GLADSTONE GALLERY
Conversations

Shirin Neshat with Carol Becker & Phong Bui

Shirin Neshat’s new full-length feature Women without Men will be shown at the 68th Venice Film Festival (September 2–12, 2009) and the Toronto International Film Festival (September 10–19, 2009). One evening in July, Carol Becker, Dean of the School of the Arts at Columbia University, and Publisher Phong Bui, paid a visit to the SoHo loft which she shares with her partner, the artist Shoa Azari, to watch the near-final version of the film before its last minute revisions. Following is the discussion that took place right after the screening.

CAROL BECKER: Having read Women without Men by Shahrazad Parsipur, I wonder at which point you began to realize or even imagine doing a film based on the novel.

SHIRIN NESHAT: It evolved gradually, I think. My deep affinity with Iranian women writers began when I first started to make the “Women of Allah” series between 1994 and 1997, which incorporated their texts on my photographs as a form of calligraphy that is infused with the image. Then in my later videos I used some of the poems of Rumi and Atar [Neyshaburi], the two greatest Persian poets of the 13th century. But then, for the first time, after many years of making short videos, I decided to undertake a project that might be a full-length feature film. I knew that I would not be writing an original script, and that I wanted a novel written by a prominent Iranian woman writer whose work would complement my own interest in the way that both the narrative and the imagery could function visually and conceptually.

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Her Prison Memoir, which hasn’t been translated into English, is one of the best memoirs I’ve ever read. I think her relationship to prison in a very complex one, partly due to the fact that she had developed manic depression to the degree that she had to be institutionalized, she had a son who she had to give to his father and that was very painful for her. You can tell in her writing, it’s her only refuge, a way of escaping reality. Maybe her mental illness has had a lot to do with the fantastic imagination she had shown. Despite all of that, she’s fearless with those conditions.

BECKER: So magical realism seems to be a more fitting reality for her.

NESHAT: Well, I heard her recently say to someone, “The reason I’m interested in magical realism is because you think about it, during the day you are awake but you are asleep at night. So when you are asleep you’re in a state of dream, you’re in another state of consciousness, which is as much a part of you as when you are awake.” So she sees dreams as magic and imagination, not so separate from reality.

BECKER: While seeing the film I felt I was in a dream and when the film ended I felt like that I had woken up to reality.

NESHAT: It was a real challenge because so much of the novel and the film are not at all grounded in reality. The two characters Parshali Legha and Farzad are fairly realistic, whereas her sister and Farzad, Munis and Zarin, are quite magical. I feel closer to the women who are not realistic. At the beginning of the novel was more factual as it started out with the 1953 revolution, and the surrealistic part just came and went, which is true to the novel. And in fact, it’s the latter that is closer to my sensibility. I’m more invested in the idea of treating the film as a symbolic level without losing the thread of communication to the viewer. For example, at the end of the year and a half of editing I reconstructed Manis as the narrator or spiritual guide that defines the mood of the story. After a long period of gestation over her character, I’ve decided that this is a strange film, and this is a strange character who is at once alive, then becomes dead, and later is resurrected. And I don’t want to let that go because I’m not interested in making a realistic film. That’s why the film begins and ends with her flying off the building in slow motion, which more or less ties the whole film together.

BECKER: It wasn’t so much the characters or even what they did that made the film feel like a dream; it’s that somehow creates the same sensation that you feel when you wake up from a dream.

NESHAT: I had many conversations with Shahrazad and I would say to her, “Did you have to write such a complicated book that it took you six years to make a comparable adaptation?” And she said, “Well, you could have chosen an easier book,” but I can’t imagine her doing another easy book. She even said to herself that as a writer, for

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example, you could have a ship with two hundred people and they could drown one by one, but when you make the film you have to get the ship, you have to get two hundred people and they drown them one by one.

But which is a far cry from your early work where actors or extras were being deployed as images, or functional as sculptural forms. And the fact that it's been dominated by black and white for so long, even since your first show in 1993 at Franklin Furnace, with no dialogue except for occasional singing, prayers, or music. It's the first time you use long narrative, dialogue, and color. You just spoke about the process of adapting the text into the moving images as well as various technical elements that the film requires, but to maintain the continuity from what you've done before and what you're doing now is another matter.

