes esoteric nonchalance, her work is unusually fervent and sincere.

Between 1998 and 2003, Neshat made ten videos, but in the past three years she has made only two, “Mahdokht” (2004) and “Zarin” (2005). Both consist of re-ger material from what has become her main endeavor: a full-length feature film intended for theatrical release, which she hopes will première at Cannes in May. When she decided to try directing, her reputation was prospering. The attacks of September 11th had increased demand for her work, and for commentary from her on Islam, which she has often felt unqualified to give. “I got attention, but at the same time I had to confront really simplistic questions,” she said. “I felt ridiculous.” Neshat’s work has always had a cinematic quality—the director Atom Egoyan has written of “Turbulent” that it “completely inspired me”—but acquaintances warned her about jeopardizing an art-world sincerity with a movie project.

“I’m doing this film—wholeheartedly, without really knowing if it’s going to succeed,” she said. “I know the price attached. I could fall on my face.”

The movie project was born in 2001, when Neshat received a call from her friend Hamid Dabashi, a professor of Iranian studies and comparative literature at Columbia. “He said, ‘Shirin, have I got a book for you,’” she said. It was a novel called “Zaran Bidun Mard,” or “Women Without Men,” by Shahrnush Parsipour, one of Iran’s most prominent female writers. The book was difficult to find in Paris—the Iranian government had banned it—so Dabashi photocopied the one he had. A wary, profane fable about the interlocking lives of five female outcasts in Tehran who convene upon a mystical garden in Karaj, cultivating a feminist Eden, the book awoke in Neshat a feeling of deep communion. “The protagonists are very vulnerable—they go mad or they kill themselves—and I identify with every one of them,” she said.

Neshat was determined to find the author, who had fled Iran in 1994. She tracked her down in the San Francisco Bay Area, living in a garage apartment. Parsipour, who has been imprisoned many times because of her work (once for four years), and who suffers from a bipolar condition, welcomed Neshat, and the two women talked for hours. “I just fell in love
with the way she looks at the world," Ne- 
shat said of Parsipur, who is sixty-one.

Parsiup agreed to allow Neshat to adapt her book into a film.
Neshat worked on the script at the 
Sundance Institute workshop for film-
makers, and her crew finished production 
in June, in Morocco. Out of the footage, 
she is also preparing three more video 
pieces (one for each character in the film) 
for a show at the Barbara Gladstone 
gallery, in January. She said, "I wanted to see 
if I could work within the logic of art and 
the logic of cinema at the same time."

One September afternoon, Neshat, 
Azari, and Sam Neave, a young 
British-Iranian editor, were at a friend's 
Tritech studio, clustered around 
two computers. Lulu, Neshat's chocolate Lab, 
grazed on a bone. The day's task was to 
refine the video piece about Faizeh, one 
of the characters in "Women Without 
Men." Faizeh is a devout young woman 
whose faith is shaken after she is raped by 
strangers in a Tehran alleyway. She over-
comes the trauma with the help of her 
friend Munis, who wants to become a 
political activist. They were on version six 
of the edit. "Shahnumah Parsipur is com-
ing to see the film on Friday, and then 
next week my anxiety is Barbara Glad-
stone," Neshat said.

Neave, wearing a hooded sweatshirt, 
dicked on an icon. The video played, be-
ginning with Faizeh, in a chador, ap-
proaching the gate of the garden.
"I think it is terrible, boring—it doesn't 
work," Azari, who co-wrote the film, said. 
He is a substantial, mustached man, whose 
initial gentleness belies a sprightly intellect.

