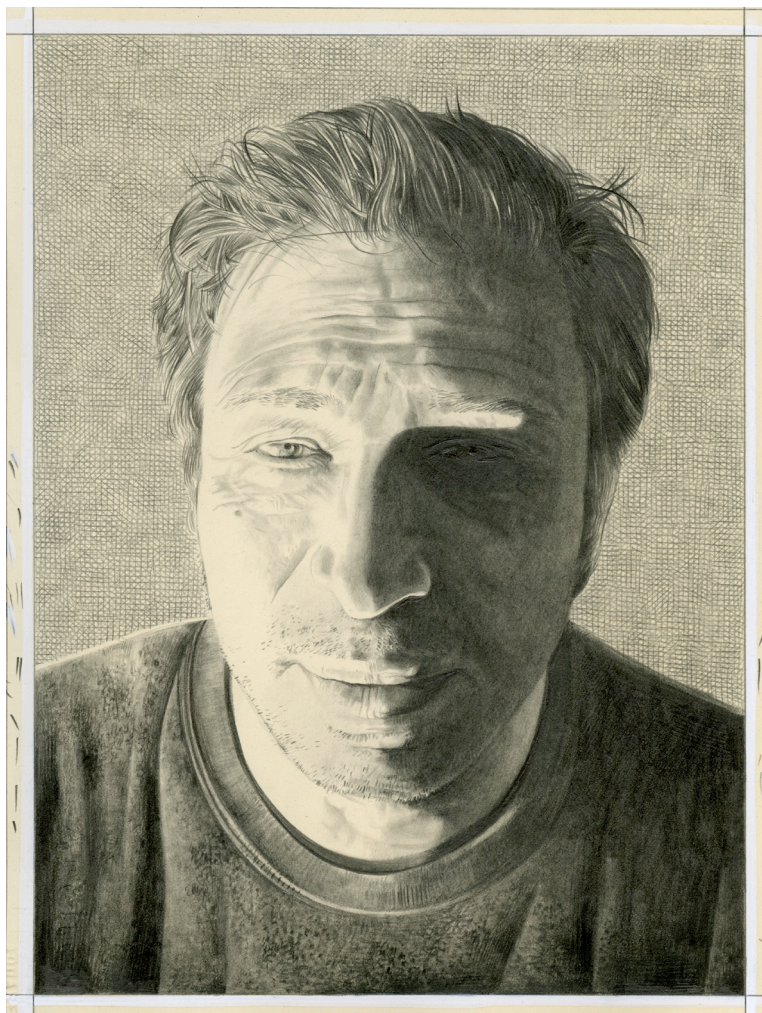


Shoja Azari WITH PHONG BUI

On the occasion of his current exhibit *Icons* at Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller Gallery (May 4 – May 27, 2010), which includes five video portraits along with a video installation, the artist/filmmaker Shoja Azari paid a visit to Art International Radio to talk with *Rail* Publisher Phong Bui about his life, work, and more.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

PHONG BUI (RAIL): The first time we met was as at Marina [Abramovic] and Paolo's [Carnevari] party. I think it was in the winter of February 2008 and I remember we spent the end of the evening talking about Rumi, the 13th century Persian poet, whose work both you and I admire. And you gave me the full pleasure of reciting one of my favorite poems of his, "Eating Poetry," then, from that point on I began to follow your work quite closely. I have seen most of the films including the epic black-and-white *K* (2002), which is an adaptation of the three Kafka stories "The Married Couple," "In the Penal Colony," and "Fratricide;" *Windows* (2006), which consist of nine vignettes, which are each filmed in a single shot or a glimpse through a window frame, as though we are watching the story unfold; *Odyssey* (2008), the most poetic among your work, in my opinion, and of course, your collaboration with other artists, which seems quite essential to the practice of your work as an artist. But before we get on with our talk in greater depth I'd like to begin with your early history: you were born in 1958 in Shiraz, Iran. What was your upbringing and what in fact prompted you to study psychology and philosophy in the beginning?

