Shirin Neshat,
Islamic Counterpoints

'slarm in its practice is specific to time, place, tradition, history, national culture and political circumstance, yet very few interpreters of any of its myriad forms have gained a following in the West. Leaving aside Salman Rushdie, whose views are, to say the least, contested, Islam's explicators consist of a handful of academics, not all of whom agree with the most visible among them, Edward Said; a few novelists, most notably Naguib Mahfouz; and a new generation of immigrants and children of immigrants, such as writers Ahdaf Soueif or Hanif Kureishi.

What, then, is the allure of Shirin Neshat? In the past three years, the Iranian-born artist has leaped into the international art circuit with generally highly praised video installations at the Venice Biennale (where she won a Golden Lion), the Carnegie International, the Whitney Biennial, the Sydney Biennial, the Lyon Biennial and the Kwangju Biennial. She has also had solo exhibitions at the Kunsthalle Wien and the Serpentine Gallery in London. A survey exhibition organized by the Musee d'Art Contemporain, Montreal, opened there in late September and will travel to Minneapolis, Houston and Miami. "Logic of the Birds," Neshat's first collaborative project involving live performance, is being presented this month at The Kitchen in New York. Lately she has participated in international film festivals as well.

Neshat's iconic exploration of the heart, mind and psyche of Islam is increasingly analogous in its visceral intelligence to Frida Kahlo's encap-
In a highly productive three-year period, Shirin Neshat has produced a series of stark, visually arresting films that reflect the tensions of Muslim society and her own conflicted role as an Iranian woman luring in the West.

BY AMEI WALLACH

sulation of her own culture. She succeeds in being at once specific in subject matter and epic in expression, practicing an intricate alchemy of image, locale, action and music.

Her three new videos, which debuted at Barbara Gladstone Gallery in "late spring, are for the first time single-screen presentations." Diverse in narrative and form, they both substantiate her achievement and suggest explanations for her ability to mesmerize her audience. The settings range from sun-scored rocky shore to village square to domestic interior; the action from individual to communal; the atmosphere from surreal to gothic; the images from a mass of women in black chadors to a single face in close-up. At the opening, on a hot night, the crowded viewing spaces were sweaty and smelled of socks. But almost everyone stayed put from beginning to end of each video (the longest is 11X minutes), despite the lure of the restless partying just outside the door.

A Landscape in Black and White

Neshat began to develop her mature body of work at the age of 33, following a 1990 trip back to Iran, her first since the 1979 revolution. Now a stranger to her culture, she was struck by the sight of women in the head-to-toe black chador that had become required attire in the wake of the revolution and had literally changed the landscape.

In Iran the chador has long been political territory; claimed, rejected
and reclaimed by battling ideologies. Viewed as an emblem of backwardness at the start of the century, it was abolished in 1936. In the 1960s and 70s, as the increasingly corrupt Pahlavi dynasty induced disenchantment with Western modernization, donning a chador became a feminist declaration of emancipation from stereotypes of beauty and the tyranny of the international cosmetics industry-akin to bra burning in the U.S. Under a 1983 (postrevolution) edict, however, it has become a kind of prison uniform, denying sexuality and individuality. The symbol of rebellion today is lipstick worn with a chador, as the Iranian-born scholar Farzaneh Milani discovered on a recent visit¹

Neshat had experienced the first two permutations of the chador’s signification before her father sent her to study in California in 1973. On her 1990 visit she discovered the third. Back in New York, where the chador has yet another meaning as a repellent artifact of political repression and what scholar Leila Ahmed calls the “most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies,” she clothed herself in a chador, had herself photographed, and wrote militant feminist Farsi poetry over the parts of her body that showed (hands, feet or face) for her first mature body of work, the “Women of Allah” series. She chose the black and white of early Alfred Hitchcock and classic Life magazine documentary photos for the glamorous rigor of these works. In Allegiance with Wakefulness (1994), the most widely reproduced image, the calligraphy decorates the bottoms of her bare feet, which are propped like Diane Arbus twins to our view, a gun barrel thrust between them.

