

SHIRIN NESHAT

THE BOOK OF KINGS

GALERIE JEROME DE NOIRMONT

HISTORY IN A LYRICAL REGISTER

The new photography collection and concurrent video installation by Shirin Neshat, under the title *The Book of Kings*, could be seen in many ways as a return to her first internationally acclaimed series, *Women of Allah*, which were shown nearly two decades ago. The same body/face calligraphy and the stark black and white contrasts are immediately recognizable. This time however the words and lines are a lot smaller and condensed and, in each print, might consist of pages of text. If reproduced on a less expansive format, a journal spread for example, they become illegible.

It is as if the artist wishes to make it more difficult for us to figure what the work might entail, unless we get real close and pause for a long time. The implication would be asking the spectator to step deeper into a dimension which is beyond the immediate, a historical one. Here, unlike *Women of Allah*, we don't find any overt religious symbolism. Again, the artist prompts us to dig deeper than what makes today's headlines. In this exhibit, violence, submission, power, authority, martyrdom, love, mourning, and death are removed from the immediate atmosphere of political Islamism and point to the past. Even though the politics of faith and resistance today are still topics of debate as much as any other time in recent years, Shirin Neshat has moved a long way from meditations on the event of an Islamic revolution and its aftermath. The trajectory of her work from *Women of Allah* to *The Book of Kings* entails the increasing presence of a hidden historical dimension while the lyrical execution still persists and even intensified. Working in the mediums of video and feature film also helped Neshat to highlight this shift.

When in mid 1990s Shirin Neshat burst onto international art scene with the *Women of Allah* series, it was not immediately clear if this was yet another effort at re-packaging of exotic Muslim images for the consumer/dealer of the North or, inversely, a nativist "return to the self", reasserting Islamic values of faith, resistance, and martyrdom, in the face of a perceived Western assault. The fact that *Women of Allah*, in its multilayer complexities was neither of those two things did not hinder facile misconceptions. Those images had an immediate impact: women in black chadors, revolutionary pistols and firearms; women subdued at prayers, Eastern scripts, and more. People could easily miss a hushed form of body-erotic subtext under or next to the apparent pious garbs, for example, the half open lips of a subject highlighted by her hand and fingers with words from the iconoclastic Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad; or the allure of the signature Neshat-eyes, radiant and mysterious with thick black lines. Iconic images have a life of their own; they seep into the media in unexpected ways, not quite anticipated by the artist or the art world. Neshat's subjects also dramatized the ambiguities and hazards of being a Middle Eastern artist in the West at a time when the theme of the "clash of civilizations" was spreading fast from academic circles to the media at large.

The most prominent feature of Shirin Neshat's work, as most critics have pointed out, is the lyrical quality of her concepts, images, and cinematic movements. Symbolism and imaginative compositions might not be hard to achieve but to simultaneously retain a socio-historical dimension within the lyrical form, or rather to express a historical theme in a lyrical register is not an easy task. For the poetic quality of her cinematic schemes, Shirin Neshat could be compared to Tarkovsky or Kieslowski and for her politics to Pasolini or Buñuel; and yet she is quite different from these two groups for her extreme formalist choreography of small or large-scale movements which brings to mind the work of someone like Miklós Jancsó.