Few established artists have made a 
successful transition to directing movies. 
(An exception is Julian Schnabel, whose 
films many critics consider to be better 
than his paintings.) The feature film did 
not turn out to be Andy Warhol's forte, 
and not many people remember David 
Salle's "Search and Destroy" (1995), a dark 
comedy about a corporate hustler, or 
Cindy Sherman's "Office Killer" (1997), 
involve a proofreader who murders her 
co-workers. Still, Neshat felt compelled to 
make "Women Without Men," whatever 
the risks. "It got to a point that it was a bi-
ennial here, a biennial there," she said. 
"You could just smell that they're using 
you for a time, and I started to get really 
tired of it. I needed a project that would let me be alone, let me be a beginner again. I wanted to hide from the art world. There 
was a danger that I would lose perspective—the integrity, honesty, and naïveté 
being washed away," she pounded her fist 
against her palm to illustrate a wave 
eroding the shore.

The first issue up for debate was how 
to begin the video—did an "art" video 
have to follow the narrative logic of the 
film versus? Even if it didn't, how would 
Neshat communicate fundamental information about the characters and their 
dilemmas? There was also the question of 
whether a video that would be shown in a 
gallery, rather than a theatre, could even 
be conceived of as having a beginning, a 
middle, and an end.

Neshat: "Matthew Barney would 
never let you walk out in the middle."

Neave: "Matthew Barney would 
punch you in the face!"

The group resolved that the video 
should have a chronology, even if nobody 
watched it that way, and began to debate 
what the beginning should be. "I think it 
is not a bad idea to start from the garden," 
Azari said.

Neshat disagreed, arguing that the 
scenery lost context if the girls weren't 
shown travelling from the din of the city 
to the garden's eerie calm. She suggested 
beginning with a scene in which Munis 
discovers Faizeh crying. Neave clicked on 
the footage.

"Faizeh looks desperate, and we don't 
know why," Neshat said.

"Well, yeah, that's because she's been 
raped, and now she's following a dead 
woman down the street," Neave replied. 
(Munis, forbidden by her brother to leave 
the house, has just jumped off the roof 
and become a ghost.)

The other way you could go is to have 
the beginning of the video realistic and 
then, the minute you get to the garden, it 
becomes surrealistic," Neshat said.

Azari introduced a more complicated 
idea. "I think the way we could treat 
Munis is that she could be her alter ego."

The possibilities continued to multiply. 
The three considered superimposing 
faces on the scenes (no), splitting the 
screen (maybe), and intercutting the 
scenes in the garden with flashbacks of 
Faizeh's experiences in Tehran (yes).

"The viewer has to know that something 
terrible has happened to this girl," 
Neshat continued. "We have to show that
she was raped. And that she had this dream that fell apart—she was in love.
Neshat suggested beginning with a panoramic shot that follows Faiiz on the road from the city to the garden. "What do you say, Sam?" she asked.
Near was quiet for a minute.
"Sam says, 'Get another editor,'" she ventured.
"No, I say look at version one. That's where we started in the first version."
"Is that true? Shit."

The garden is a central motif not only of Persian literature but also of Neshat's self-mythology. "The house I grew up in had a beautiful garden, a typical Persian garden with a pool in the middle," she said recently. "Sometimes I draw it just so I can remember it. Two willow trees growing around the pool, roses, everything symmetrical." Neshat was the fourth of six children in a middle-class family; her father was a physician and part-time farmer, her mother was a housewife. Qazvin was a conservative city, and Neshat never dared to go to the bazaar without a veil, but her family was not particularly religious. Now she considers herself a secular Muslim.

When Neshat was in seventh grade, her parents enrolled her and her siblings in a Catholic boarding school in Tehran. Neshat was homesick, and she became uncooperative, so her parents brought her home. When she was seventeen, they sent her to Los Angeles for an extended visit with a sister who lived there. Neshat spoke little English and was profoundly homesick again. "The first few years in the U.S. were the darkest of my life," she said. She stayed, though, graduating from Berkeley with a degree in art. "My father insisted that all his children, including the girls, go to the highest levels of education," she said. "But sending us away from the warmth of the family separated us forever."