This is work best understood as performance art and closest in impulse to Anselm Kiefer’s 1969 “Occupations,” for which he traveled to European historical sites and had himself photographed giving the Nazi salute. If Kiefer was, in a sense, assuming personal responsibility for his Fascist heritage, Neshat was testing her own response to the cataclysmic history of her nation and to the Western reaction to it. In both cases, the artists rehearsed their conflicted inner lives through their own bodies, with this essential difference: as an immigrant and a woman, Neshat inhabits both worlds, teetering between past and present, Western and Eastern, stereotype and deconstructor of stereotypes.

A Binary World

Neshat’s films are thoroughly inhabited by the chador, which has been her primary metaphor and bearer of meaning. It is an emblem of the contradictions—male vs. female, individual vs. community, nature vs. culture, tradition vs. innovation, violence vs. lyricism—that play out on opposite screens in the black-and-white trilogy Turbulent (1998), Rapture (1999) and Fervor (2000). The women in her films overcome the solemnity of the chador by singing, setting out to sea, flying into the imagination.

Turbulent was the first film Neshat made with the Iranian crew who have become essential to her work: composer and singer Sussan Deyhim, director of photography Ghasem Ebrahimian, and cowriter and sometimes performer Shoja Yousef Azari. On facing screens, Turbulent takes the form of a musical duel between Azari, portraying a singer performing a love song with words by the great 13th-century mystic Rumi, and Deyhim, delivering her own eclectic composition. The audience stands in a space between the two screens, as if spectators at the duel. The man sings to a full house (to which, in the interest of the cinematic image, he turns his back), the woman to an empty auditorium. Nevertheless, it is no contest; Deyhim’s explosive guttural inventions win.

Rapture faces off a hundred men inside an old fort (culture) and a hundred women in chadors outside in the desert (nature), showing male and female in stark separation again, on screens on opposite sides of a room. At first the men, all in white shirts and dark pants, are at play. They circle and chant; they are active, while the women seem to watch from a distance. Suddenly the roles reverse. In the film’s climax, a woman dances on a drum, her bare feet seen in close-up; others hike up their black robes, push a small wooden boat into the water and put out to sea.

Fervor probes the sensual cost of repression to both sexes on separate side-by-side screens, with a spare aesthetic: a woman in chador and a man are walking separate paths, which cross like lines on a Minimalist canvas.
In Iran, the chador has long been political territory, serving variously as an emblem of backwardness, a feminist statement and an artifact of repression.

near the beginning of the film. They traverse receding alleyways and dis-
appear around a corner at the end-perhaps the same corner, probably not. In between, they sit on separate sides in a hall, the women’s side black with chadors, the men’s variegated in shades of gray and white. A charismatic itinerant preacher is performing a moral tale about sexual transgression. (At one point in her editing process, Neshat had subtitles translating the sermon, but she concluded that it robbed the scene of its poetry and ambiguity. Nevertheless, it is evident that he is illustrating his speech with drawings of a seduction.) The woman flees. Emotions are as divided as public lives for both sexes.

Neshat works her effects in a landscape of stone and sand, of primitive villages, courtyards and protected interiors. Her landscapes are at once characteristic and symbolic of the weight of a culture lost and remembered. It is not, however, the landscape of Iran, though it resembles it. Not certain of her welcome in her homeland, Neshat finds locations that suggest Iran’s dramatic desert terrain or, as in the 2001 work Passage, transcend real time and place for more extensive allegorical significance.

Neshat’s emergence as a maker of film and video installations coincided with the flowering of Iranian film in the 1990s. She has enormous regard for Abbas Kiarostami and other directors who are compelled to create their effects out of cramped means, since the government monopolizes film stock and sets censorship rules. Instead of being hampered by the control, Kiarostami uses the limitations as an opportunity to make films that, he says, build gently and “disturb you afterwards ... keep you preoccupied for weeks.” To achieve her own stringent spell, Neshat sets limits for herself. Since she conceives the films as a visual artist, her images are disciplined and consistently compelling. The films that succeed do so not only because of the clarity of their concept but because they distill images for esthetic resonance. There is no dialogue to carry the scenes, and every frame counts. She treats the chador like sculpture, a black mound against the sand, a congregation of humped forms making a pattern, a background against which the white of a hand is newly seen as intimate and unpredictable. She makes visual references to Donald Judd’s serial Minimalism, Louise Bourgeois’s engorged body parts, Andreas Gursky’s thronged humanity.