SHOJA AZARI: I was born in Shiraz, which was a South central city in Iran. My upbringing was pretty normal in a family of five siblings, my father, my mother, and my dad's first wife. Actually I grew up in a family where there was basically a contest for my father. [Laughs.]

RAIL: Do you mean fighting for affection?

AZARI: Yes, fighting for affection. And it was quite interesting in that my father was a dentist and a practicing Sufi. I remember, there were these gatherings where they would get together and basically be chanting and it all looked very strange, interesting and mysterious

to me as a youngster. Those were the primarily school years. My father died when I was 11 years old and left us with a huge debt, resulting for the family to dive from a mostly comfortable middle class life to life of poverty. I guess, being a Sufi and all, he really did not believe in material life! [Laughs.]

During high school years, the society was becoming more and more politicized and exciting. We used to read books, keeping them hidden, then pass them around, so you were basically thrown or forced into this political consciousness that has carried over into my life and work. Even at a very young age I began to question just about everything. In fact there was a clergy or Mullah that was affiliated with my dad's circle, and I must have been 10 or 11, whom I pressured him for proof of god. He was very kindly and patient, but whatever he said, it made no sense, therefore didn't satisfy my curiosity.

RAIL: When were you first exposed to art? When did you discover it was so urgent that you had to stop everything else and become an artist?

AZARI: My childhood friend, the painter Shahram [Karimi] who had an older brother who also was a painter, and he was teaching painting at one of the two art institutions in Shiraz, so I would attend to his slide lectures on the history of art. I remember leaving that place feeling like the whole world is open to me, almost like an enlightenment or epiphany.

RAIL: What year, approximately?

AZARI: Probably 1970 or 1971, and I was about 13 or 14. It was also the time when I began to write poetry and short stories, as well as get involved in theatre, so the course of my development in the visual arts didn't really come in full circle until I met Shirin Neshat in 1997. However, I can't ever forget seeing *Death in Venice* at a theatre in the University of Shiraz. There were like 300 people in the audience, and after the film was finished, everyone was sitting there in complete silence. No one talked, even when watching the credits scrolling down in the end of the film. And no one left, there was just this silence and amazing energy. I remember clearly turning around looking at the people and saying, "Wow, this is really amazing." I thought, if a medium could capture people like this then, I want to become a filmmaker.

RAIL: *Death in Venice* may be Visconti's best film, and Dirk Bogarde was absolutely phenomenal in it.

AZARI: Agreed. So you can imagine it as the film that really got me excited about filmmaking. I began to make short films on Super 8. What was particular about that time was that while the society was under dictatorship and there was no political freedom, there was a ton of cultural and intellectual activity. In fact, one could describe the Iranian society at the time as cosmopolitan. With the emergence of the Islamic regime and the formation of the theocracy in Iran, in addition to the political oppression of all aspects of cultural/intellectual life, life itself was suppressed. One indication of this cosmopolitanism was the Shiraz Art Festival, which was perhaps one of the most important annual art events in the world at the time, I guess partially because it was sanctioned by the royal family, and a lot of money was spent on it. The fact that Shiraz is an ancient city, which contains the ruins of Persepolis, and is surrounded by beautiful "orchards" added to the charm. In any case, we had one month of the festival where every major international artist would participate and show their work. It is there that for the first time I saw theater and dance performances by Moris Bejar and Bob Wilson, among others. The festival encompassed all types of activities, from visual arts, to film, theater, dance, etc. We used to jump walls in order to see the events because either we could not afford the tickets, or we were too young for the event. Actually, I made a big mistake by taking my uncle's family—my uncle and his wife are very traditional people—to see Pasolini's *A Thousand and One Nights*. As expected,



Shoja Azari, "Coffee House Painting" (2009), The day of the Last Judgment. Video projection on canvas. Motion graphic artist: Nariman Hamed. Courtesy of artist and gallery.

not only did they walk out of the theatre but they didn't speak to me for months.

