

GOETHE MEDAL 2019

LAUDATORY SPEECH FOR SHIRIN NESHAT

BY BRITTA SCHMITZ

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Dear Guests,

In the early 1990s, when Shirin Neshat first presented her large-format photographs in a small, remote Venice palazzo in a group exhibition during the Biennale, she instantly aroused the international art community.

The black and white pictures from the now iconic “Woman of Allah” series were stunningly new, different, appealing, mysterious, self-confident and very elegant.

Even the large size of the prints was technically new and unusual at that time.

Added to this was the almost fundamentalist black-and-white minimalism of the works in which veiled women, some with rifle barrels, are photographed in various poses. A web of written texts is superimposed over their uncovered body parts. For non-Farsi speakers, these captions initially appeared ornamental in character.

The writing not only took up the function of the veil, because not the veil, but the language produces the actual distance. The ornamental language creates a space that hovers almost protectively in front of the portrayed women.

Also, the dualisms of black and white, male and female, familiar and alien are so consciously and cleverly employed that the breaks and complexity of hardened clichés are almost physically present in the room.

Although all of this was immediately obvious, we did not yet have the right words and the knowledge. Global curating was in its early stages and women artists from non-Western contexts were very hesitant to take their place in the international exhibition business.

But the cosmopolitan Iranian from New York could not be overlooked, since she uses both Western and non-Western codes. It was and is revolutionary and inspiring, sets a lot in motion and her works have gained cult status.

One work from this early “Allah Series” shows a hand touching the woman’s lips almost tenderly. Calligraphy and Persian lettering run along the back of the hand and along her fingers.

They reproduce the verse of the great Persian poet Rumi: “Your real country is where you’re heading, not where you are.”

This line, which aptly characterises the artist’s identity, permeates the complex and outstanding oeuvre of the artist.

With her many solo and group exhibitions worldwide, numerous lectures, visiting professorships, film projects, opera productions, etc., she can be described as the “grande dame” of intercultural practice, who consistently puts her cultural identity at the centre of her work.

Over the course of the more than thirty years of her career, her works have opened up new horizons for us; we have learned a lot from these works of art about ourselves, about the world and about a tremendously differentiated experience of interculturality, of homeland, of society, feminism, contemporary Islam, pain and change.

In her projects, Neshat focuses the visual discourse on historical and present-day social developments in Iran, whose shifts she seismographically notes because she has always understood herself as a political artist and is closely connected to the worldwide Iranian diaspora and exile community.

She has lived in the diaspora for decades, but there’s a saying that you can take an Iranian out of Iran, but you can’t take Iran out of an Iranian.

That’s probably true, as one can learn from her many works.

And yet, or perhaps because of that, she quite subtly succeeds in attuning the tenor of an open language and not only conveying a differentiated picture of her country of origin, but also initiating a revealing insight into the composition of other perceptions.

Her works are site-specific in the sense that they can be shown in Tokyo, Los Angeles, Bucharest, Berlin, Moscow, Toronto, Delhi or anywhere else in the world, and every time it is always another work of art that is not received in a globally uniform way. On site, a different, other image and a narrative of reality is generated, which is received by each audience in its own way.

There is no imagery that crosses borders regardless of context and is globally uniformly decrypted, no matter how much we hope for it. Even works of art are nomads today, like Shirin Neshat herself, and this illustrates the nature of her art production.

Her universally valid works always treat their own story as something changeable, fluid, and thus she shows this aspect in her enormously poetic and precise allusions, as only few works of art achieve with this consistency.

Shirin Neshat is greatly influenced by Iranian women writers and moves like a mediator between two worlds. She uses her camera to project the visual memories of a poetic narrative style developed especially by women writers of her own generation. Because Shirin Neshat is very aware that when you separate people from their language, you separate them from everything that language means: past, stories, culture. She often works in installations with juxtapositions to emphasise the weight of each person's word.

Language means home, and the fact that we grasp the world differently with every language keeps the aesthetics of her work suspended while preserving a great deal.

With all of the delicately and carefully conceived works, Shirin Neshat manages to create a unique narrative entanglement by producing haunting stories and images that are hard to forget and that transcend cultural boundaries.

I am very delighted that Shirin Neshat is receiving the Goethe Medal. Goethe, who positioned himself as a mediator of cultures, would have had great pleasure in this wonderful artist.

Thank you, Shirin Neshat. Thank you for all your artworks.

Britta Schmitz