Sometimes now, an Iranian film will restate her images—the multiple women in chadors on bicycles in Marziyeh Meshkini’s The Day I Became a Woman (2000) recall the multiple women in chadors dancing in Neshat’s Rapture. In both cases, Neshat believes, the intent is the same, to “deconstruct the subject by taking it into a new context, out of the purely political and into the philosophical and poetic.”

Neshat’s relationship to her subject matter is both complicated and enriched by the fact of her exile. Exile is a philosophical and emotional state. It has little to do with the length of time one has been away from home. The loss is invariably lifelong.

Exile as a Language
Exile is one of the overwhelming facts of the 20th century. In finding a form for the divided inner life of exile, Neshat has created a language that millions can comprehend. Edward Said describes the state this way:
Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—like in music—is contrapuntal.

For an exile, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally.

The shuttling glance and divided self of exile are the language of Neshat’s work. However, she has visited exile head-on as subject matter only once, in the film installation Soliloquy (1999), introduced at the last Carnegie International. Soliloquy is her most problematic work, in part because it tries to do so many things at once that it clouds her esthetic, which is best when most crystalline. The film turns out, however, to have been a petri dish that incubated the ideas she has developed in her newest work.

During most of the 1980s, Neshat was codirector, with Kyong Park, of the Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York. Through exhibitions such as “Warchitecture,” photographs of war-damaged buildings in Sarajevo, or “Queer Space,” which investigated how gender defines space (and vice versa), she assimilated the social meanings of physical space that have permeated all her films. In Soliloquy, she beats the message like a drum: superhighways and modernist buildings signify the West, courtyards and minarets, Islam.

Soliloquy is one of her few experiments with color. (She had earlier shot Shadow under the Web, in color; in that 1997 work, Neshat, dressed in a chador, runs through a variety of architectural spaces.) Soliloquy is the first film in which she attempts to integrate urgent autobiographical material. Her father had recently died in Iran, and her bewildered fury at the rupture he forced by sending her to America in the first place surfaced once again. Worse, her nephew, Inman, died of cancer in Iran at the age of 17, and she had been unable to visit him. Soliloquy “takes on all of it: mourning, loss, rage, homesickness, rootlessness, Christianity, Islam, the isolation of individualism and the constraints of community.”

In Soliloquy, as in her other film installations, Neshat told two sides of her story on facing screens. The artist herself, in a chador, is seen on both screens, the split a metaphor for her conflicted inner life. She is as isolated in the ancient landscape as on modern highways. In her three new films, all made in 2001, she has separated out some of the tangled themes she broached in Soliloquy: death, mourning and ritual (Passage); isolation and extremity (Possessed); private and public identities (Pulse).

**Communal Ritual**

Passage germinated from Neshat’s readings in apocalyptic texts after she was invited to participate in the “Apocalypse” exhibition (held in the fall of 2000) at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, an invitation which she later declined. She was steeped in those impressions last year when she
In Possessed, inner life is central to the action and events unfold from the woman’s point of view. Here Neshat comes closer to feature filmmaking.

watched on television the clashes between stone-throwing Palestinians and Israeli soldiers, and was transfixed by the sight of Palestinian bodies held aloft in funeral processions.

Around this time, Philip Glass approached her about making a film for which he would write the music, and she created the 11-%-minute Passage for him. Shooting near the town of Essaouira, Morocco, where the shore and the desert have in the past served her for their similarities to Iran, she sublimated rage in a bleak, dazzling epic of death and rebirth.

The film, in color, opens with a view from above of waves breaking on a beach; a distant mountain rises out of the mist. As the camera moves closer, a dark sand on the sand resolves into a huddle of men dressed in black; a wave bursts on a long note of music. The men stretch into a column and advance. Suddenly the camcorder is at ground level, panning over a dun spread of stone to another indistinguishable black mass against a mountain and blue sky.

As the men walk along the water, they hold aloft a body wrapped in white, which reprises the whitecaps on the slate sea. The chords advance with melodramatic vehemence, underlining significance when the action alone would suffice. Then the camera moves over rocky ground to where the black mass thongs. A new melody enters as a child’s hands, seen in close-up, push aside stones. A seagull soars. The men turn up a path, and we see the line of them in profile. The advancing camera discloses that the black mass consists of women in chadors, bobbing in unruly rhythms. The men cross the dunes; afternoon light throws long shadows onto the scrub. The women claw at the earth. The music swells with urgency, then softens as the child’s hands arrange stones in a circle. The men approach, bisecting the screen from the top, and for the first time we clearly see the shrouded body they carry.

