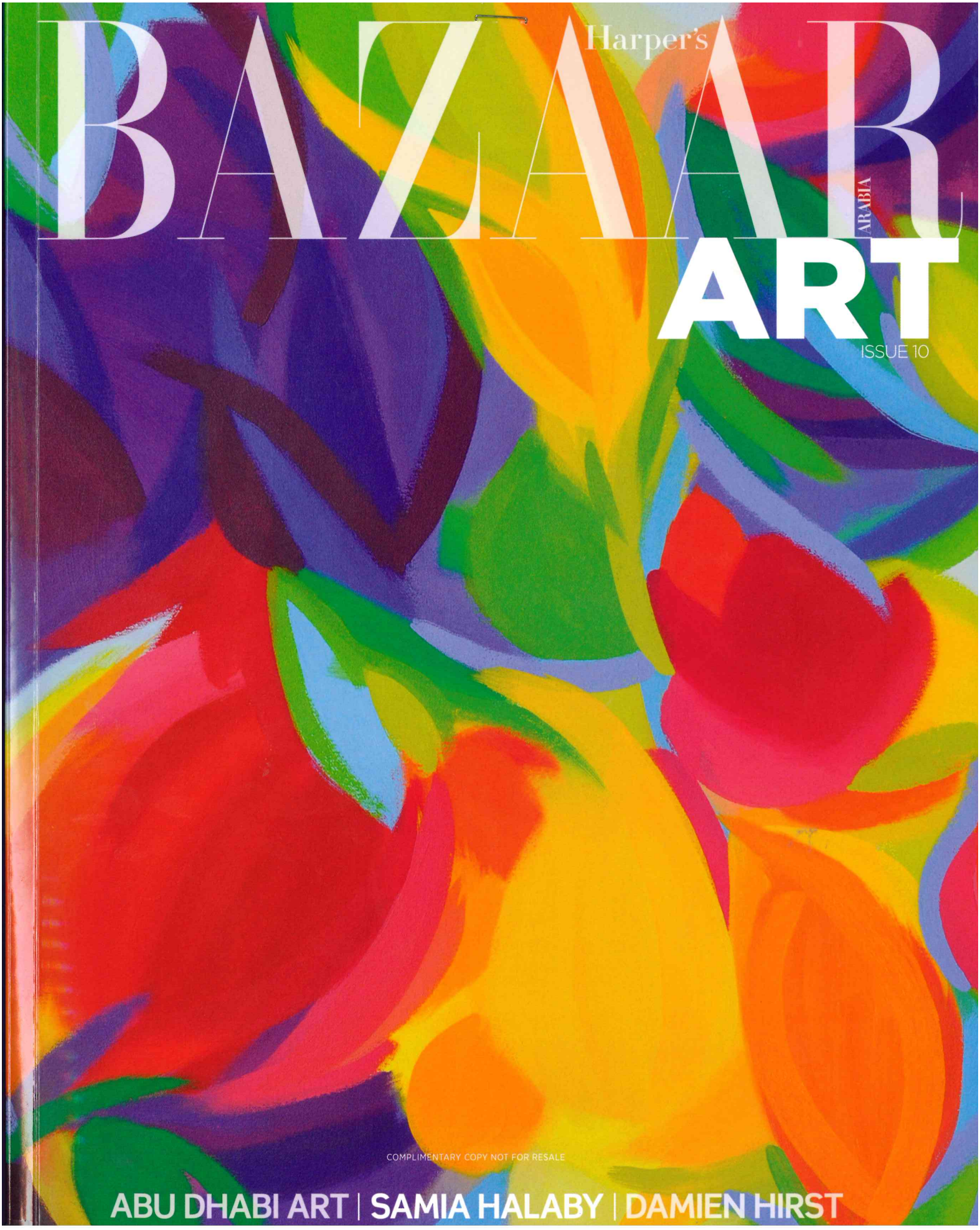
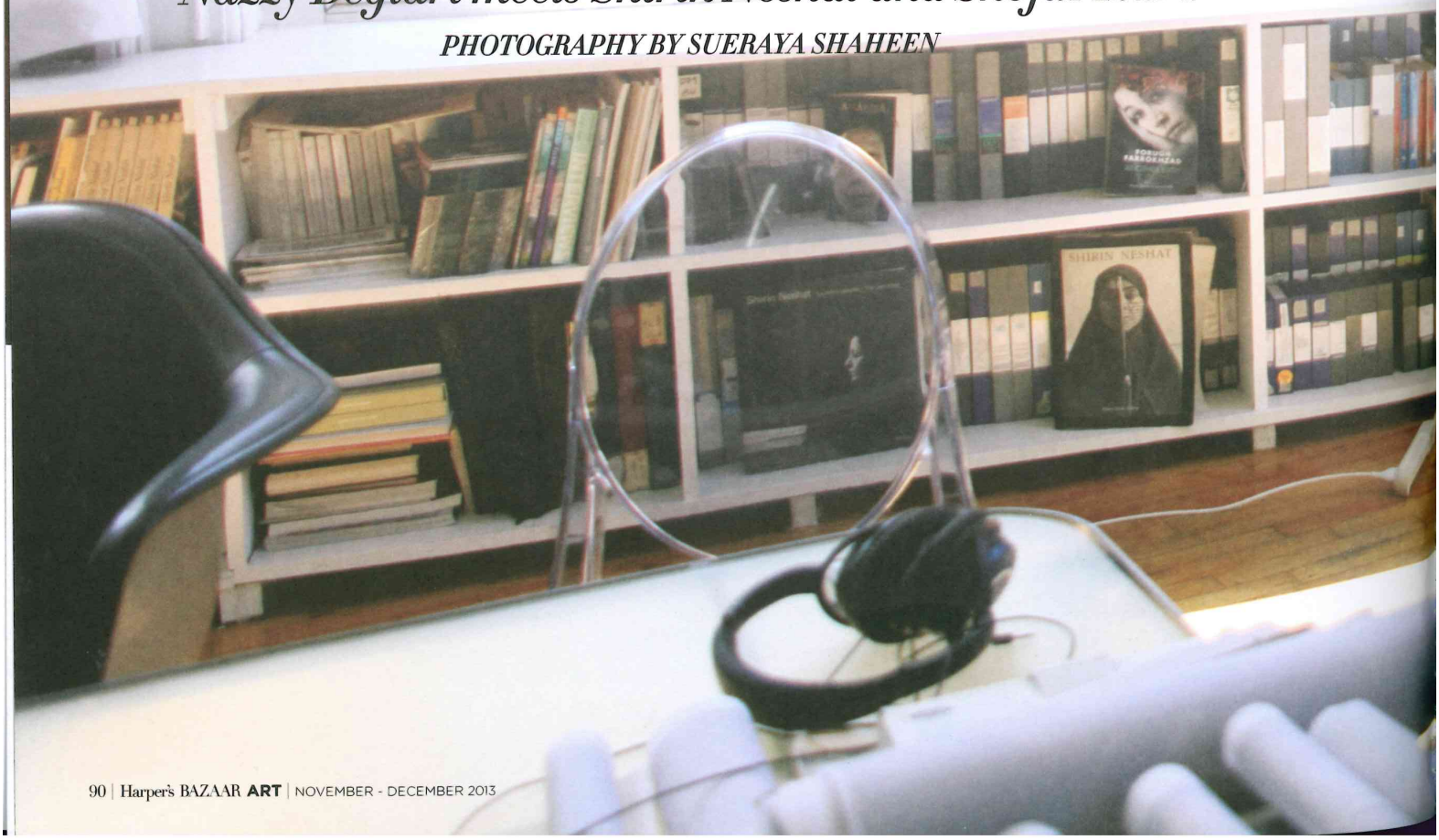