RAIL: It would have been equally as bad if you had taken them to the see *The Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales*. [Laughter.]

AZARI: In any case, at that time I saw many films by different masters, and almost all of them were in the original language with subtitles, which was so amazing. All you had to do was sit there and get immersed in these films. Even though you didn't understand much of what you saw, they amazed you nevertheless.

RAIL: You didn't come to the U.S. until 1983, which means you lived through the 1979 revolution. Could you tell us a little bit about that experience?

AZARI: Actually I came to New York and went to film school in 1977. And while I was here studying English, taking some classes in film production, the revolution started and of course I couldn't contain myself so I went back. It was between 1979 and 1980, and I just can't tell you how wonderful the prospects of life and freedom in society in general were. It was almost like a complete anarchic state because the government wasn't formed yet. There were activities on a grass-roots level and people were hopeful. There was such a sense of cooperation and building the country. I was involved in all of it, being young and pretty much attracted to the ideas of socialism at the time. I was associated with an anarchist group while doing theatre works and writing at the same time. There was such a burgeoning of creativity and enthusiasm, and what was amazing was that there was no idea of career building; it was just like you were doing it for the good of humanity in the hope that you would arrive at the pinnacle of socialism and brotherhood. It was during that period, the first year and half, that really formed my consciousness. Then the government began to crack down and close all the universities and cultural centers. It was the beginning of the Islamisation of the society so the rest of the years from 1980 to the end of 1983 I pretty much lived underground, because of my political and artistic involvement.

RAIL: It was a very strange revolution because it wasn't because of a financial crisis that led to social unrest or caused a peasant rebellion; nor it was about military discontent or defeat at war, but to replace a modernized monarchy with a theocracy, which was, to say the least, quite problematic.

AZARI: Well, it was one despot replacing another, whether the Shah or Khomeini. Anyone who was against either of them was put in prison or tortured. It was a state ruled under boots, which was when, during my youth years, we were active and became political because all you saw was a dictator and you wanted to remove him. So the whole society was politicized. What was really amazing was in Iran a true social revolution took place, comparable to the October revolution in Russia, or the French revolution. It was a total overhaul of society; every institution of society was changed and turned upside-down—a full-fledged social revolution. The forces that really created that

kind of movement and potential were secular, socialist, democratic, and all that, but the religious backlash swept across when Khomeini started to take leadership. So, the movement wasn't really religious at its inception, as you had just said, but became that way. The reason for that is the Shah, unfortunately, because of the 1953 crisis. In 1953 we had a national government of doctor Mossadegh, and it was a sort of so-called democratic period, during which time the Shah fled and then there was a coup d'état, manufactured by the CIA and British intelligence, that removed the democratic government. They brought back the Shah who then totally obliterated all the secular opposition including all the communists, socialists, democrats, and intellectuals who were put in prison and whatnot. So, what remained untouched in the society were all these mosques and religious institutions that were so widespread. When the revolution started to happen, although the leadership was secular at its inception, mosques mobilized the core movement and therefore it became religious.

RAIL: The 1953 Revolution serves as the political background of the film *Women Without Men*, which you collaborated on with Shirin. Anyway, after the 1979 revolution, there came the Iran-Iraq war a year later, 1980, which was equally horrific. To think that Saddam accused an Iranian agent of trying to assassinate his foreign minister, Tariq Aziz, as a pretext for going in there—it was the most surreal episode. What was your impression of the whole war? Were you there or here?

AZARI: I was there for a couple of years when the war started, but then I left. Otherwise, it took eight years and it was the most devastating because more than a million people on each side were slaughtered and killed. The interesting thing about the war is that the majority of the Iraqi population was Shiite and the theocracy that came to power in Iran was Shiite while Saddam was Sunni so he was really scared that the revolution would spread. That was the reason he thought he should attack while the chaos of the revolution continued and Khomeini had dismantled the army. So, he thought he would move in and take half of Iran but what he didn't realize was there would be such a mass mobilization. People really went to war against him. What is really horrifying about the Iran-Iraq war is that, once again, the U.S. was really backing Saddam at the time. When Saddam used chemical weapons in Kurdistan and Halabja where thousands of people died, the West, including the U.S., turned their faces and let this slaughter go on. There was a lot of ugly politics involved and the U.S. had a lot to do with it.

