

The Hand, the Face, the Gaze

On the day of the opening of *The Home of My Eyes*, at YARAT in Baku, **Ric Bower** talks to Shirin Nishat about her new portraits of Azeri people.

For over two decades, Shirin Neshat has created visual meditations on political, religious and feminist issues in her native Persia. Her lyrical video and photographic works have attracted numerous awards, including a Silver Lion at the 66th Venice Film Festival, the Lillian Gish Prize in 2006 and the First International Prize at the 48th Venice Biennale. In 2014 YARAT, the Azeri contemporary art organisation, commissioned Shirin Neshat to make a new body of work, which became *The Home of My Eyes*.

Ric Bower: *The Home of My Eyes* is an emotive title. Why is home important in the context of this project?

Shirin Neshat: Having lived in exile since 1996, as you can imagine, home is a poignant concept for me. Also, in neighbouring Azerbaijan, I feel as though I'm going back in time to my childhood. Azerbaijan and Iran have a shared history as we were once part of the same country. There are people from so many different countries, languages, religions and ethnicities here. I felt that the opening show for YARAT should be a tribute to the diverse spirit of Azerbaijan.

RB: Was it daunting being tasked to fill such a vast area?

SN: When I first walked into this cavernous upper space at the YARAT centre, it felt like a chapel and I resolved to imbue a spiritual

sensibility in the work. The installation of photographs, here at YARAT, was partially inspired by my video *Turbulent* (1998). *Turbulent* was a two-channel projection, where the viewer was situated in the middle, between the screens. This show is intended to generate that same emotional intensity: the gazes of the people in the portraits and their gestures meeting each other across the space; the viewer is caught in front of them, but also in between them. This installation is meant to be very sculptural. I didn't want it to be a conventional set of portraits, or even a conventional photography installation. I wanted it to be a form of narrative, to convey emotional agency through the way it was installed.

RB: So the work is about finding unity in diversity?

SN: Yes. What I love about portraiture is that it can take ordinary people and turn them into monuments.

RB: How did your subjects respond in front of the camera?

SN: It's interesting; they are from a different culture than me. They didn't necessarily know much about art - we didn't even speak the same language - but when I started photographing them, there was an instant connection. I explained how I wasn't trying to make them play a role or be someone other than who they really were. Eventually they

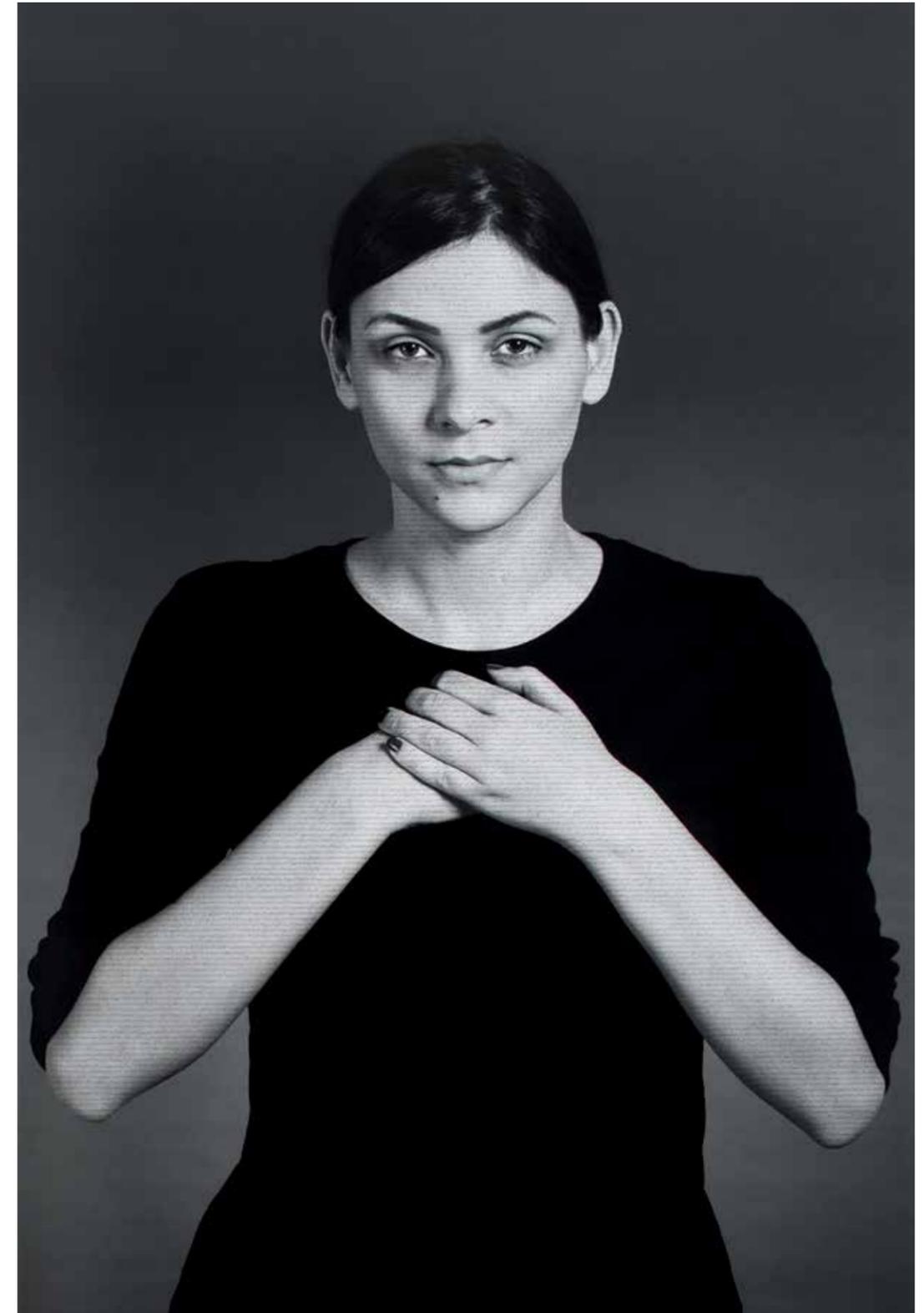
felt comfortable and their gestures became pure improvisation.

