

# BLOUIN ARTINFO

## 22 Questions for Iranian Artist Shirin Neshat

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Shirin Neshat  
(Photo by: Lina Bertucci (2006))

Iranian, New York-based artist Shirin Neshat is well known for her work in film and photography, which often addresses the experiences of women in the Islamic world. With pieces in the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art's upcoming show, "The New International," opening August 1, and La Biennale de Montréal, opening in October, we thought it was the perfect time to catch up with Neshat to talk about her background and practice.

**You have work in Garage's upcoming show "The New International," which focuses on artists who came of age in the '90s. Do you feel that decade was particularly influential on your work?**

Yes, the '90s were extremely critical years for me, as I began my career in 1993 after years of not making any art at all. I remember right after graduating from art school and moving to New York in the 1980s, I had lost all interest in pursuing art as a career, as I found myself quite disillusioned both by my own artistic potential and the competitive nature of the art world. But in the early 1990s when I began to travel again to Iran, I found a renewed interest in making art — by then I had gained a maturity I needed as an artist, and a compelling subject matter that I felt so passionate about.

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**While that exhibition is looking back, you also have work in this year's La Biennale de Montréal. The theme of that show is "looking forward." It will be the first time your film "Illusions & Mirrors," from 2013, is shown in North America. Do you feel that work fits well the biennial's theme?**

Well, usually it's the curator's task to identify whether someone's art fits the description of the exhibition's theme or not; but I happened to personally think that this piece does fit well into the biennial's theme for a few reasons. First of all, "Illusions & Mirrors" is a major departure for me, as for the first time, I leave behind all cultural and religious specificities of my past work and look toward making art that entirely disconnects from any specific place or time, delving into a deeply existential issues. Also, within the dreamy narrative of this short piece, one does sense in the protagonist Natalie Portman's performance that she falls deep inside of a dark, nightmarish psychological space but only to exit into a better and bright open space.

**What project are you working on now?**

I have just finished working on a collaboration with a well known choreographer, Krzysztof Pastor, at the Dutch National Ballet, on a piece based on Shakespeare's "The Tempest." This was a big production, which took a long time to develop, and it just finished its run in Amsterdam. I'm in midst of preparing a solo exhibition for Mathaf, a museum in Doha, Qatar, which will open in November of 2014. Also, for the past few years I have been in development stages for my next feature film, which is based on the life and music of the legendary Egyptian singer Oum Kulthoum. Hopefully we can begin to finally shoot this film in 2015. It will be co-directed, like "Women Without Men," with my partner, Shoja Azari.

**What's the last show that you saw?**

The last New York museum show I visited was at the New Museum. I particularly enjoyed Ragnar Kjartansson and Camille Henrot's exhibitions. Also, in June I visited exhibitions in Paris, including the Ilya Kabakov and Bill Viola's in the Grand Palais, Thomas Hirschhorn and Hiroshi Sugimoto at the Palais de Tokyo.

**What's the last show that surprised you? Why?**

I was quite taken back by Hiroshi Sugimoto's wonderful exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo. Up to now I have admired this artist as a master photographer, but his exhibition showed a new side of him. A highly

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conceptual show, for the first time I saw him taking a more sculptural approach in the way that he used space, installing both his own art work and objects all leading to a highly moving and poetic show.

**Describe a typical day in your life as an artist.**

I am a hard worker and the day usually starts by jogging in the park and returning people's emails and phone calls before I get to my studio. I work all day sometimes six days a week but I leave my nights free as I enjoy my time off by going to movies, seeing friends, and most often taking my dance classes.

**Do you make a living off your art?**

Yes.

**What's the most indispensable item in your studio?**

My laptop and my paint brushes.

**Where are you finding ideas for your work these days?**

My projects tend to be long-term projects, and not so much developed on spontaneous ideas, but I guess most often my inspirations arise from reading, travels, and good conversation with friends.

**Do you collect anything?**

I have begun to collect some art, particularly those of my friends. Also, I have an obsession with old tribal jewelry, particularly from Middle East and Asia.

**What is your karaoke song?**

I don't even sing in the shower. I'm too afraid of hearing my own voice

**What's the last artwork you purchased?**

It must have been some work by a young Iranian artist, Ala Dehghan, at Thomas Erben gallery in New York.

**What's the first artwork you ever sold?**

In 1995, I sold my first art work at Annina Nosei Gallery from the "Women of Allah" series. This was my first solo exhibition and I remember two people who acquired my work from that show were Kiki Smith and Cindy Sherman, and I was so flattered.

**What's the weirdest thing you ever saw happen in a museum or gallery?**

I thought the recent exhibition by Thomas Hirschhorn at Palais de Tokyo in Paris was quite weird but in a nice way. He had filled one floor of the museum with truck and car tires, creating a maze of spaces that included meeting rooms, a library, art studios for children, a bar, and a

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TV room where the visitors could select and watch a movie of their liking.

**What's your favorite post-gallery watering hole or restaurant?**

Fanelli bar and restaurant in Soho.

**Do you have a gallery/museum-going routine?**

Yes. Sometimes I take an afternoon off to see shows in Chelsea or the Lower East Side with my friends and co-workers at my studio.

**What's the last great book you read?**

"Museum of Innocence" by Orhan Pamuk.

**What work of art do you wish you owned?**

One of Goya's black paintings.

**What international art destination do you most want to visit?**

Cuba, Lebanon.

**What under-appreciated artist, gallery, or work do you think people should know about?**

As far as artists go, I believe Laleh Khoramian is a great Iranian artist who deserves far more recognition than she has received.

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**Who's your favorite living artist?**

Marlene Dumas. Although I am not a painter, her work moves me deeply.

**What are your hobbies?**

African dance.