RAIL: We certainly had our share in my country, Vietnam. Not to mention what happened in Cambodia during the horrific *Killing Fields*, where 200,000 people were executed by Pol Pot—the rest of the world looked the other way, too. At any rate, you left Iran and you came back to New York and what did you do then? How were you able to sustain yourself and do your work?

AZARI: There is this saying, “revolution eats its children” and it really is true, and it has now started in our current situation in Iran. You can see the way the government is eating all the people that created the theocracy: they are all in jail now, or in my case, it cut out like 10 or 15 years of my would-have-been-productive life because I was totally immersed in politics. In other words, all my artistic activities were put on the back burner. But what can any of us do? I mean, we were all so hot with politics and ideology, and that was our condition, our way of life. Eventually, I left Iran when the borders were closed. I crossed the border, which is a story in itself. Then I was stranded in Pakistan and Europe for a while and finally, because I was a student here before, I ended up coming back to the U.S. Otherwise I would have been in a miserable situation. When I came I had a baby son, and a wife, and it became a game of survival at that point, like, how are you going to feed your family while being still so hot with politics? After about 10 or 15 years I came back to art, but basically for a long time, just like many artists we know, I was doing odd jobs and trying to survive while putting myself through school.

RAIL: So was *The Story of the Merchant and the Indian Parrot* considered your first film?

AZARI: It’s my first unfinished feature film [laughter]. Although, I had made a bunch of short films before, but with that I put all my savings and hard work into it. I wrote the script, which was actually inspired by a Rumi poem, “The story of Merchant and the Indian Parrot.” It’s a beautiful story but it was incorporated into New York City life.

RAIL: In a contemporary context.

AZARI: Exactly. I, in fact, managed to make a half hour film and realized there was no way I could finish it so it just sat there, partly because the story had an apocalyptic vision predating the Oklahoma bombing, but when the Oklahoma bombing happened I felt the story was done. It had no relevance any more!

RAIL: And that was the end of it. [Laughs.]

AZARI: Pretty much. Yeah.

RAIL: Which does happen to the rest of us. Regarding *K*, would you consider it your first mature work?

AZARI: Yeah, it was definitely my first mature work.

RAIL: And what compelled you to construct your own adaptation after Kafka’s three stories, “The Married Couple,” “In the Penal Colony,” and “A Fratricide”?

AZARI: Well I’ve always been an admirer of Kafka, ever since I was a teenager. Kafka was very popular in Iran, partly, I think, because despotism and other political situations that were present in his writing reflected what was going on in Iran’s political climate at the time or even now, I would say. So as you could only imagine, I was completely versed in Kafka.

RAIL: Your attraction toward Kafka doesn’t quite surprise me since he, too, had strong anarchist leanings.

AZARI: I really felt that after all these conflicts and with the advent of internet, computers, and the prospect of Big Brother again, we, as a separate society, are moving into much larger global conflict. So I started to reread Kafka and it made much more sense to me once again, and because of financial restrictions, I could make three stories. And I started doing three stories not wanting it necessarily to be a feature but somewhere along the road I felt they could be constructed as a trilogy, and therefore combined into a feature length film.

RAIL: Well, I think that the fact that you have basically used the same actor in three films within the film, is quite similar to the way that Bergman uses the same actors, whether Max von Sydow, Bibi Andersson, Liv Ullmann and others, therefore a certain kind of continuity is created. I would say that it does two things for me. First, it creates a rhythm that expresses the course of time within the frame, which is what Tarkovsky believes is an important agent to the power



Shoja Azari, Icon# 1, Icon series. Video portrait 2010. Motion Graphic artist: Nariman. Courtesy of artist and gallery.

of the image. Secondly, it seems to be a truthful depiction of Kafka’s so-called smaller parable within the parable. What I thought was so funny was Shirin, who played the housemaid, after she greeted the protagonist at the door went back to scrub the floor, and when she let him out after a good ten minutes, she went back to scrub exactly the same spot.