**NESHAT:** As I started to really learn about cinema and study how to write a script, I came to the conclusion that the fundamental difference between visual art and cinema is a question of character. Up to this point I've been making videos and photographs where people are more or less detached characters, they are iconic figures or function as statues, as you said. "Rapture" is a good example in which there is not a close-up of a single person—they function as a group, or one monumental image, it's about going deep into the psychological, mental, emotional state of each person and for me that was the biggest challenge. And I soon learned that filmmaking is about me. I must admit that I often felt shy in experience in terms of how to communicate with the actors, but in the end I'm quite happy with who we chose and how terrific they all were in their performances. As far as the aesthetic decisions, I decided from the beginning that this is going to be an experimental film, and that I would be playful with it, especially in terms of occasional use of color.

**BURIANNOLOLI AND TARKOVSKY:** Similarly used color in some specific occasions.

**NESHAT:** In my case, I knew that it was going to be a 1970s painted photography kind of style, partly because it breaks up the starkness of the black and white and because it really uses the elements from the dream world.

**BURIANNOLOLI AND TARKOVSKY:** I also noticed there are recurrent motifs and repetition, like the falling into darkness and the beginning and the end. And I thought when Zarin snuck under the little hole in the bottom of the wall that took her to—

**NESHAT:** Alice in Wonderland.

But exactly, I felt that such sequences really tied the whole flow of the movie together.

**NESHAT:** Again, being a visual artist I tend to think of the images more conceptually than in conventional filmmaking. The characters change the name from different backgrounds and circumstances, but at some point their lives intersect, so for me it was useful to make those intersections as fluid as I could without losing the subtleties. In other words, the path to the garden implies the transition from the city to the country, the transition from disaster to the possibility of renewal, and the fact that there are those kinds in each character, so we carefully selected a simple road that is basically non-descriptive. The hole, in some ways, can be read as entering life after death or it could be parallel or it could be seen as a sexual organ. For me, all of these women were looking for an idea of salvation, what would the other side be representing, and how would they be able to go into that same direction?

**BURIANNOLOLI AND TARKOVSKY:** Unlike the novel, which tells each woman's story separately, the film seems to interweave their stories with a strong visual style made for each of them.

**NESHAT:** Yes, that was an important distinction for me. Paripour originally wrote the stories about each character and at some point she decided to put them together. The scene of the garden was very short in the book, as if it was almost inconclusive, but for me, that was my favorite part of the story, so I wanted to stretch it out.

**BURIANNOLOLI AND TARKOVSKY:** You've created parallel universes that didn't exist in the novel. For instance, the whole political movement, which was only alluded to in the novel, is really brought out more prominently in the film.

**NESHAT:** That was the most radical difference, otherwise we stayed quite close to Paripour's idea, which is identical to my own interest in the pair of opposites: the political and the philosophical, the social and the personal, the traditional and the modern, men and women, and nature and culture, etc. Similarly, Paripour chose her characters, from a super wealthy, westernized woman in Paripour Legha, to Zarin, a lower-class prostitute, to two women who both were from the religious traditional middle class, but the way each one of them represents a particular type of problem is quite powerful.

**BURIANNOLOLI AND TARKOVSKY:** I agree. When Amir Mousavi's brother comes to look for Faezeh at Paripour Legha's home, you can see how uncomfortable he was in the kitchen. The class difference between the westernized bourgeoisie culture versus the traditional was very intense.

**BURIANNOLOLI AND TARKOVSKY:** I also thought of the sequence of the police officer who appears at first with such an incredibly stern presence, and the moment he sits down to eat his meal there's an intense silence. And as soon as one of the guests begins to sing and play his sitar, the police officer becomes relaxed and participatory. It was intense but funny at the same time.

**NESHAT:** Actually, there is a lot of humor that appears in both the novel and the film, like when Mousavi and Faezeh talk about virginity as a hole in a curtain, and other times in the film that are not from the novel, like the absurdity of the man singing and playing the music while the officer was being so tense, then all of a sudden became so animated as you just pointed out, not to mention at the military reception when one man said to the other: "Oh, your wife looks like our gardener, do you know her?" And he says: "Oh no, we are too busy." And the other responds: "Oh that's too bad." Or when one other man says "Oh well, Albert Camus says such and such..." and the other says "Oh, who cares what he said," so there are moments full of sarcasm, but at the same time they function as kind of relief from what otherwise is a very intense emotional and political film.

**BURIANNOLOLI AND TARKOVSKY:** Would you say that the collaboration between you and Paripour was inevitable largely because you both are interested in mysticism and mythology? While her novels reflect her interest in the myth of Gilgamesh, and Sumerian as well as Chinese mythology, you construct your imagery or characters with similar yet different mythic presences.