Harper's
BAZAAR
ARABIA
ART
ISSUE 10
COMPLIMENTARY COPY NOT FOR RESALE
ABU DHABI ART | SAMIA HALABY | DAMIEN HIRST

# ART TO ART: SHIRIN NESHAT AND SHOJA AZARI

*SHE is the world-renowned, Iranian-born, artist-turned-filmmaker, whose images have assumed iconic and ironic supremacy. HE is the mild-mannered filmmaker and latterly, photographer whose provocative and beguiling pieces are taking New York by storm. Nazzy Beglari meets Shirin Neshat and Shoja Azari.*

*PHOTOGRAPHY BY SUERAYA SHAHEEN*



Shirin Neshat and Shoja Azari in their shared workspace, Tribeca New York, autumn 2013


Shoja Azari, New York, autumn 2013
'I don't use art to express my political views, but my work is political in nature because of who I am...'

Shirin Neshat and Shoja Azari share a spacious studio in New York City's Soho neighbourhood. When I visited them, one sunny September afternoon, I found a busy space, in every corner of which, a diverse gang of artists were hard at work in a variety of media, their jobs being to execute what Neshat and Azari have envisioned. The capacious loft, where they live, is just a few blocks away. Here, the minimalist decor is soothing. Long cool walls are painted white. Although they are passionate about acquiring works of art, not a single piece is in evidence, except for a poignant portrait of a young boy, placed on the desk. Shirin did this work in memory of her late younger brother, as a gift to her family.

Artist and filmmaker Shirin Neshat met Shoja Azari, filmmaker and photographer in 1997, as she was assembling the crew for her first video work, 'Turbulent'. The pair struck up a close personal and professional relationship, which continues to nurture, inspire and support them. Both long-term US residents of Iranian origin, each in distinctive ways deals with the burdens of exile from the homeland, reaching back into an imaginary or historic Iran through a deluge of contemporary and historical culture, literature, visual symbolism and poetry. They work across media, across eras and across nations to evoke powerful and poignant imagery.

Currently, Azari has two major shows taking - or about to take - place. One is with his artist friend and regular collaborator Sharam Karimi, at MANA Contemporary in Jersey City. It features a collection of collaborative video paintings and one solo work. Then there is participation in a group show for Hurricane Sandy Relief in Brooklyn. Meanwhile, in November, he will have a solo show, 'FAKE: Idyllic Life' at the Leila Heller Gallery in New York, with a series of installations, including his new 'Orientalist' paintings. His 'The King of Black', which premiered as part of the Yarat Foundation's 'Love Me, Love Me Not' at the Venice Biennale this year as well as the titular video installation 'Idyllic Life' will be included too.