The child lays twigs inside the stone circle she has made, as if to build a fire. Against the desert, the circle of women and the vector of men form an astonishing geometry. The moment the men lay the body on the ground, smoke flares, as if from the child’s pile of twigs. The child turns to look, a dab of green dress and red leggings against the desert and the black. The women work frantically now, as the grave becomes a black void expelling dust. The fire encircles men and women; the child is outside the circle, watching. Smoke rises. A trumpet sounds alone, climbing to a high B-flat. Fade out.

Neshat has translated the brutality of the Israeli-Palestinian television images into cathartic, purifying ceremony. She has blurred specificity and social commentary into charged generalities. The large screen supports the implications of vast space, and the ritual actions seem to pull the audience into a direct experience. Farzaneh Milani calls Neshat’s cosmos “the space in-between. The viewer is always placed in the interval between the particular and the universal.”

The music is surging and theatrical. Glass saw the film as “dramatic, ritualizing pageantry.” The score italicizes, perhaps unnecessarily, the big-screen scenery and the suspenseful rhythms of the shots that alternate between the women at the grave, the men arriving with the body, and the child. What gives the film its emotional vigor, however, is the delicacy of Neshat’s touch.

Just before he died in 1985, Italo Calvino prepared a series of lectures he never delivered, on the literary qualities he would like to see carried into the next millennium. He could have been talking about Neshat, whose work embodies the “lightness,” as well as the “economy, rhythm, and hard logic” he valued. He defined “lightness” as “luminous tracings that are placed in the foreground and set in contrast to dark catastrophe.” To illustrate, he chose the moment when Perseus makes a bed of leaves on which to set down Medusa’s head, “so monstrous and terrifying yet at the same time somehow fragile and perishable. And everywhere the head touches, marine plants turn to coral and the nymphs rush to bring twigs and seaweed to the head so they can adorn theirs with coral.” Such lightness, he went on, “can leap over a grave,” while “what many consider to be the vitality of the times—noisy, aggressive, reviving and roaming—belongs to the realm of death, like a cemetery for rusty old cars.” With such imagery as a child’s hands arranging twigs or the froth on a wave, Neshat dissolves the severity that underlies all her work. She vaporizes the stereotype of the chador by suggesting the infinite variety of personal experiences and universal issues that it veils.

In Passage, the chador functions mostly as an unspecific, timeless costume which separates the circle of women from the advancing trajectory of men. There is the poetic implication that out of their encounter with
Passage grew out of Neshat’s readings in apocalyptic texts, plus TV images of Israeli-Palestinian clashes and bodies held aloft in funeral processions.

death could come the child who embodies future possibility. Neshat is constantly adjusting her reconstruction of the chador’s opposite, incendiary meanings in East and West. Those dissonances, however, continue to be as essential to the resonance of the work as the crinkle of a candy wrapper or the clearing of a throat is to a John Cage Silence performance.

The Question of Narrative
With Possessed, Neshat returns to the theme of exile and how it infects public space. Or at least that is one reading of the 9ri-minute black-and-white film, in which for the first time Neshat offers an individualized character with a vivid internal life. The film opens with a single widescreen shot of a woman’s face in three-quarter profile against an empty sky, strands of dark hair ruffled by the breeze. The woman is perhaps in her 30s. Her head is uncovered; she is wearing a dirty caftan instead of a chador. She is muttering to herself, but Deyhim’s score drowns her out with its keening urgency. She is seen full face and then from the other side as the camera circles her. A leaf brushes her face, the camera travels vertiginously, and her face is lost in shadow. It is an electrifying moment. The screen goes briefly blank, then the camera rediscovers her talking at a wall.

