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## Shirin Neshat on Iran's exiled artists

The controversial film-maker and photographer focuses the spotlight on others for her latest project


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Soudeh Davoud, 'Dream and Imagination' (2019)

Griselda Murray Brown
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How does it feel to be exiled from the country you call home? What kind of relationship can you have with a place you've never visited?

An exhibition organised by the [Center for Human Rights in Iran](#), an NGO based in New York, brings together 13 female artists of Iranian origin whose work interrogates the nature of freedom, repression and belonging.

Opening next month at New York's High Line Nine galleries, the show takes in painting, drawing, sculpture, photography and video. It is curated by [Shirin Neshat](#), one of Iran's most successful — and controversial — living artists.

Neshat, 62, came to prominence with her photographic series [Women of Allah](#) (1993-97), which depicted veiled women holding guns, their skin inscribed with Farsi poetry.



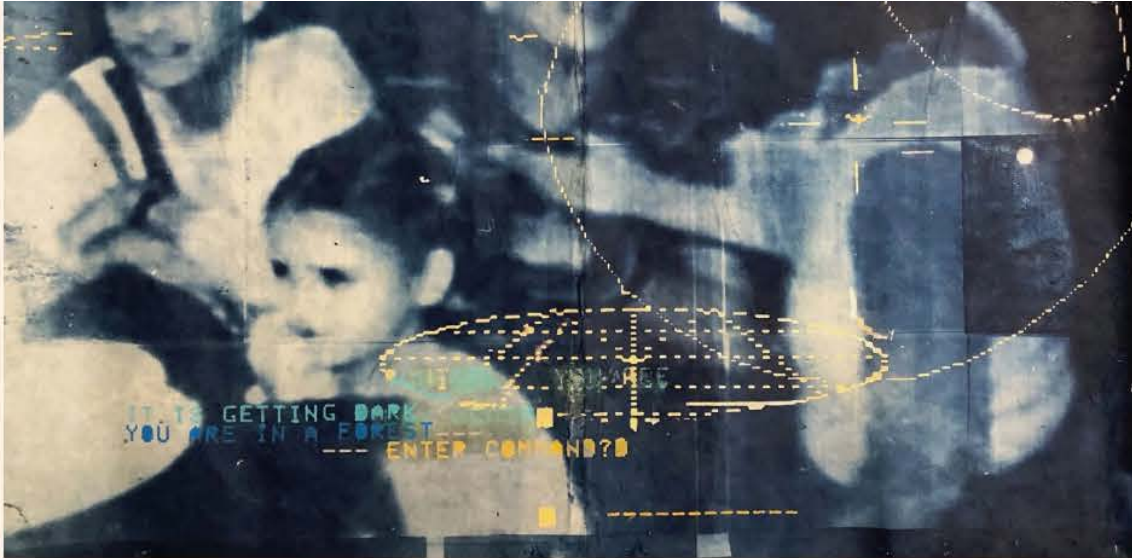
Portrait of Shirin Neshat by Lyle Ashton Harris

These ambiguous pictures drew attention to the women who had fought in the Iran-Iraq war — were they empowered or exploited? — and to their lives under Islamic rule.

In 1999, Neshat went on to win the Golden Lion, the top prize at the Venice Biennale, for her short film *Turbulent*, which explored gender roles in Iran.

Her first feature film, [Women Without Men](#) (2009), set against the country's 1953 coup, was widely acclaimed. Banned from returning to Iran in 1996, she has lived in the US for more than two decades.





Nazanin Noroozi, 'Untitled #0017' (2018)



Shahrzad Changalvaei, 'Better Never Than Late #2' (2018)

In selecting artists for the exhibition, what interested Neshat was “how the political reality has defined [their] work”, she tells me over the phone from her home in Brooklyn.

Their art reveals a diversity of attitudes towards Iran — “resolved or unresolved” — as well as to their “host countries”, where they occupy the often fraught space of “foreigner and immigrant”. There is little separation between the personal and political.

Neshat cites artists who left Iran to study and cannot now visit their families back home for fear they will not be allowed to return to

Europe or the US. “They don’t know what their tomorrow looks like, and that immediacy of vulnerability plays a major part in the work that they’re making,” she says.

As a result, their art often conveys the urgency of present needs — “It’s not an investigation of their past; it is something that is happening today as [Iranian president] Rouhani and [US president] Trump negotiate the future.”

This year marks [40 years since the Islamic revolution](#), in which the shah was overthrown and the regime of Ayatollah Khomeini established. “The revolution separated me from my family,” says Neshat. But her exhibition reflects a multiplicity of experiences: some of the artists remember that time well; others were not yet born.



Parastou Forouhar, 'Portraits' (2014)



Ala Dehghan, 'Life perhaps, is that rope' (2008)

The Frankfurt-based artist [Parastou Forouhar](#) was born in Tehran in 1962. Her parents, who were high-profile political dissidents, were stabbed to death in their home in 1998, part of a wave of killings of writers and intellectuals.