Shoja also has work in collections at Museum Of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León, the Fundación Helga de Alvear and Centro Atlántico De Arte Moderno in Spain, Colombia's Museum of Art.

Meanwhile, partner Shirin is also working at full-tilt. Right now, she's finishing up editing a short film in collaboration with Natalie Portman, shot by renowned Iranian-French director of photography, Dariush Khondji. This short piece, commissioned by Christian Dior, will be exhibited at the Grand Palais in Paris, in November. She's also busy working on a project set to launch next June, an exhibition in New York, commissioned by the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, of new photographs she shot in Egypt.

Shirin Neshat's rise to art superstardom began in 1993. Having arrived in the US in 1974, she studied Studio Arts at the University of California, Berkeley, where she received her MFA in 1982. However, she only began seriously making her own art in the early 1990s. Her first show, at New York's Annina Nosei Gallery, 'Women Of Allah', the controversial, cliché-challenging, pro-feminist, anti-cultural stereotyping series of images of women's faces, including her own, wearing black chadors and covered with handwritten texts, drawn from classic Persian literature. The New York art

world was beguiled, Cindy Sherman bought a piece and Neshat's long, accomplished career was underway. She went on to win The Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in 1998 for her first collaboration with Azari, 'Turbulent'. In 2006 she won The Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize, one of the richest prizes in the arts, has been the subject of a profile in The New Yorker magazine in 2007 and museums including MOMA, MOCA, LACMA and the Guggenheim have acquired her works. In addition, there have been several books published on her art works.

Following 'Turbulent', Shoja Azari has made three feature films, and has co-written more than ten video installations with Shirin included Turbulent'. The first feature film they co-directed, 'Women Without Men' won the Silver Lion for Best Director at the Venice Film Festival in 2006.

Their life today, is, according to Neshat, 'dizzying'.

This is understandable. For as well as dealing with a new round of exhibitions and collaborations, the pair are currently immersed in quite possibly their most epic undertaking to date. As major artists such as Sam Taylor-Wood, Julian Schnabel and Steve McQueen have done in recent years, Shirin and Shoja are working on a feature biopic, in this case of the legendary Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum. They've been writing and rewriting the script and now, are almost ready to embark on getting the next stage of their project to the screen. It seems an appropriate topic with which to begin our conversation…

# 'I WILL NEVER BE ONE OF THOSE ARTISTS WHO WILL PLAY IT SAFE'

*Shirin Neshat*

*Shirin:* The Umm Kulthum project has been going on for a few years now, which is delaying the production. We've been rewriting the script and now are in the final stages of polishing, so that we can go into production. A lot of our time has been spent on this project.

*Shoja:* I would say the writing part of the project is a challenge. It's going to be an epic film. The story will cover five or six decades of the history of Egypt and of course the life of Umm Kulthum. The story begins in the 1920s and goes all the way to 1975. It's a huge project, so to get it right takes time.

*Shirin:* Exactly, I'd like to expand on that. With the project's producers, we're discussing how to perfectly balance the film, so it's accessible to people who don't know Umm Kulthum at all and also for people who love Umm Kulthum. So, we're trying to balance making an artistic film with one that is commercially viable as well -and made from the perspective of two directors who are not Egyptian! So there are many considerations. And on top of it, as you know, Egypt has just passed a very turbulent time. It's been interesting in a way, because it makes our film more relevant but at this particular time, it looks more difficult to shoot the film in Egypt. There have been both artistic and non-artistic reasons that have made us think that there is no way to rush this project.

*Shooting the film in Egypt will definitely be a big challenge at a time like this...*

*Shirin:* We were originally planning to shoot on location there. I think the script we have now is 100% better than what we had, let's say, six months ago. My experience from my debut feature film 'Women Without Men' is that, with a film this epic, there is no way to rush and you are wiser to take your time.

***Umm Kulthum is a fascinating subject but at the same time a sensitive one for Arab audiences, especially when its two Iranian-American directors are taking up the project of portraying this iconic figure.***

Umm Kulthum, the subject of Shirin and Shoja's latest collaboration

*Shoja:* That was in our minds when we first went to Egypt. We talked about our idea in New York, then I told Shirin, let's travel to Egypt to find out for ourselves how Arabs feel about foreigners making a film about their legendary artist. We didn't want people to think we were attracted to the story because it's 'exotic'. But when we went to Egypt, we were convinced that we were on the right path. We talked to intellectuals, historians, filmmakers, writers - people across the board. Whoever we met told us, you should do the project because we can't touch it. We need someone from outside to come and do it. They told us no matter what we Arabs do, it's going to be too emotional and personal. So we were encouraged by them and their opinions. I have to explain that the film is our perspective, our outside perspective because we are Iranians. But we do share a lot of cultural values and similarities with Egyptians. Besides, Umm Kulthum was - and still is - a popular figure in Iran, where people listened to her music. When Shirin and I went to Egypt, we felt at home and we could easily relate to the society and the culture.

*Shirin:* For me, outside of the socio-political and historical references that will come out of the film, it's just fascinating to go under the skin of an artist who became her nation's most important artist of the 20th century. There she was, a woman in a male-dominated society, who was loved by all kinds of people. Secular, non-secular, intellectuals, working class, peasants… she ultimately became the icon of peace and unity. There is no precedent, even in the West, for an artist to attain such a high calibre.