AZARI: As you know, the humor is very essential in Kafka. The reason for three actors playing the same roles over and over is, similarly, my own reflection on Kafka being cyclical in his repetition. So it’s always like this endless absurd cycle that humanity is caught in and it keeps repeating and repeating and repeating. And it has almost a sense of reincarnation, so if you look at these three stories, the way each plays out, you know the victim in one story becomes the oppressor in the other one, or the executioner, and the oppressor becomes a victim and vice versa. So it’s almost as if we’re doomed to repeat ourselves. We might take this role or that role or some other role but it’s really basically the same scenario. You might have a different role in it which is like, it almost doesn’t matter what role you’re playing because you’re either on this side or that side but you end up recreating the same kind of drama constantly. So that was the reason for utilizing these three actors into these three different films and changing the roles with each other.

RAIL: What can you tell us about *Maria de Los Angeles*, which is considered your most experimental film.

AZARI: It was made in Mexico and it was a film that chronicles the making of one of the video installations that I did with Shirin called *Tooba*. It was sort of a behind-the-scenes film documentary, and my feeling was that basically the practice of filmmakers as they go to a foreign land to make a film is that of the colonialist. They go to these small villages of really poor people and basically exploit the hell out of them. Actually in Morocco while we were there making our film, the people that we were working with told us that we paid them three times more than Ridley Scott and other Hollywood directors do. Beyond that, just the idea of us going to these villages, spend weeks there, basically uprooting their lives really bothers me. It’s really a form of colonialism. That’s why Shirin hates that film because it portrays us as these colonizers [laughs].

RAIL: What was the impulse behind *Windows*, Shoja?

AZARI: I don’t know. Ideas come to you. You know, you have an idea and then you start to elaborate on it, give it wings, then it can fly somewhere. I remember watching a Fassbinder film, and there was a camera movement of two people, father and son, sitting at two ends of a table, and there was a painting on the wall, which was a sort of classical German landscape painting, and the camera was moving from one face during the conversation, framing the painting, then moving to the other face. All of the sudden I had this light in my head. Well, how about if this painting is a window and we’re moving from this face to a window and something is happening behind that window and again to the second face. That was the creation of *A Room With a View*, which is actually a really horrifying story. It really upsets people because while these two people are watching a soap opera on TV, eating popcorn, and between them there is a window looking out to a park where this nightmare is unfolding. That was really the inception of it and then when I finished the film I realized that it was all done in one shot and there was no cut in it. It was about 10 minutes and there were about three different layers: one, the two actors that were watching the soap opera. Two, the view of the window where the horror occurs. Three, the soundtrack coming from their voices and from the soap opera. That was when I wanted to make other similar films that could be made in one shot and more or less based on different ideas for different scenarios on the same concept.

RAIL: I felt that there was an order that generated an interplay, one might say, between realism and surrealism. It began in *The Phoenix* with a jazz musician, who, after turning on the oven gas, begins to play his saxophone as almost a prelude to his suicide, which eventually leads to the death of two pedestrians outside of his window. This stands in contrast to a couple watching a soap opera while a group of teenagers, a gang, rape a young woman who is jogging alone outside of their window in *A Room with a View*. You can find similar accounts in *The Lovers*, (the young man played by Behrang, your son, who is also a musician who plays in a band called Electric Black) and *Exit 31*, and the rest of the other five vignettes, actually. What can be more realistic than an argument between a couple while caught in traffic? The husband, played by you, arguing with the wife who he thinks is having an affair with his brother. And the surreal beauty of the last one, which I thought was incredible, of a man who is dying but we only know it when the moth actually dies by the window. It’s very subtle, which brings us to another characteristic of your work, which is, I would say, slowness.