In 1983, Neshat moved to New York, where she worked as a receptionist at a hair salon as she tried to get an art career off the ground. She was a painter then, attempting to incorporate iconography from Persian miniatures into a Western style. "My work was so mediocre," she said. "I had two sessions of showing work to gallery owners. It was the most humiliating thing in my life." Around the same time, she met Kyung Park, a Korean-American artist and architect who had established an avant-garde exhibition space on Kenmore Street called the Storefront. "All this time, I'd been in California with stupid men," she recalled. "I was mesmerized by his intelligence." She abandoned painting and threw herself into life at the Storefront, helping out with everything from cleaning and mass mailing to organizing conferences.

She and Park married in 1987, and had a son, Cynus, in 1990. The following year, Neshat visited Iran, with Cynus, for the first time since 1979. The country was nothing like what she remembered. "It was as if you lost color and suddenly everything went to black and white," she said. She was disturbed by the new regime—the police presence, the dark clothes, the disappearance of nail polish—but fascinated by, even initially enamored of, the idea of a revolutionary society. Her life in New York seemed increasingly brief, as she pulled away, travelling to Iran every year between 1991 and 1997. "It took a few years for me to really get attached again," she said. "When I came back to New York for good, I left my work, I left my husband," she said. "I completely changed my life."

As Neshat started to hang around other Iranian expatriates, her views began to crystallize. She sympathized with radical Islam's hostility toward Western hegemony and yet was dismayed by its fear of sexual equality, she saw vibrant Persian intellectual traditions being blotted out by black-clad religiosity. She didn't know how to resolve the big geopolitical quandaries of Iran and America, but she began to summon images that, through mood and emotion, could at least convey her sense of searching bewilderment.

Neshat goes to only three restaurants: Fattali's, Walker's, and the Old Town Bar. They all look the same (dark wood, tin ceiling). She always orders chicken fingers. Most mornings, she jogs with Lulu for an hour along the West Side Highway, and every night she takes a dance class, either flamenco or West African. (In her twenties, Neshat became obsessed with kallok, a traditional Indian dance form. "I even became a vegetarian," she said. "But my parents objected. One of their friends said, 'You send your daughter to California and she becomes an Indian'?"") These rigidities provide the necessary conditions for taking chances with her art. "It gives me a sense of security,"
she said. "I am experimental on some things but not on others. I have to be mentally prepared."

Before she started directing a movie, Nesbat embarked on a crash course in the history of film. "I am really in love with the moving image, because it's less of a commodity than photography," she said. "You cannot put a film in your pocket." She and Azari got a projector, and they sometimes watched three movies a day, assigning themselves curricula: Tarkovsky Week, Kieslowski Week, Bergman Week, Buñuel Week. "I am ambitious but not naive," Nesbat said. "I am not one of those people who think that since I am an artist I can escape all the rules of cinema."

In late September, Shahrarai Parišpur flew from California to New York to view a rough cut of the movie version of her book. Nesbat was nervous; the novella had not been easy to adapt. "The people at Sundance said, 'We warn you, magical realism is one of the most difficult things to do,'" Nesbat recalled. "That's why "One Hundred Years of Solitude" never got made."

Parišpur arrived at Nesbat's studio to see the film on a Friday morning. She had brought takeout sushi and was wearing black ankle socks with purple Crocs that she had bought on the street; she was agitated because she had spilled soy sauce all over her new shoes. A copy of the Post was sitting on the table with the computers. "ZERO CLEVE: IDIOT IRAN FREZ is 'AMAZED' BY UPROAR," the headline read, referring to a suggestion by Iran's President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, that he visit Ground Zero. The headline in the Daily News the day before had been, simply, "GO TO HELL!" "Can you believe this?" Nesbat said. "GO TO HELL! Why?" Nesbat, many of whose friends and family members have suffered at the hands of the Iranian government, feels that Ahmadinejad is a criminal; but she was put off by the paper's jerking tone: "It's just this superiority complex in this country that has to end."