*I'm thinking of someone like, say, Edith Piaf in France who became a national heroine during World War II.*

*Shirin:* Edith Piaf and Billie Holiday or other women who became artistic icons had tragic endings. Either they were abused by men, committed suicide or something else. But Umm Kulthum is really one of the rare kind that never had a dip. She only ascended, not descended. For me as a woman artist, it's really fascinating to go under the skin of a woman that was loved equally for her music and for what she gave to her country and the entire Arab world. This is not something you can find easily anywhere. For me there is no one in Iran that could equal her in that stature.

*Shoja:* The more we did research on Umm Kulthum as a person, it became more clear that her life contains all the contradictions of Egyptian society. By studying her life, you can get a sense of her modernity and of the conflicts that are plaguing Egyptian society, even today. She was, I would say, the only person that came from a religious ➤

conservative background, embraced modernity and was being embraced by the political power of her time. So there are many elements and layers in her life that allows us not just to deal with a biopic, but a much larger issue that is also the issue of us Iranians.

*Shoja, you've made five feature films including 'K' and 'The Windows', both of which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2006. You're also an actor and a producer. However, you moved on to visual art, painting and video installation and photography. But Shirin, you did totally the opposite. You began with photography and then moved on to video and filmmaking. Your debut film 'Women Without Men,' which you co-wrote and co-directed with Shoja, earned you both the Silver Lion as Best Director at the 2009 Venice Film Festival. Is this transition the result of the influence you have on each other, or is it a natural course and evolution?*
*Shoja*: My first passion is still filmmaking and storytelling.

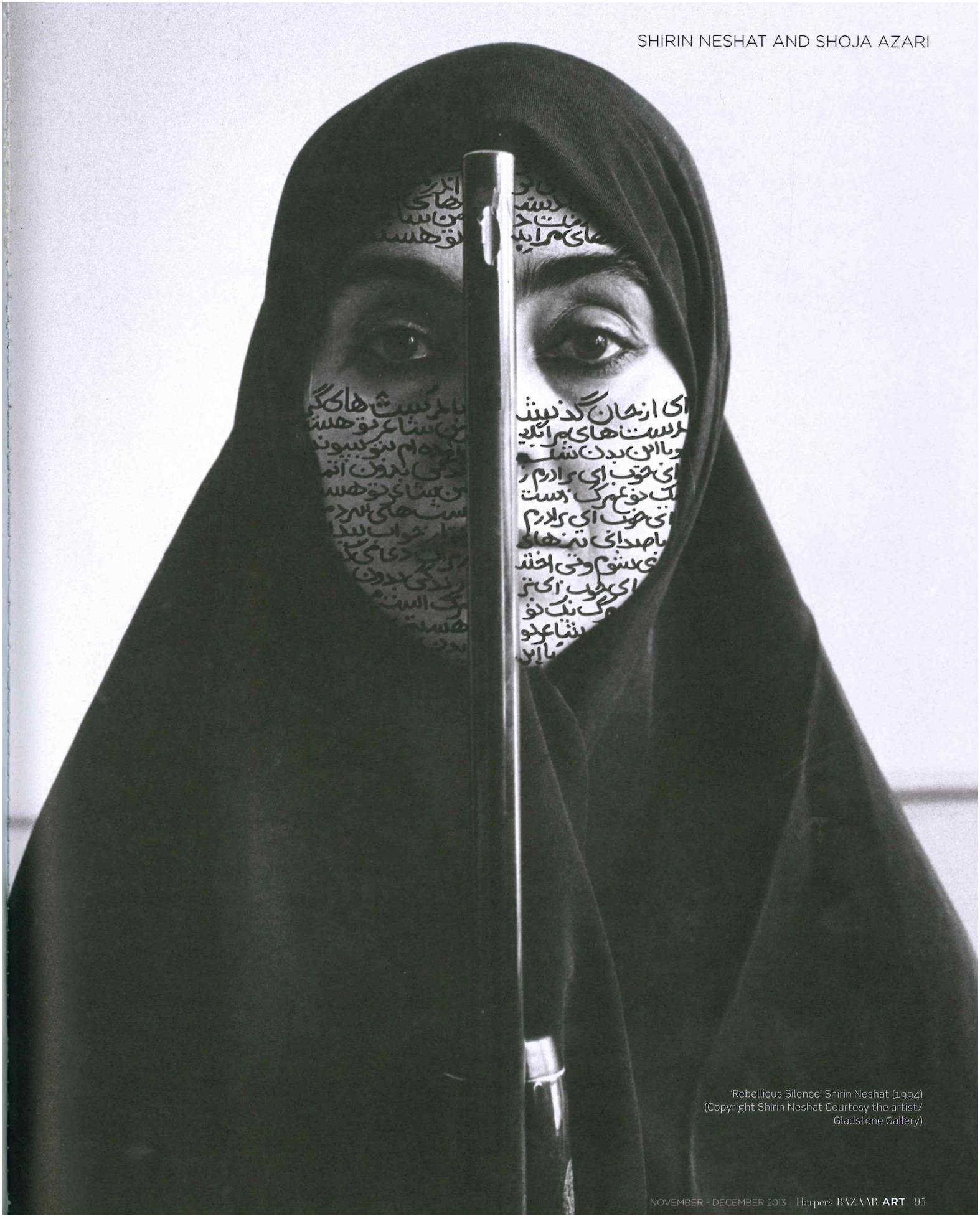
*You haven't stopped, you are still making films...*
*Shoja:* True and next year I will be making my new feature film. Everything that I've done in visual art has always engaged that cinematic approach. It's always had that aspect of cinema that I've incorporated in my painting or photography. For example, the series of video paintings I've done with my childhood friend from Shiraz, Shahram Karmi, called 'Forsaken', is a four-panel work. It's a painting, but you need to sit and watch it for five minutes to see ghost-like characters appearing and disappearing, so there is a story and a narrative going on in the painting on canvas.
*Shirin:* I think as a couple working together, you influence each other without realising that you actually have that impact. For example, when I first met Shoja in the 1990s, we were just making videos that had a slight thread of story, but were not narrative films. But I guess, being around him and the other people who became part of the group, seduced me into doing that, although I never openly talked about it with Shoja. It just becomes an organic evolution - once you are around someone dealing with a different medium, it sneaks up on you. When I met Shoja, I never had had an idea of making a film. I'm sure that although now Shoja is making still-photographs, he had never thought he really could work on photographs or exhibit them.