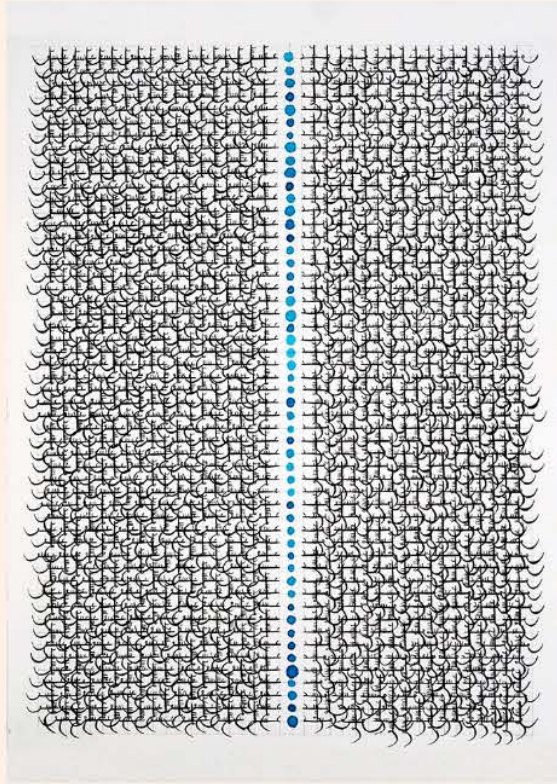
Despite its simplified style, Forouhar’s work is “strongly critical” of her homeland, Neshat says. Her digital drawings look, at first, like abstract patterns, their repeating motifs echoing the Islamic decorative tradition.

On closer inspection, they reveal themselves to be made up of figures — figures under attack. The beauty of the images is

figures — figures under attack. The beauty of the images is complicated by their latent violence.



Afruz Amighi, 'Headdress for the Beheaded' (2017)



Hadieh Sha'fie, 'Grid Drawing 37' (2015)

Neshat contrasts Forouhar with [Afruz Amighi](#), who was born in Iran in 1974 but grew up in New York. There is no “sharp knife” in Amighi’s work, Neshat says. It is not explicitly political. Yet, like Forouhar, Amighi is exploring an inherited aesthetic, with delicate fibreglass sculptures that echo the arabesques of ancient mosques.

Similarly, New York-based [Sepideh Salehi](#)’s bold, abstract ink drawings are influenced by classical calligraphy; and the quietly subversive watercolours of [Shiva Ahmadi](#), an artist living in San Francisco’s Bay Area, draw on the Persian miniature tradition.

Many of the works in the show have a subtlety that belies their politics — which is nonetheless revealed in titles such as “Headdress for the Beheaded” (Amighi) and “Carnage” (Ahmadi).





Afsoon, 'Poets in Heaven' (2014-15)



The exhibition is more about [diasporic experience](#) than life lived inside Iran. Of the many artists living in Iran contacted by Neshat, only one, [Soudah Davoud](#), accepted her invitation to exhibit.

“She is very brave,” Neshat says, referring to “the lack of freedom of speech, and censorship” endured by artists there. The reason so many artists declined to take part was not only that the show was organised by a human-rights organisation: “It’s my name,” Neshat tells me. “I have this controversial name with the Iranian government.”

She might be banned from entering Iran, but Neshat doesn’t see herself as the authorities see her. “I’m not a political artist. I’m not a political person,” she insists.

“My work asks questions about tyranny and the people in power, and that itself has put me in this position. But I have no interest in being confrontational. I don’t make the kind of work that’s screaming loud against the government.”

Partly as a response to being read as a political artist, her work has increasingly gravitated towards the surreal.



Sepideh Salehi, "Kakol" from the School series (2016)

A recurring theme in Neshat's art is the extent to which women are free. But she won't be drawn on feminism, which for her has "always been a very controversial issue".

In the past she has refused the feminist label. "I express things from the perspective of a woman, but I don't have this western idea of feminism," she tells me. "I don't have an agenda."

It's impossible to generalise about a group of artists as diverse in age, geography and life experience as those in this show, but commentators do generalise – especially about women from the Middle East.

"I've been a product of huge stereotypes in the way that the western media has read my work," Neshat says. "Really, if anyone can recall these cliché descriptions about 'What it's like to be a woman artist', it's me, because I've been on the forefront. So I don't want to do that to these artists. Every artist has a story of her own."





Laleh Khorramian, 'Data Portrait' (2019)



Roya Farassat, 'Hear No Evil' (2009)

*"A Bridge Between You and Everything: An Exhibition of Iranian Women Artists" is at the High Line Nine galleries in New York from November 7-24; Griselda Murray Brown is an FT Arts editor and co-host of the FT Culture Call podcast*

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