Parišpur, eating her squid, began to drink soy sauce straight from the cup. "Shahrarash, don't eat that soy sauce," Nesbat cried out. "Too much salt!" A few minutes later, the screening began. Nesbat clicked a mouse, and the screen filled with the image of a young girl, Munis, sitting in her family's house with her ear pressed to an old-fashioned radio. The movie is set in 1953, and the tableau was meticulously constructed as that of any Jane Austen adaptation: Ornate carpets, pillows on the floor; Munis, surrounded by a samovar and teacups, dressed in a period costume of a shirtwaist dress and pin curls. Still, it did not look wholly realistic—you could detect the hand of Nesbat, the artist, in the scene's muted palette and portentous mood.

From Munis's house, the action moves into the Tehran streets, where a violent rally is under way. The British- and C.I.A.-led coup that, in 1953, overthrew the democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, is just a backdrop in the novella, but Nesbat had made it a major plotline. In an e-mail, she wrote, "My film, without a doubt, is to release some anger as an Iranian against the unfair intervention of the U.S.A. in Iran, which forever wiped out the chance for democracy in our country and later brought the Islamic revolution." Despite her insistence on historical authenticity, her depiction of the mob, with its lines of marching men, recalled the abstracted choreographies of her videos. The pro-Mossadegh faction, for instance, was outfitted in matching white shirts. That is a little inspired by "Rapture,"" Nesbat said. "I studied BBC footage from the fifties, but I did my own thing."

When Munis jumps off the roof—Nesbat shows her floating, like a feather—the film breaks into surrealism. As the women make their way from the material commotion of Tehran to the garden, the light becomes gauzy, signalling an ancient, hermetic world. At one point, Faiezd finds herself alone in a forest of inconigious geographies, where wisps of cloud drift through the frame at supernatural rates and pine boughs suddenly give way to swamps. Walking through a field, she hears a noise and turns around to glimpse a woman in a chador darting among the trees. Not sure if the vision is imaginary or real, she walks and walks until she comes upon a crumbling house.

Filming began in Morocco in April, with a budget of around five million dollars. (The film is being produced by a consortium of European production companies.) The cast and crew came from twenty-five countries, and the mongrel society that Nesbat had created made for some calamities. She had asked the Iranian actress playing Farrokhaqa, the ma-

triarch of the garden, to stay in Morocco throughout the three months of filming, fearing that she might run into problems travelling back and forth. Two weeks before filming began, the actress refused, and Nesbat found a replacement. When the new Farrokhaqa arrived on the set, she had gained weight and highlighted her hair blond. Nesbat was also concerned that the movie's mature scenes might offend Muslim extremists.

"I was every day praying to God to keep me strong mentally and physically," she said. "It was really a question of stamina, surrounded by men who could do anything." Nesbat believes in the equality of the sexes, but not in their equivalence, and she can be harsh toward those, especially women, who she feels have violated decorum. One married actress, she said, was behaving like a diva, "filing with all the men," and Nesbat told her that if she didn't stop she would have to leave. In January, Nesbat ran into a movie-business friend at a film festival in Rotterdam. "Shirin, it's not too late!" she said. "Just give it up. This book was not meant to be made into a film. Go back to making your nice little video installations!"

In the studio in Tribeca, after almost two hours, the final credits rolled. It's a very good film," Parišpur declared, "but it's far from the book." She began to enumerate her grievances. "The brother pays too much. You must cut the first prayer. It's too many times in one day."

"O.K.,” Nesbat said. "Just show him combing his hair or something?"

Parišpur continued, "The dialogue between the man and Munis is weak. Everyone tells Farrokhaqa how beautiful she is at the party scene, but she's not that beautiful." She went on, "In the Faiezd scene, when she asks for water, Farrokhaqa should just give her the water, not talk."

Nesbat explained to Parišpur that she had cut a main character, Mahdokht, from the movie, because "it was so easy for it to become corny."

Parišpur grimaced and began fanning herself with a FedEx envelope. After a few minutes, though, she smiled, and told Nesbat that she was content. "When I don't see my imagination, I become sad," she said. "But this is your film."