*I'm sure you don't always compliment each other, on the contrary I've seen you criticise each other. Since you are family, I imagine it's tough to keep the criticism professional and not personal.*
*Shirin and Shoja:* Oh yes, it's harsh criticism.
*Shoja:* We are relentless toward each other!

*Does it ever get personal?*
*Shoja:* (laughing) Oh yes, a lot of the time!
*Shirin:* (also laughing) But there are times that I criticise his work and he says, 'You are completely wrong' and then the next day I notice that he's changed his work! (more laughter all round) There are times, even before an idea is born into a work, I discuss it with him. He is the one I trust as my second psyche. Sometimes, I discuss ideas with him because I know there is no judgment, but he would give me his really honest opinion. He is very honest. If he likes something, he would immediately say it's good, but he can be very harsh. I'm not sure if I'm as harsh as he is.
*Shoja:* Are you kidding me? (laughs) But if you cannot be honest here, where the hell could you be?
*Shirin:* So it's better we criticise each other, rather than someone else. So, we protect each other.

*Shoja, before becoming a film director you studied psychology at New York University. How do you bring that aspect of your training into your art work?*
*Shoja:* I originally started with poetry, fiction and theatre. So my earliest background is in writing. I was also always interested in philosophy. Psychology came to play a part in my life when I was concerned with paying my bills and building a future, there was no prospect of making a living by becoming an artist. I studied psychology for that reason. I think if you are involved in storytelling, in building a character for a story or a film, and in human beings, you are always interested in psychology.

*Shirin, you've often talked about two events that shaped your vision and career as an artist. One was your return to Iran in 1990 for the first time since you left for the States in 1974 (you called this trip 'the most shocking experience I ever had'). The other was working at Storefront with your then-husband, architect Kyong Park in Manhattan in 1982. Can you tell me a bit more about how these two events had such a profound effect on your artistic career?*
*Shirin:* I think these events explain how I became an artist. I always say that if it wasn't due to my personal life circumstances, I probably would have abandoned art altogether. I actually had a ten-year absence from making art from the time I graduated from Dominican College near San Francisco and from UC Berkeley [ie the 1980s] until I went to Iran. So the trip you're speaking about was an impetus to return to making art. And then the work I did with Kyong, wasn't just Kyong, it was the Storefront architecture as an organisation that became a kind of education for me, that helped me mature as an artist. My return to Iran became a reason to return to art, but working at Storefront gave me that necessary maturity and education. From then on, I had the passion and I had the methodology. So that's the way I see it. But of course, being with Shoja and the art community we've created and all the different things that have happened to me since then, have all been part of my evolution too. ➤



'Rebellious Silence' Shirin Neshat (1994)
(Copyright Shirin Neshat Courtesy the artist/
Gladstone Gallery)

From 'Rapture' (1999) Production still
(Copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy the artist
and Gladstone Gallery)

# 'I ALWAYS WANTED TO GO TO PARIS. IN THOSE YEARS, I DIDN'T THINK NEW YORK WAS THE CENTRE OF ART'

*Shirin Neshat*

*Shoja, was there a turning point in your life too?*
*Shoja:* It has been pretty much steady since early high school. But of course, there have been enriching moments. I've always looked at my involvement in cultural endeavour and artistic production as a disease. I was probably born with that. Seriously. It was the consequence of severe depression and I think it has been with me ever since I started to have and understand consciousness when I was 13 or 14. It has always been my struggle, and if I'm not making something or I'm not creating poetry or film, I become severely depressed. I remember in 1983, when I came to the US, because it became impossible to stay in Iran since I was very active in post-revolution Iran. We started a New York City art society with artists like Nicky Nodjoumi and Ardeshir Mohassess. Our society didn't last more than a year, because it turned into a political battleground, everyone with differing political views wanting to take over and use it for his own agenda. It fell apart, and there was no sense of community any more, only isolation. So, when I met Shirin in 1997, I think one of the most valuable things that happened was the community that she had managed to form. That community had a sense of identity and belonging. So that was a major shift in my life in the US.