AZARI: That’s not a good word [laughs]. People won’t go to see it!

RAIL: Nevertheless, I felt the slowness of the *The Passing* was only more amplified in what I think is your most poetic work thus far, *Odyssey*. And that slowness of pace is considered by, again, Tarkovsky to be an important requirement in filmmaking. As you know, he often spoke against the growing popularity of rapid-cut editing or any kind of special devices that he believed to be the opposite of the artistic nature of cinema. I also felt the poem “Thus Spoke Earth,” by Ahmad Shamlou was so complimentary to the film. There’s a line, which goes, “iron and copper make deadlier weapons than stone, which you use to murder Abel.” So beautiful. However complex his poetry, his imagery remains very simple and concrete. In the same way, the camera moves through various places inside of this incredibly horrifying abandoned slaughterhouse with its different instruments of torture, including chains, meat-hooks, and so on, yet one thinks of them as a singularly simple concrete image.

AZARI: And the film language that we love, including all the great films of Buñuel, Bergman, Pasolini, Visconti, and Antonioni, for example, which were all slow films. I remember I saw a Fellini film in a big theatre. Even by the late 80s and it was packed. Those were the times when seeing movies was part of an intellectual involvement. Then, I remember when people started to talk about the “death of cinema,” which did happen, unfortunately, not in a sense that the actual physical theater died but the film language suffered or at least, if it’s not dead, it’s really ill. Because there is a certain language of TV, which lends itself to ADD. The fast cuts and continuous stimulation that only monopolize one part of the brain, which appeal to the audience that basically grew up with TV so they can’t relate to the film language that activates the complete global brain, which is required as part of our reflective process. I remember seeing *Saraband*, the last film of Bergman, at Film Forum in 2004. And there were only three of us in the audience. The film lasted one week and it was gone. You’re talking about a master filmmaker, and it was a brilliant film, so it’s really unfortunate.

RAIL: I don’t know what we can do about it, but the fact that we’re even talking; I think there’s hope. Can we talk about your collaboration? Especially with Shirin, which we don’t need to go into depth, but in regard to this particular film, *Women Without Men*, how do you feel about the way it resonates with the current political climate in Iran?

AZARI: It almost brings tears to my eyes because the background of the film is during the crisis of 1953, when a secular government, a national democracy was in power. People were really hopeful again but it all got crushed by the CIA coup d’état which established the shah’s dictatorship for the next 30 years. In our film *Women Without Men*, we follow the stories of four different women from four different social backgrounds and classes of the society, and they converge into this beautiful orchard. And eventually when the country falls, the orchard falls, and basically the hope of these women also falls in a sense. When we were finishing this film, and we were actually accepted at the Venice Film Festival, the current uprising broke at night after last year’s June election, and then the killings on the streets of Tehran began again. There was little we could do except cry while trying to finish the film and what was really amazing? The resonance. The images of the film and the images that we were watching on YouTube were so uncanny and so similar to each other. For example, Munis, one of the four women, who basically became an activist but not an ideological activist, an activist who is very hopeful for a betterment of life.

But she jumps to her own death. And then there’s this image of her on the street, dead, and then we had the image of Neda Agha-Soltan, the woman who got



Shoja Azari, Icon# 4, Icon series. Video portrait 2010. Motion Graphic artist: Nariman. Courtesy of artist and gallery.

shot last June on the streets of Tehran—these two images of two innocent bystanders, two innocent people, two idealists, two young women, you know, at two different periods. One fictional, one in today’s reality. And that resonance was so uncanny.

RAIL: Actually, the film begins with her falling and ends with her body on the street. It was so incredibly sad. Could you also talk about your collaboration with Shahram on what you refer to as “video painting”? Where did it begin and how many have you done so far?