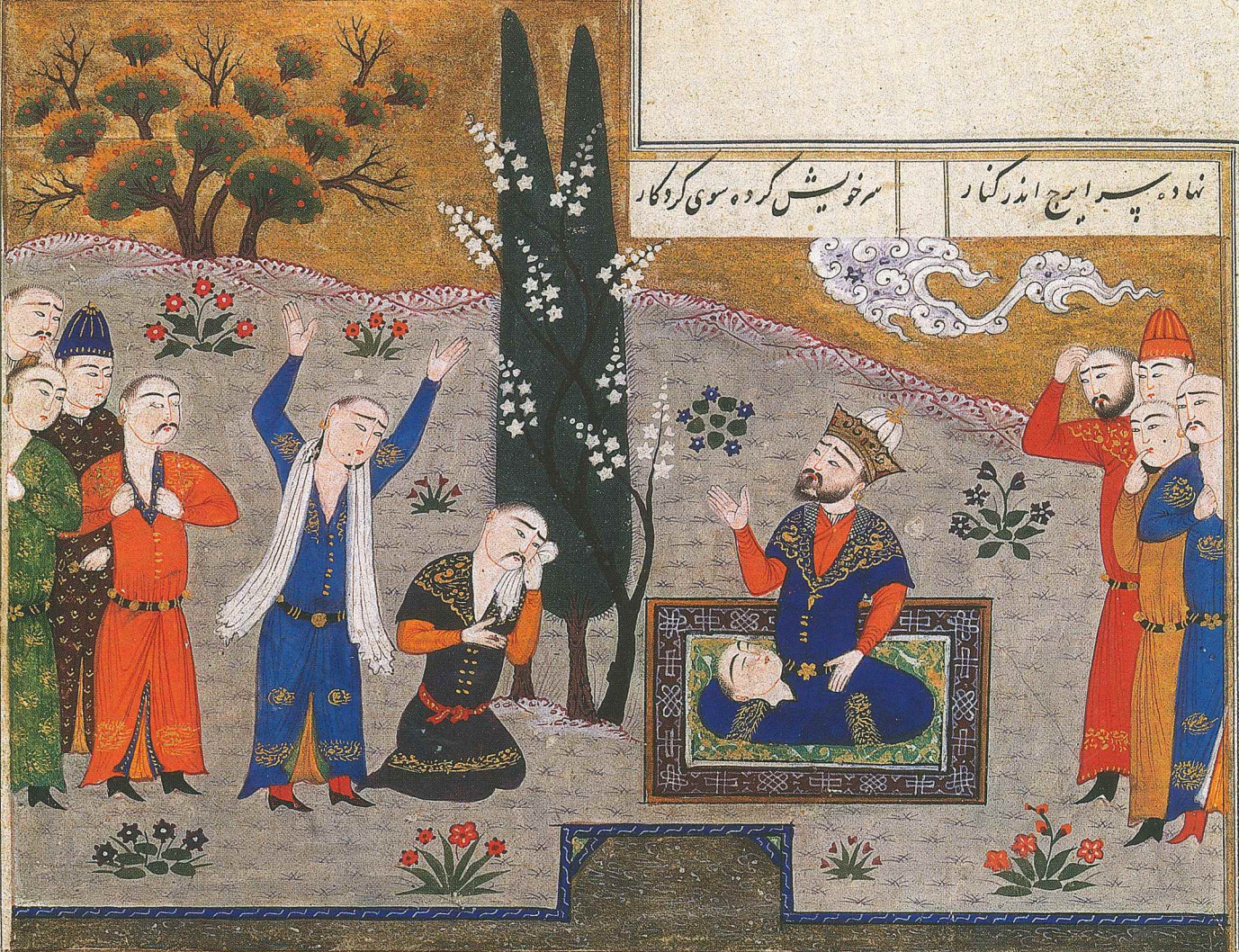
As a visual artist, Neshat does not record anything simply as a document or a political event. What counts perhaps as momentous or newsworthy, a coup d'état (1953 in Iran), large street demonstrations, the plight of political prisoners in the Islamic Republic, the collective mourning ritual of mothers of the martyrs at their graveyard, the gathering of the pious at a procession, circles of resistance and underground print-shops, a landmark show trial of journalists and political figures of the Iranian Green Movement in 2010, or what goes on in an ordinary place like a brothel or a women's public bath, all enter fields of poetic connotations that are peppered with literary allusions. Still, Neshat is far from someone who simply trusts her poetic intuition. She seems to meditate on theoretical concepts and consciously tries to challenge orientalist perceptions of her subject matter. A case in point would be the famous public bath scene in *Women without Men*, where an act of self-immolation turns a vision of a serene, sensuous, oriental bath into heart-wrenching violent blood-letting. This is another way of dealing with history through subverting certain accepted representations that might be seen as a sort of visual historiography of the Middle East. In this sense, Shirin Neshat is fundamentally a radical political artist.