*I remember in 2009, both of you went on a hunger strike in front of the UN to support the Green movement in Iran. Shoja, you have a critical view of US foreign policy and your 'Orientalist' series at Leila Heller is a strong reminder of this. Yet your work is also deeply rooted in Iranian culture. How do you define the line between being an activist and an artist?*
*Shirin:* It's true that we have an obsession with Iran. Shoja, perhaps because of an unresolved relationship. We don't go back to Iran, we are deprived of that experience. I have to say that Shoja's work is much less connected to Iran than mine. But there is an obsession on his part about being among the Iranian community and being very up to date about what's going on in Iran in terms of culture and politics. I think unlike other Iranians, who have a more comfortable relationship with Iran, where they can travel back and forth and they have a kind of resolved relationship, our obsession comes from the lack of access to Iran and it makes it a bittersweet relationship.

*But it gives you material to work with.*
*Shirin:* Yes for sure, because of the sense of pain, of distance from loved ones and so on. For me, it's much more emotional and sentimental. For Shoja, it's different. Generally he is more intellectual than I am. He doesn't approach things in that kind of emotional way. He is also very knowledgeable about literature and all kinds of Iranian culture. I think people forget that simply because you are not physically there, it doesn't mean that you're disconnecting yourself mentally. I think that's what our studio in New York is all about. We have created a second home or second Iran to feed us whenever we need to be fed.

*So you have constructed your own image of Iran?*
*Shirin:* Yes we are creating our own idea of Iran in a way, carving out religion, capitalism and all of that and just focusing on culture. As you can see in our studio, we have surrounded ourselves with people who come from different mediums but are somewhat invested in culture.

*Shoja, is art a medium for you to express your political-social point of views?*
*Shoja:* I don't use art to express my political views, but my work is political in nature because of who I am. I think that part of my being Iranian, going through the Revolution, life in exile and being cut off from your roots, all because of political events, somehow leaves its mark on you and your personality. I never attempt to make a work of art that is political in nature, but anything I do becomes political by its very nature, because of my personality and my interest in human dilemma and justice and the question of colonialism and displacement. These are the issues I think about. If I have to be honest, perhaps 40 per cent or 50 per cent of our conversation in our community is about either arts or politics. So it's inevitable that my art is influenced by all these elements.

*Shirin, when you first started your work, you used your own face and sometimes that of your son, Cyrus as the subject of your photography or video installations. But then you abandoned the idea - why?*
*Shirin:* I never liked to do it to begin with. It was more like a necessity because I had the idea, I was available, I was Iranian and I could direct myself better than directing someone else. But at some point, I felt very uncomfortable in front of the camera. I'm never comfortable in front of the camera in general. I learned how to direct other people to sit in front of the camera. I think it's a very complicated thing, when the artist becomes the subject of his or her own work, because it's the question of - are you talking about yourself or are you just performing? What kind of perception do you want the audience to take from that? At the end I decided that I was just playing a role and I might just as well have someone else play that role and now I'm very comfortable doing that.
*Cindy Sherman has always put herself as the subject of her own work but she plays different characters…*
*Shirin:* Cindy Sherman is still doing it and that's still the central part of her work. With me, it's not the central part of what I do. She is also the pioneer of that kind of photography. But I think even with Cindy Sherman, with all of the roles she plays, she's looking for herself in a way, if I really have to analyse her work. I'm not sure if I want my work to be so much a statement about me, I prefer to be more understated.

*Cindy Sherman was one of the first people who bought your work, when you were just starting out.*
*Shirin:* She was. At the very first exhibition I had in New York, two people bought my works, Cindy Sherman and Kiki Smith. Two very established artists from the United States, so I was just thrilled.

*Where did you get the idea of writing on the face or body of the images you take of people? In rural areas in Iran when somebody gets sick people write prayers on their forehead or have them dress in cloth covered with handwritten prayers. Is this one of the sources of your inspiration?*
*Shirin:* I had developed this obsession in one of the trips I made to Iran. I started to look around, from the carpets on the ground to the architecture and the little charm plates I bought in the bazaar. I became obsessed with how text is constantly incorporated into decorative motifs, whether manuscripts or decorative objects. So I was sort of playing around and ➤

I started writing on everything. Eventually, when I started to shoot, I felt that conceptually, as the images were so much about women who were so silent, the writing became the voice and that added a very strong conceptual approach - she seems so shut off, but yet she has so much to say. So, it wasn't just a sort of decorative strategy or study idea, but also how to help my concept.

*Do you think people misunderstood your work in the early days – the women holding guns and so on?*
*Shirin:* I think so. Perhaps the worst criticism was the way some claimed I was 'Orientalising' or somehow 'romanticising' violence by capturing the elements of the revolution. Many people said that I was, sort of, aestheticising the violence or endorsing and supporting the Islamic revolution. Meanwhile I was also attacked from the opposite side. But I think the work in its nature asks for this kind of misunderstanding, because it goes directly after images that are clichés. I've sort of accepted that as part of the discourse, there will be people who will misunderstand, people who will attack and people who will praise me. I will never be one of those artists who will play it safe. And I think, with my other works like my debut feature film 'Women Without Men', I got the same reaction both in Iranian and Western communities. So that has become part of the game and I've accepted it.