AZARI: It began about five or six years ago, although I have collaborated with Shahram on other projects throughout my life. We grew up together, we went to the same high school, we’ve been active together as activists, as artists and whatnot, and Shahram has done all the production design of my films and also the films that we did with Shirin, so he has been a really active partner of ours for a while. But this particular “video painting” was a real accident; it was a discovery of technique really. Nothing but that. What happened was, I was watching a Tarkovsky film called *The Stalker* and I just thought it was unbelievably painterly.

RAIL: Well, he certainly made one after the icon painter, *Andrei Rublev*.

AZARI: That’s right. Each frame is like a painting. So we thought, what if we take this and go to the source of it and just freeze one frame and actually paint it? So we did that and we projected the clip into the painting and what happened was this magical thing. There was very subtle movement on the canvas coming from the actual image. It was a double image; it was a painting and the moving image. They were identical so it was like light meeting the pigment and there was something strange, three-dimensional movement, the painting was alive. So we just did it as an experiment to have fun with and the result was astonishing. It was really like a discovery of a new technique. And we continued with that for five, six years. We created a series of landscapes, to burning oil fields, to correspond with Tarkovsky’s images. It was a lot of fun but it had to move more. It was a great effect but what do you do with that effect? You have to push it more. We started incorporating concepts into these paintings and it wasn’t quite working when the concepts started to impregnate the canvas. It was like, okay, you know, it’s not as magical anymore. So what remained from that experiment was this discovery of the relationship between painting and the merge of painting and cinema, the moving image. And I’m continuing with that and this show is about that.

RAIL: Well, I’m very much interested in that concept, as you know. Tarkovsky’s last book was called *Sculpting in Time* and I think that the notion of sculpting, of painting, is really about emphasizing a kind of gradual slowness, which is the only condition that allows a course of time to express itself within the frame. In any case, the title of the show is *Icon*.

AZARI: They are a series of Shiite icons and, I don’t know, you have to see them. They are very subversive. The form is a continuation of my discovery with the video paintings so it’s really good because they’re paintings that are alive. They’re not painted images, they’re like religious pop art in Iran. So they’re all these old paintings and they have become alive. My intention was basically the same as what happened with the Renaissance, the way that the Renaissance artists took these icons and these figures that belonged to the church and humanized them. So I guess that’s what I’m doing with Shiite icons. I’m trying to bring them from the grip of the clergy.

RAIL: Is there a next project?

AZARI: Yes, I have a feature film in development called *Paradise* which I am hoping to shoot in Winter of 2011. It is a futuristic story that takes place in the year 2025. A world wrought with political conflicts and natural disasters. It is a psycho-erotic thriller with a biting political backdrop. **BR**

WOMEN WITHOUT MEN

A FILM BY SHIRIN NESHAT
IN COLLABORATION WITH SHOJA AZARI

SCREENING SCHEDULES FOR NEW YORK CITY AREA

Quad Cinema
34 West 13th Street, New York, NY 10011
Friday, May 14th
1:00 pm 3:00 pm 5:00 pm 7:00 pm 9:30 pm
Saturday, May 15th
1:00 pm 3:00 pm 5:00 pm 7:00 pm 9:30 pm
Sunday, May 16th
1:00 pm 3:00 pm 5:00 pm 7:00 pm 9:30 pm
Monday, May 17th
1:00 pm 3:00 pm 5:00 pm 7:00 pm 9:30 pm
Tuesday, May 18th
1:00 pm 3:00 pm 5:00 pm 7:00 pm 9:30 pm
Wednesday, May 19th
1:00 pm 3:00 pm 5:00 pm 7:00 pm 9:30 pm

Thursday, May 20th
1:00 pm 3:00 pm 5:00 pm 7:00 pm 9:30 pm
www.quadcinema.com

The Paley Center
25 West 52nd Street, New York, NY 10019-6129
Wednesday, May 5th
7:00 pm
www.thepaleycenter.org

For the complete screening schedule nation wide please go to: www.womenwithoutmenfilm.com