**NESHAT:** That's true for the most part, however, I have to say that I did eliminate the most mythical character, Mahdolkh, from the film, mainly because Mahdolkh is just too far out. (She is the subject of one of my videos.) For the longest time, Mahdolkh was in the script but at one point we just decided that the four characters were enough to do the trick.

**BURIANNOLOLI AND TARKOVSKY:** There's some slackness in the writing that I can only imagine how difficult it must have been not to literalize the film.

**NESHAT:** This is the first time I've ever worked at readaptation, and I think without a doubt it will entail some degree of faithful interpretation while other parts have to be reconstructed in order to find the right balance for the film. So it's like... I'm... leaping off a cliff.

**BURIANNOLOLI AND TARKOVSKY:** It was terrifying [laughter] because sometimes I would have a few people read the script and they would say, "This is all bull, oh my God," and I have to tell them the truth, that the discipline of cinema is another kind of language, so once I've learned to educate myself while being very respectful to the integrity of the novel, I had to make a film that was accessible, yet enigmatic enough to be faithful to my work. I remember a friend who I worked with in my previous project, who said, "You should stop now, this is not going to go anywhere, you're never going to make this film," and I said, "No, I won't give up." And maybe part of the reason I said "no" is that I couldn't disappear from Paripour. I could not imagine letting her down, and the book is simply a masterpiece.

**BURIANNOLOLI AND TARKOVSKY:** On the way here, Phong and I were talking about this new phenomenon of artists who make films. Schnabel has already done four, Matthew Barney has his Commuter cycle. Steve McQueen has made Hunger this year, and I think it's quite exciting. Perhaps, perhaps audiences today desire to see films that are more challenging, which makes them think Rather than just take in the spoonfed formulas Hollywood film have endlessly and successfully used.

**NESHAT:** My intention is of course to have the film shown at commercial theaters, not at galleries and museums. Obviously Schnabel has been very successful in reaching the mainstream. As for Steve McQueen, as a first time filmmaker, I thought Hunger was remarkable.

**BURIANNOLOLI AND TARKOVSKY:** It's good for the health of film, because artists' conception of the form is different. It's more hybridized and visual artists refuse to simplify the narrative or sequences of images.

**NESHAT:** Yet I'm feeling that we cannot be ignorant about the fact that we need to acquire a complete set of skills that are required in making a full-length feature.

**BURIANNOLOLI AND TARKOVSKY:** But there is a difference between the language of form and the language of technique.

**NESHAT:** Exactly. I'm thinking about Barney's films the other day. While his use of the narrative remained more or less abstract and enigmatic, the ways in which he constructed the characters in relation to the sets and the music are pretty much identifiable with his personal aesthetic. Whether or not he intended his films to reach a certain kind of audience, that's difficult to tell. As for Steve McQueen, he just directly adopted a script that somebody had written and he was able to make that long scene of the two men so compelling and visual. Schnabel, on the other hand, took a more conventional direction. Nevertheless, he managed to make really good films. In my case, maybe in addition to some of my friends, maybe my own mother would understand the film. This is my intention. [Laughter.]
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part of all arts, whether Persian, Islamic, or Classical art. I really believe that beauty is a fundamental way of getting closer to the divine. Of course, that conception comes from spiritual Islam. But I also think it’s very poignant to bring that spiritual element into juxtaposition with the political reality. In other words, we have all these beautiful women with the veils against the background of those magnificent mosques and architecture, and then we have the guns. To me, these works create a new space, a new world. Today, it’s very hard to imagine them all together.

BECKER: You’re moving in this complicated terrain because you’re creating these very disparate audiences that the work is addressing. One is a Western audience and the other is an Iranian audience.

NESHAT: Absolutely, I think you keep them all in mind all the time. You’re navigating the space between, which is not an easy thing to do. But by doing that sort of thing, you’re creating a new space, a new world.

NESHAT: Absolutely. I think that’s one of the most important things about your work. It’s quite a different sort of environment and once it’s sent out to the world as an object, people can decide what they want to see.

BECKER: There are a million landmines that all of us could be falling into. There’s always the potential that any one of them could explode.

NESHAT: Or I could make a mistake, by making one of them.

BECKER: But through metaphor, and through a symbolic universe that you create, you can always a few steps ahead while they’re trying to catch you. They might think that you’re here but you’re in fact over there.

NESHAT: There is also luck, which sometimes happens to us all. I remember once someone called while I was still working at Storefront and asked if he could look at my work, and I thought it didn’t sound right.

