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PERSONAL IS POLITICAL

Shirin Neshat Curates New, Politically- Charged Exhibition Featuring 12 Iranian Women Artists



Courtesy of Lyle Ashton Harris and CRG Gallery

The exhibition opens at High Line

Nine in New York City on November

7.

by **Andrea Whittle**

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Before the Iranian-born artist Shirin Neshat ever publicly displayed her own pieces, she devoted herself to the work of others.

After she first arrived in New York in the 1980s, she co-directed the Storefront for Art and Architecture with her ex-husband, organizing and putting up radical exhibitions that addressed issues confronting the city at the time, while simultaneously encouraging public discourse.

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“There was something very gratifying about doing that, and I actually think that’s a very important part of my experience,” she says.

In a sense, Neshat, now 62, is returning to those roots. Known for her spare, emotive films and striking black and white photographs overlaid with calligraphy, she was called on by the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) to curate an exhibition commemorating the 40th anniversary of the 1979 revolution. She thought it would be interesting to focus the exhibition on work by other women artists, each of whom explores and defines her relationship with Iran in different ways.

“I think it’s really important for artists to

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not just think about their own work,” Neshat says of her second time formally standing in as a curator. “It feels really right, especially as an Iranian artist who is somewhat established, to be able to pay tribute to other Iranian artists who maybe haven’t received all that attention.”

Titled *A Bridge Between You and Everything*, the exhibition opens at High Line Nine in New York City on November 7. The works, mostly paintings and drawings, a few sculptures and one video, will all be put up for auction via Artsy, the proceeds of which will benefit the CHRI’s arts, culture and disability rights programs.

Rather than distinct sections devoted to each artist, Neshat is hanging everything salon-style in an effort to emphasize the variety of perspectives and experiences on view: Some artists, born before the revolution, look back with nostalgia at the Shah period, while younger ones have only ever known the country’s contemporary Islamic rule. Another present theme is the volatility of U.S.-Iran relations, and Trump’s stance on immigration. Many of the artists

are immigrants, and some would consider themselves refugees. Of the twelve artists represented, only one, Soudeh Davoud, still lives and works in Iran.

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Nothing in the show feels, as Neshat puts it, like it has a loudspeaker attached to it. She felt pulled towards work rich in symbolism, allegory and metaphor. Paintings by Roya Farassat feature anonymous and mythical figures, while watercolors and drawings by Sepideh Salehi and Hadieh Shafie employ repetitive calligraphed letters and washes of pigment. Bahar Sabzevari utilizes traditional stylistic techniques and religious imagery in portraits reminiscent of Frida Kahlo and Cindy Sherman.

“I’m not really interested in directly political work or didactic work,” Neshat says. “For every artist that I have chosen, there is some level of subtlety or poetry that I think is very much a part of the Iranian identity.” She mentioned, in particular, the work of Parastou Forouhar, whose parents—both political dissidents—were murdered in their Tehran home. Now

based in Frankfurt, she creates stylized graphic drawings, animations and installations that recall printed textiles or patterns found in nature. “She addresses the political issues and all of the pain that she has had to deal with in such quiet and subtle and yet subversive ways,” says Neshat.

Wary of her own experience of having her personal narrative dominate the public discourse, Neshat wants the focus to be squarely on the work, not only out of respect for the women as artists but out of concern for their privacy due to their immigration status. “It’s not something of the past. It’s really very present, how vulnerable they are politically and personally, with a future that is really uncertain. There’s so much anxiety,” she says.

Neshat, who also has a one-woman show up at the Broad in Los Angeles, has been outspoken in her criticism of Iran’s current government and hasn’t returned to her home country since 1996.

“I think it’s generally understood that it’s

not a good idea for me to go back,” she says —although, she adds, she’s “not officially on a black list like Salman Rushdie.”

And while her work often comments indirectly on issues that relate to human rights, specifically the experiences of Muslim women, Neshat declines to call herself an activist. “I think the work is politically charged, but the work is also very emotional and so much about humanity at large and about issues that are quite existential and universal,” she says. “But I’m Iranian, and I can’t escape that part of my identity. I don’t really have that kind of mental option to just completely do without any political issues. By framing certain issues that are political, it doesn’t necessarily make you an activist, it just makes you a communicator.”

Ala Dehghan, Synthetic S-XL Anti-Cut, 2017. Courtesy of the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI).