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Writing Sample

Exhibition Review Essay for Shirin Neshat: Afterwards

Shirin Neshat was born in Qazvin, Iran, in 1957. She was a university student in the United States during 1979 Iranian Revolution and has lived in the U.S. ever since, moving to New York City, where she remained to continue her artistic research and studies. It was only after traveling to Iran in 1993 that Neshat identified the central problematics of her work. In her work Neshat bears witness to the capacity of the human beings to simultaneously build and destroy what constitutes them and their civilizations.

“Shirin Neshat: Afterwards”, is an exhibition displayed at the “Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art” in Doha – Qatar from November 9, 2014 until February 15, 2015. With a layout based on the binary structure 10101, the exhibition alternates between spaces of photography and moments of video installation all located in the Ground Floor Galleries. This rhythm and the viewer’s circulation throughout the galleries echo Shirin Neshat’s use of primary oppositions and the human body. The exhibition functions as a circle, with the continuous movement prompting a reflection of the world through the images produced by the artist.

The exhibition “Shirin Neshat: Afterwards” is conceived as a visual and sonorous experience that unfolds in the spaces of the museum. Composed of layers of information, images, references and concepts, this exhibition is an experience that through the artist’s interrogation of history and acts of building and destroying life and relationships addresses the contradictions inherent to humanity. The artist invites the viewer to look at the world, its histories and civilizations, through the overlapping lenses of identity exile, gender and politics. She invents a visual vocabulary made of contrasting images that confront contradictions in society. For Shirin Neshat, the presumed binaries of black and white, man and woman, the individuals and the masses, fullness and emptiness, presence and absence, are the elements that compose the artist’s personal universe and space of dialogue.

Shirin Neshat created the photographic works *Women of Allah*, 1993-1997 (Set 1) after her first time returning to Iran since her exile in 1979 at the beginning of the Islamic Revolution. The characters in these images – sometimes performed by the artist herself – speak to stereotypes of women from the Middle East that are both constructed and perceived by Middle Eastern and Western perspectives. These coded, cinematographic images discretely represent the figure of

the woman as resistant to the clichés of representation and the too often limited role assigned to them in society. Minimal and stark, these photographs address issues of anxiety, sacrifice, honor, presumption and uncertainty. This group of work made early in her career articulate the artist's approach to making and editing images, which are the opposing elements in Neshat's artistic vocabulary. A number of references and accessories are repeatedly used in the making of this series: photography, poems in Farsi calligraphy on the body, guns, microphones, the veil, and the gaze. The results are images that speak from specific positions, the woman's body, a localized society, and a precise medium, to be addressed and understood globally.

The photographic series *The Book of Kings*, 2012 (Set 2) is composed of three groups, each representing a segment of society: villains, patriots, and masses. Inspired by *Shahnameh*, mythological, historical account of pre-Islamic Persia written by the Persian poet Ferdowsi in the 10th century and that capture the rise and fall of ancient dynasties, Neshat's *The Book of Kings* focuses on contemporary narratives of political upheaval and revolutions. In addition to the literary reference, the artist also uses her personal experience, exile, and cultural heritage to respond to political events in her homeland, Iran, and the region during the last decade's political changes. Here the artist produces still photographs of people she met during her journeys in the Arab World, and then inscribes these photographs with lines from ancient poetry.

The masses are comprised of forty-five individual portraits of citizens, with fine veils of words lining across their faces. Here are the people who are affected by power. The patriots are those who fight power-pose with their hands over their hearts in what has become a universal symbol of patriotism, demonstrating their willingness to make any sacrifice for political change. The villains, those who hold power, meanwhile, are captured in life-size full-body portraits, their painted torsos displaying images of violent battle scenes found in illustrations of the *Shahnameh* that show both the might of a warrior and the bloody outcome of battle.

The spectacular video installation, *Turbulent*, 1998 is Neshat's major transitional production with which she moved from photography based artworks to video installation. Gender is a central topic in this work, as in the artist's work in general. Here, Neshat employs a straightforward sceno-graphic approach to illustrate the social structure of her homeland Iran. Neshat conceives *Turbulent* visually and conceptually around the idea of opposites, including black and white images, man and woman, empty and full theatres, and stationary and rotating cameras, as well as classic and contemporary singing. This play with opposites and their gendering allows the artist to question the absence of Iranian women from the field of music as artistic expression.

Set in a fictional and absurd courtroom scene, *OverRuled*, 2012 draws on themes of injustice, tyranny, and judgment. *OverRuled* is a three-channel video installation and its duration is 10

minutes and 15 seconds. The artist creates a physical and symbolic space where moral judgment is questioned. Using the music of contemporary Iranian musician Mohsen Namjoo and the poetry of celebrated 13th century poet Jalaluddin Rumi, Neshat investigates the repressed and unspoken elements of social and cultural consensus. *OverRuled* is shown on a large horizontal format, accentuating the proximity of the viewer and making the exhibition space similar to that of a court. The viewer witnesses a scene between, on one hand, a judge and his men, who represent power, authority, and rhetoric, and, on the other, the defendant two musicians, who sit on the opposite side of the table. Attacked and penalized by the judge for the supposed subversive nature of their songs, the two musicians respond in the language of music and poetry.