*Shoja, like Shirin, you have incorporated religious elements in your work and have taken a great deal of risk by using religious portraits. The provocative and kitsch 'Icon' series that you did a few years ago that was shown at Leila Heller Gallery, is a vivid example.*
*Shoja:* There are two elements that have affected me. One was the Green movement in Iran in 2009. We were glued to TV and YouTube and so on, watching the demonstrations and the killing of Neda. That left an emotional scar on all of us. We were all crying. That was a very strong emotional impetus for that ['Icon'] series of works. The other element is that I grew up with these images - all of us grew up seeing them - of religious pop culture in Iran. One thing that was always fascinating for me, was the feminine nature of these icons. I think it was by accident that I took one of these images and erased the beard and looked at the eyes that were painted like a woman's eyes, with makeup. So the artists who painted these icons had tried to beautify them by making them look feminine. They painted a woman and put a beard on her. I wanted to see what happened if I took the beard and erased it. From that point, I came up with the idea, under the influence of those images from Iran, I placed the image of a woman inside that frame. Those were video works, framed as photographs. The movement was minimal, just a blink or a teardrop. It was like what happened with the images of Jesus Christ or Mary, which Renaissance painters in a way humanised and made much more spiritual than when they used to be in a church, detached from people. So my intention was humanising the saints who have been venerated, making them a part of contemporary culture. It was reverence, not attack. Even if they show these works in Iran, there won't be any problem because there is a tradition of this kind of religious pop culture, or image making.

*You both work with a team who execute your directions. Like, Shirin you do not actually do the photography yourself, or Shoja you don't paint yourself, you hire or assign someone to do the painting and execute your concept and idea. Tell us how this process works.*
*Shirin:* I've never owned a camera and never shot a photo, so for me, it was always important that I became the person in command with ideas and find people who will execute them. I never wanted to mix the expertise of the skill with being the creative person behind it. My own craftsmanship is the calligraphy that I do with my hands. I have no envy about learning how to edit or take photos, it's just not my interest. It's more like - I have a vision, I want it to come true, therefore I get people to help me to bring it out. And then my job would be to detect people's potential skills and gifts and also learn how to dance around each other's tendencies to bring out this idea that I had or even improve it because of their gifts. I think for Shoja as a filmmaker, he is probably used to teamwork.
*Shoja:* I think that if I have to say anything about myself, it would be that I'm a person who could create ideas and concepts, nothing more. I'm not good at anything else.

*That's an exaggeration! You have five titles or more to your credit, you have co-created almost all the video installations with Shirin, you have your own independent career as an artist and a filmmaker...*
*Shoja:* I have, but you know the fact is the people who collaborate with us, are much better than us. Way better than me. If I take the camera and decide to shoot a film, I may be able to do so, but they can do it a hundred times better. So why do it yourself, when there is someone who is better than you and is willing to? Our work is a teamwork, and an artistic exchange.

*What would you do if art were taken from you?*
*Shirin:* I think if you extract art or what we do from our lives, we wouldn't know what to do with ourselves! (laughs) I think for me, it's an obsession, because it's a way of life. I find life as it is, so banal (laughs) that if I had to really eliminate what I do, I would have no idea what else I could do. I was telling Shoja, that you cannot retire as an artist, you have to work until you die, because it's not a job, it's a way of life, it's like a philosophy how you approach the use of time. Otherwise, life is just full of daily chores and that's just not interesting to me. Whatever form that kind of creative activity takes, it just gives me a will to live and to believe in something more important than just so many banal things in life.
*Shoja:* To me life is utterly absurd, there is no way that life could make any sense, its absurdity is a reality.

*This is a cynical and dark view of life, Shoja.*
*Shoja:* That's my belief.
*Shirin:* You know him, Nazzy.
*Shoja:* I think that's the tenet of humanism, existentialism, that's how it started - by looking at what life is. Could you find meaning in life itself? The answer is no. If you look at it in a grand scale, it's nothing but an absurd comedy. I don't want to sanctify art - I think art is another human practice - but for me, any authentic work is to bring meaning into life. It's like you are defining yourself, you are giving meaning to your own life and that's what art is for me. Shirin calls it banality and when I say absurdity she laughs, but banality and absurdity are the same word. So it's like creating meaning in your own life.

*So in this banal and absurd life, how do you find inspiration? You both incorporate literature and poetry into your visual works and films, what else inspires and moves you?*
*Shoja:* It's constant, there is no break, we are either watching a film, going to galleries and museums or discussing art.
*Shirin:* We watch a lot of films. We follow films and art pretty closely - maybe film more. I have to say that Shoja has been the one educating me about the history of film and cinema. When I met him, I knew little about cinema and some of the films made by master directors I hadn't seen before. Shoja has been responsible for walking me through it and now I'm passionately following it. Lately, I enjoy reading a lot. It's wonderful, because it's not a social engagement, it's a solitary experience which I'm liking more and more. I'm reading a lot of biographies of other artists whom I admire. I also read novels. In terms of art, we just never get to do enough.
I forgot to tell you that Shoja and I are also collaborating on a major ballet piece with the Dutch National Ballet, based on Shakespeare's 'The Tempest'. We are working with the chief choreographer, Krzysztof Pastor, who was inspired by our work. We are not directing, but it's based on our vision. For a long time, he's been interested in creating a ballet that's based on an artist's vision. He chose 'The Tempest' because we had an idea about the wind. ➤

'The King Of Black' (Still) (2013)
Shoja Azari (Courtesy Leila Heller Gallery)

# 'I REALLY LOVE TIMES WHEN I JUST SIT AND DO NOTHING, JUST BE'

*Shoja Azari*

*You have a busy life with a 24/7 work schedule and frequent travel. What's an ordinary day in your life like?*
*Shoja:* (laughing) There is no ordinary day.

