

issues of the day: the complexity of Muslim identity—and, in particular, shifting gender roles within it—and the collision of personal values and freedoms with institutional and religious dogmas. In 2011, the *Financial Times* selected Neshat as one of the most influential women in the world; in 2014, the World Economic Forum bestowed on her the prestigious Crystal Award in recognition of her outstanding contributions to the world through her art. As Neshat noted in her acceptance speech, “Picasso once said, ‘Art is the lie that enables us to realize the truth.’ Yes, my work is fiction, but I believe through fiction we can go deeper into the human psyche, deeper into reality, deeper into the universal plight of what it is like to be a human being on this planet today. I tend to consider an artist as a conduit—art and culture as a bridge between people and the people of power.”¹

Because of her outspokenness, Neshat can no longer safely work in her native Iran (where her mother and some of her siblings still live). In 1996, as she was leaving Iran, she was detained and interrogated at the airport. Neshat took this chilling experience and intertwined it with the experiences of famed novelist Shahrnush Parsipur as inspiration to create the film installation called *The Last Word* (2003).²

In this dramatic, seventeen-minute work, a team of men, presumably state interrogators, threatens a woman about her perceived misdeeds. Large ledger books are piled up in front of the seated woman, while a man hovers over her. “Woman! You’ve crossed the line.... Others have given up and confessed,” he taunts her. “You can’t pretend any more.” After continued, escalating threats, the woman finally breaks her silence by reciting a haunting poem by the iconic but banned female poet Forough Farrokhzad. The beauty of the words pouring out of her brings the interrogators to a standstill. The woman, having had her final say, defiantly rises and walks away.

Neshat has an uncanny ability to distill complicated, emotionally charged issues into visual means, creating an open-ended dialogue both with her audience and the Iranian regime. In *The Last Word*, for example, she brilliantly highlights the courage and voices of artists who create under institutional terror and the importance of what she calls “the people of imagination” speaking truth to people in power.

In many ways, Neshat has become a speaker for her people—despite the fact that she hasn’t stepped foot in the country in nearly twenty years. “I don’t really fancy the idea of going to prison,” she told *The New Yorker* magazine in 2007. “I’m not a martyr.”³

Interestingly, martyrdom, sacrifice, and Sharia law were themes Neshat explored in her very first photographic exhibition, *The Women of Allah Series* in 1993. It was through this particular exhibition that I first encountered Neshat, who was, in fact, often the subject of the photographs. Her almond-shaped eyes were rimmed with kohl and peered out from behind a veil, her gaze direct and determined, hands covered with Persian script. She photographed

herself sometimes brandishing a gun, at times cupping her mouth with her hands, or holding her young son, Cyrus. For several images, Neshat hand-inscribed poetry penned by women who were silenced by the repressive Iranian regime on her face, the bottom of her feet, and even on her eyeball. There is no mistaking the deeply personal and simultaneously political nature of Neshat’s work, which is based on her heritage and the dichotomy of her experiences as an Iranian artist and a Muslim living in the West.

Shirin Neshat was born in 1957 in the city of Qazvin, often noted as the third most religious city in Iran. She was the fourth of five children. While her family was not particularly religious, given the environment, she never dared to go to the local bazaar without a veil. Although no one else in her immediate family claims artistic proclivities, Neshat credits her father, a prominent physician named Ali Neshat, for instilling a sense of individuality in her from an early age. This encouraging of freedom and a drive for personal expression is uncommon in typical, conservative Iranian families, and it appears to have helped Neshat explore her passions and talents. Over the years, she says, “I have developed an identity that is my own. I pioneered it myself.... I didn’t inherit it, but made it myself.”⁴

Neshat’s father also believed in providing his kids, regardless of their gender, with the highest opportunities for education. She was sent to a Catholic boarding school in Tehran in the seventh grade, and in 1974 she was sent to the United States to continue her education. She graduated from U.C. Berkeley with a degree in art, but didn’t consider herself an artist for close to a decade. “I didn’t want to make mediocre art,” she explained to me. “Being an artist is more than a skill; [it’s] a sharing of something important with the world.”⁵ In 1987, Neshat married Kyong Park, a Korean-American artist and architect, and immersed herself in running their avant-garde exhibition space in New York called the Storefront.

By the time her son, Cyrus, was born in 1990, she was beginning to feel the first tremors of an awakening. “Once my child was born, I felt the need to join a larger dialogue,” she shared. She took her then-one-year-old on their first visit to Iran after the 1979 revolution. Nothing could have prepared her for what she experienced on her visit. She discovered that her homeland, as she remembered it, no longer existed. As an outsider, she noticed that the new social order had infiltrated the private lives of people and their interactions. On a personal level, she acknowledged how much her mom and sister had changed since the revolution. “Before they were more modern and cosmopolitan, but somehow it seemed as if the color in their lives was lifted from them. When the regime changed, the impact was so deep that they couldn’t even recognize it,” she said.⁶

Still, when she returned to New York after her first visit, Iran kept beckoning her. She visited her homeland every year until 1996, and while back in the States, she pored over books and articles on the Iranian Revolution. In many ways, it was her reaction to the revolution and