On the surface, the large black and white prints in Neshat's *The Book of Kings* do not have any obvious connection to the epic monument of Persian poetry, Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (*The Book of Kings*). But the borrowed title functions as a symbol or code-name for a chain of similar themes and events scattered throughout Iranian history, related to the conducts of tyrants and a long line of rebellious sons and daughters who fell from grace and lost their head.

Unlike *Women of Allah* whose references directly pointed to the grave events of the post-revolutionary Iran during 1980s, here we do not find a sign or an emblem related to the Green Movement that shook the foundations of the Shiite theocracy in 2009, whereby a vast street performance of popular will anticipated the Arab Spring two years later. Shirin Neshat was an outspoken defender of the green movement within the Iranian diaspora. What marks the "presence" of this historical event in the show and connects it to a stream of identical uprisings throughout Iranian history is more than forty portraits of mostly young people from Iran and the rest of the Middle East, looking directly at us, expressing very subtly a range of human emotions that encompass fear, doubt, hope, bewilderment, rage, desperation, courage, and ultimately a plea, asking us to bear witness to their struggle and their defeat.

Right page: Faridun mourns over the head of Iraj
Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*.
Turkman: Shiraz, 4 July 1486
Scribe: Ghiyas al-Din b. Bayazid sarraf (banker)
Opaque watercolor, ink and gold on paper

نماده سپید ابرج اندر کنار / سرخویش کرده سوی کردگار



همی گفت ای داور دادگر
دل مرد و پند از انسان بسوز
همی خواهم ای روشن کردگار
جو دیدم چنین زان بسبب شایدم
زمین پست و خاک بالین او
کس از تاجداران بدینسان نغزو
خوش منافی نه و چشم پر آب
همه دیده پر آب و دل پر خون
فریدون شهبان سر اسرگشت
که ابرج برو مهر بسیار داشت
از ان خوب رخ شد دلش پرا
جهانی گرفتند پرور و نوش
جو بخت و آمدش سنگام شوی
که وی بود از نسل چشید شاه

بدین بی گنه گشته اندر نکو
که مرکز نه پستند جز تیره روز
که چندان امان یابم از روزگار
کجا خاک بالابه بنایدیم
شده تیره روشن جهان بین او
که تو مردی ای نامبردار کرد
ز مردام و دود برده آرام خواب
نشسته بنیاد رود اندرون
بران ماه رویان یکی بر گشت
قضا را گیر ک از بار داشت
بکین سپرد داد و لرا بنوید
بر آمد بیاز و بزرگی کش
جو بر من شدش روی و چون قهر تو
سزاوار شاهی و تخت و کلاه

بجز سرش چپه در پیش من
باغ جگوشان کی از ده
که از تخم ابرج سیکه نامور
بدین گونه بگریست آن شاه زار
در بار پسته گشاده زبان
سرت را بریده بزار امرن
سر اسرگشت کوشش مردوزن
همه جامه کس کرده بود و سپاه
یکی خوب جهره بر پشته نهید
پری جهره را چپه بدور نهان
جو سنگام زادن آمد بدید
بران لاله رخ راز سر تا پای
نیام زد کرد و شویشت سنگ
بدادش بدان نامبردار شوی

شش خورده شیران آن بخت
که بختایش آرد و بدایشان ده
بر بستم بدین کینه پسته کمر
همی ناکیار پستش اندر کنار
همی گفت زار ای برده جوان
ثقت داشته کام شیران کفن
بر جاب کرده کی بخشن
نشسته برانده بر مرکب شاه
کجا نام او بود و ماه اسرید
از ان شاد شد شتر یار جهان
یکی دخترا آمد ز ماه آفرید
تو گشتی مگر ابر چستی بجای
به داد و جندی بر آمد درنگ
جو یکجند گمانی بر آمد بروی