*I know you're early birds. I get your emails sometimes really early in the morning*
*Shirin:* I'm different from Shoja, there is a big difference in our personalities. I'm a very structured person and if I'm not structured, I can't function, so I have to apply that to my body, to my food, to the way I spend my days. I just don't go with the flow, I can't. I eat the same thing every day and do the same routine every day. Shoja has been much more organic, but he is changing. So, I start my day with exercise, every day either in the morning or in the afternoon. I work every day. Almost six days a week. I study dance and I'm very regimented about taking my classes.

*So that's how you get your toned body.*
*Shirin:* (laughs) I'm like a soldier. We spend the whole day in our studio, so in the morning, something outdoor in the park, just to clear our minds. In the evening, with the same people that we work with the entire day, we go out for dinner. We are really about repetition, at least I am. But I see that Shoja is starting to enjoy the repetition.
*Shoja:* I am?!
*Shirin:* (laughter) Yes, you're now enjoying eating the same food and doing the same exercise routines.

*I've seen you walk your dog Lulu in the park and in general you seem more relaxed than Shirin...*
*Shirin:* I'm hyperactive.
*Shoja:* Yes, for sure you are. I don't know, I don't take either life or anything else, too seriously. It's absolutely essential to be in the moment, not to be compulsive. I make sure there is time for work and there is time for doing nothing. I really love times when I just sit and do nothing, just be. Like for example I like to do one thing at a time and not mix it. Like sit down and eat and do nothing else like being on the internet or on the phone.
*Shirin:* (laughs) I wish I was more like him.
*Shoja:* What I really miss is solitude.

*Like as if you miss yourself...*
*Shoja:* Yes. There was a time in my life that I spent in solitude. That is gone. It was really nice that we spent most of our summer this year in the countryside. There was time to be, be by yourself and do things like - gardening.
*Shirin:* That was hard for me to do (laughs) six weeks of being in nature. You know how I am. But I surprised myself.

From 'Rapture' (1999) Shirin Neshat production still (Courtesy the artist/Gladstone Gallery)

*You have both been single parents, you both have sons. Shirin's son, Cyrus just graduated and is back in New York and Shoja's son, Behrang is a musician who is touring the US. How do you manage to spend quality time with them?*
*Shirin:* That's a good question.
*Shoja:* My son, Behrang is our collaborator. We work together on our art and film projects. He did the music for two of my films. He is co-writing a script with me. He co-wrote the script for a play that we did together.

*How old is he now?*
*Shoja:* He's 31 years old. You know, I became a father when I was 16. (laughs)
*Shirin:* Come on, Shoja! (laughs)
*Shoja:* No, I was 22, I was very young when I became a father. I have raised him and we are like close friends. We collaborate all the time and if I have an idea it's definitely back and forth with him. I always rely on him.
*Shirin:* My son Cyrus is living with us now which is nice, but soon he will have his own place in New York City. When he was in college, we didn't see each other much. But lately he is beginning to want to travel with me, and that's really interesting. We went to the Berlin Film Festival together and we saw films all the time. He suddenly loves museums and goes with his friends to galleries and museums. I like it, he has his own life and friends, but he appreciates what we are doing.

*Both of you have been successful and success could easily seduce you. How do you manage to keep the ego in control and stay grounded?*
*Shirin:* I think we are really vulnerable people and most of the time, we feel very insignificant. As for myself, I never think of myself as a great artist. I'm always surprised when somebody says something like that, because I know me, I'm a very vulnerable person, I see all the weaknesses in me and all the failures and rejections, all the things that [other] people don't see. I think when people see you from the outside they have this image of you but in reality we have a lot of failures, we have had disappointments and that just disables you to picture yourself as a success. We like to be grass roots, and we like to do things that don't necessarily earn money and we've worked very hard for many years. Our strategy is not success and I think that's been the driving force for us. We do what we believe in, and it has its ups and downs. Sometimes we've had terrible reactions, sometimes, good reactions.
*Shoja:* To me, one of the severe diseases of society is the culture of celebrity. I see it as a disease that is eating the heart of humanity, and I despise the fact that society has created these demi-gods that are better than you. If you fall into that trap, there is no end to it. The heart of it is basically to remove your human dignity, to empty you of your worth so you don't have any, and you see your worth only in some unreachable demi-gods. So to fall for that is to fall for false consciousness and that's one of the things I try to fight in my work and also as a person in my life. HBA

# FAKE: Idyllic Life

## New Works by Shoja Azari

Shoja Azari
*The King of Black*, 2013 (stills)
HD color video with sound

November 14 - December 14, 2013

568 West 25th Street | New York, NY 10001
Tel: +1 212 249 7695
Fax: +1 212 249 7693
www.leilahellergallery.com

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.