As the music ratchets up in intensity, the woman stumbles into an alley and edges into a town square where children play, men drink tea, women in chadors go about their business (in this film, the portentous black garment is relegated to a bit part). Cellos descend into a minor key and instruments screech distress as she mounts stone stairs and by her aberrant behavior draws the attention of the crowd. The townspeople are all around her, the men closest. She screams. Some in the crowd threaten her, some move in to protect her. A fight ensues, and the music intensifies. As the crowd wrangles and shoves, the woman forces her unheeding way through the faces and chadors and disappears off the bottom of the

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screen. In the end we see her full-screen again, lost in her solitary reality. The music subsides as she disappears through a doorway and down an alley.

Is she someone driven mad by her situation, or by the political torture that has been as prevalent in the Iran of the clerics as under the shah? Is she a gypsy, singing "to register [her] presence in people's ears," as in a poem by the Persian poet Simin Beshabani? Is she a woman who felt imprisoned in her chador? Is she an artist as well as an exile, capable of churning the smooth surface of everyday assumptions?

This is a film in which inner life is central to the action; the events unfold from the woman's point of view, the music mirroring her internal discor. This is the closest Nesbat has yet come to feature filmmaking. The gifted actress Shoheh Aghdashloo plays the woman. Nesbat is apparently good with actors: Aghdashloo says that her direction gave her space in which to improvise. The crowd includes compelling characterizations as well, though on first viewing one is too focused on Aghdashloo to notice.

The issue of narrative is a complex one. What is the place of narrative in a film by a visual artist? Bruce Nauman suggested one answer in his Clown Torture by presenting episodes without beginning or end, only a middle: a clown "takes a shit," screams under torture, is plagued by a falling water bucket. Bill Viola throws it on the audience to complete the loaded narrative in The Nantes Triptych, in which a woman gives birth sitting between her husband's legs on one screen, and an old woman dies, tended periodically by the hand of an unseen intimate, on another (in the middle, a body floats underwater, occasionally emitting bubbles). Nesbat's inclination is to continue on that path, but in the manner of Greek tragedy, with themes that are elemental, have significance in all cultures and are timeless, however they clothe themselves. In Possessed, however, she enters the realm of individual character, interiority and a potentially novelistic point of view. The woman on screen is more than a metaphor. Her thought processes are visible.

In earlier versions of Possessed, Nesbat used a split screen in the portions in which the woman interacted with the crowd. The crowd appeared almost as a character. This made for a more pronounced dialogue between crowd and woman, public and private space, external and internal chaos, society and outsider. It was shattering in that form, with music that built in urgency instead of starting from urgency and escalating. Together, Nesbat and Deyhim took an enormous leap with the final version, away from Nesbat's familiar turf. It signals her intention to further explore the traditional terrain of cinema, and to expose the dramatic intensity of her vision, which she has in the past muted in lyricism and a degree of abstraction.

In Nesbat's characteristic dialectic (and in earlier cuts of Possessed), the originality of her juxtapositions and the aptness of her metaphors precluded associations with other filmmakers and other filmic traditions. She was a visual artist taking chances with a different medium, but on her terms. The final cut of Possessed invites comparison to the Italian Neorealism of the 1940s and the French New Wave of the 1950s. On those terms, Nesbat is a neophyte, sometimes overplaying her hand, without the assurance that permitted the subtlety of her earlier films. However, reworking her own familiar ground is hardly the answer, either. Clearly this is a moment of transition, and she is confronting it.

Voiced Yearning

In Pulse, which also stars Aghdashloo, Nesbat goes back to aspects of her earlier practice; the film is shot in a single 7-minute take in black and white. It recasts Turbulent's concerns with the relationship between men and women. Pulse begins with two repetitive electronic notes. The camera is at such a distance from the subject that it is difficult to see much in the darkness, except for a high, grated window. A man's voice begins to sing as the camera intrudes slowly into a private chamber

Three new films by Shirin Esfandani were recently shown at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York (May 12–June 26). Her survey exhibition is on view at the Musee d'Art Contemporain, Montreal [Sept. 29, 2001-Jan. 12, 2002], and travels to the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (June 15–Sept. 8, 2002), the Miami Art Museum [March 21–June 1, 2002] and the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston [Sept. 5–Nov. 2, 2002]. The Birds, a multimedia collaboration with Susum Goh, Ghasem Ebrahimian and Shogin Aozar that includes stage action, will be presented at The Kitchen in New York (Oct. 2–13).

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