On the opposite wall, we find less than a handful of larger full body portraits, depicting stately elder figures, perhaps kings, viziers, or other statesmen, that are sitting upright or standing and looking fiercely proud, possibly a reference to the old court photographs of the Qajar era. On their body, instead of written text calligraphy (the testimony of the fallen), we have scenes of bloody battlegrounds and beheadings, very much like the dramatic story-panels of traditional popular *Shahnameh* narrators (naghals) who used them as background for their one-man street performances. Between the two walls there are yet other mid-size prints that are open to free interpretation, among them a stunning minimalist picture of a pair of hanging legs in the air titled *Divine Rebellion*, immediately conjuring the bodies of the condemned on the gallows. Whether this single powerful image is a reminder of so many public hangings during the last three decades in Iran or a reference to the fate of legendary historical figures of dissent and apostasy such as Mansur al-Hallaj, it can also be seen as pointing to the storyline of the adjacent video installation called *OverRuled*.

OverRuled video is a short version of a much longer theatrical piece which, at the time of its initial staging in New York in the winter of 2011, was performed with a cast of around 40 actors and a whole troop of emigre Iranian musicians, singers, and media personalities. Watching the short version, one might conclude that here Neshat is dangerously close to a type of sloganeering that amounts to nothing but a simple good-versus-evil sensationalism. However, the original theatrical piece that she directed, a complete courtroom drama from beginning to end, was nuanced and complex. The central character of the judge (Mohammad Ghaffari) is not simply a hypocritical revengeful bigot. He is genuinely trying to safeguard the normative consensus of a community of faith against the threat of moral relativism. He is willing to pardon the accused, begging them to recant, even ready to enter a theological dispute with the defendants, so that his court would not be complicit in filicide. If we remember the Socratic manner of free thought, questioning the dominant ideas and accepted norms that hold a community together, even the possibility of paying tribute to a goddess quite apart from the gods of the city-state, (what is known as "corrupting the youth") then one appreciates how the writers of the piece bring to light the primordial conflict between the cohesion of a community and the danger of freethinking individuals throughout history. Even so, in *OverRuled*, Neshat and her collaborator Shoja Azari cast the conflict in terms of traditional Islamic mysticism of a Hallaj or Rumi kind, with strong erotic but otherworldly pseudo-philosophizing, against the religious orthodoxy. One might put it as an "inner" civilizational clash because there is no reference to freedom of the kind we see in liberal western cultures, based on civil rights and rule of law. In this sense, *OverRuled* is similar to Neshat's unforgettable video masterpiece *Turbulent*, where the internal dichotomy of a deeply religious culture is cast as between the tradition of Sufi male singing and the dark, enigmatic, "non-musical" tunes of a female emotional counter-vocal assault.

Neshat's poetic vision, in this sense, is quite different from what has come to be known as international hybrid art. Her references do not come from a border-less global popular or elite culture. They are deeply rooted in the history of her own native land. There are a lot in her work in need of being "translated" for a non-Iranian audience. As she put it in an interview with the scholar Shadi Sheybani, "I hope my work is a bridging of the two cultures. I function as a translator, conveying the meaning of one culture to the other as I find a visual language to communicate to both sensibilities. The two cultures aren't merely

different; they are completely contradictory¹.”

One might doubt if the martyrdom of the young lovers and their metaphysical creed of love or ecstatic rapture can stand in for the secular, civic aspirations of Iranian youth at the present historical juncture, but this timeless transcendent universalism could perhaps raise hope at a time when prospects of serious political change seem distant.

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¹ Shadi Sheybani, *Women of Allah : a Conversation with Shirin Neshat*. Michigan Quaterly Review. Volume 38 issue 2. 1999, p.204. University of Michigan.