BECKER: I love this quote from you that I read in another interview: “I appreciate beauty as a way to neutralize violence.”

NESHAT: My justification at the end is that this notion of beauty, symmetry, and harmony is a fundamental

with complex characters, without sacrificing their visual sensibilities. I really feel like I have been in university in the past six years, trying to learn all of filmmaking—from editing, working with editors, cinematographers, to actors, from technical to artistic skills, while learning from other filmmakers as well.

NESHAT: Absolutely, I learned in those ten years that architecture is not just about design, it’s about space and it’s about the meaning a space gives. My ex-husband, Kyung Park, for example, really had a huge interest in the political relationship of space and social responsibility, like housing projects. He did a number of shows that I helped him do, which were really about defining space, and so I know how to approach it theoretically, as well as its physical applications. Particularly in Islamic culture, space is an important element that separates private and public lives. People change behavior as soon as they enter a particular space. In any Muslim country you cannot enter a mosque without taking off your shoes, for example. There are certain codes that everyone must adhere to. It’s very severe, like if you’re outside a public space, you must wear a veil and cannot have eye contact with a man.

BECKER: And this conception, the clichéd reading of the woman under the veil who has therefore no power. In fact, it was brought up in an interview that Arthur Durito did with you, in which you said there has never been any sort of competition between Iranian men and women—the acceptability in their own roles is identified with their dignity.

NESHAT: There are two things you are bringing up. One is the question of feminism in relation to that part of the world and the other is the idea of Orientalization and the exoticism of certain iconography. The question of feminism—today somebody asked me if I think I am a feminist and I said, I don’t know what that means because only if you choose the word with the subject of a woman, does that make you a feminist? And the other thing is that I think the idea of feminism in the West and the East is very different. My understanding is, Iranian women are not really in a struggle to be equal with men—that is not what women want. Women want to remain women; they just want their rights. It’s like a yin and yang situation. We think that men and women together make a perfect equilibrium in the universe, whereas I think in the U.S. women have to be like men in order to advance their careers. The other thing is a lot of people have accused me, even Iranian people, saying that I use the veil or other ideas as a way of eroticizing the subject or making purely aesthetic exercises and I’m saying well of course, I am an artist, aesthetic concerns are fundamental to what I do, but the question of orientalization is not my problem in that women in that part of the world actually wear the veil and the question of orientalization is a Western concern. For me, the mystery is built out of those two differences. Again, when Zarina was in the bathroom, I sat down and I thought that looks like an Orientalist painting, partly because I thought how often you do have an anorexic woman who appears in an Orientalist picture. In other words, I was very conscious of both its reading or the ideas of stereotypes while playing with them, trying to deconstruct and construct the text and image at the same time.

BECKER: I love these quotes from you that I read in another interview: "I appreciate beauty as a way to neutralize violence."
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They just want their basic rights, which is not much to ask. The key is that we have to learn from this young generation. Who don’t want their parents to compromise their struggle. They want peace and they want to be like everybody else in the world and they’re willing to fight for their ideals. They are a new idea of revolution and that idea is the idea of democracy and tolerance. There is a word in Farsi, which means “to make up.” We Iranians have been divided into many political and religious ideologies: the Muslims, the anti-Muslims, the pro-Shah, the anti-Shah, the rich, the poor, the capitalists, the radicalists, and Hamid emphatically said, for god’s sake for once, let’s come together and understand that we could be different, but we can still be fighting for the same freedom.

This is one goal that we all have in common and this is the theme of the film, freedom, and release. It’s such a honey that the garden, where the women look for freedom, is a place of exile. And at the last hunger strike at the U.N. Headquarters in July, we were there united to demand the release of the prisoners from the recent elections in Iran.

Becker: All you have said is the embodiment of Miness. All she ever wanted was freedom.

Neshat: Right, at first, she got involved with the Communists. Then she realized that the Communists themselves were capable of violence.

Becker: That realization came when she held in her hands the deed, innocent young guard. One of her own people.

Neshat: Exactly. All she wanted was to make peace. I mean, it’s been 30 years since the last revolution in 1979. Different people have different relationships to the country. Some people who never go back, some people had members of their family killed, so they have strong feelings against the government and they don’t see any way of making up with the country. The whole idea for us in exile is we have to make peace with ourselves, and pay attention to those who are living in Iran, especially the young generation. They’re our only hope.

Shirin Neshat’s current exhibit, Games of Silence, will be on view from September 3 - October 3, 2009 at Gladstone Gallery on 13 Rue des Grands Carls, Brussels.

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