RB: What was the relevance of the questions you asked your subjects, prior to the images being made?

SN: While making another photography project in Egypt in 2013, titled *Our House Is on Fire*, which depicted impoverished elders caught up in the revolution, I learnt that talking to my subjects put them at ease in front of the camera. It was a way to help them trust me. In this case, as I asked my subjects about their relationship to the idea of 'home', their answers were quite nationalistic. This could be due to the fact that the people of Azerbaijan are generally very proud of their recent independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. I sensed that they celebrated the idea of being Azeri, regardless of where they originated from.

RB: How do you decide whether to use moving or still images when you engage in a project?

SN: My work has generally become more narrative, whether photographic or film based. I no longer seem to be able to make one single image that works on its own. This installation of many portraits is one body of work; it's hard for me to see each photograph in isolation. When it comes to photography, I am consistently a minimalist. I reduce my →





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Mahira, from *The Home of My Eyes series*, Shirin Neshat, 2014-2015
 Silver gelatin print and ink, 152.4 x 101.6 cm
 Copyright Shirin Neshat
 Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

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Soliloquy, Shirin Neshat, 1999
 Production still
 Copyright Shirin Neshat, Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

elements to the hand, to the face, to the gaze; I take a very sculptural approach to the figure. This is not the same in my filmmaking. In filmmaking, I use landscape, choreography and music. I use movement and colour at times too. There's a severity to photography and to human portraiture, in particular. Nothing is more powerful than human expression in my mind. In film you can do what you need to do with the mood of the room, the dialogue and the atmosphere. I've never been seduced by that within photography. I've learned to keep them separate; two completely different mediums.

RB: You wrote the subjects' responses to the questions you asked them prior to photographing them directly on the portraits and mixed it with poetry. Can you talk about that process?

SN: Yes, the texts inscribed on the photographs are a mix of the characters' responses to my questions as well as poetry by the 12th century poet Nezami Ganjavi. Ganjavi was a famous Persian poet who moved to Azerbaijan; Iranians and Azeri's have been arguing over this poet for a long time. We selected sections from his famous *Khamseh* (five), so named for its five-part structure, to integrate into the calligraphy and wrote them over and over. It's all very carefully translated, line by line. It becomes like a mantra for each of the subjects.

RB: It's almost an act of love, something you're lavishing on them.

SN: Yes, when we were getting them ready for the portraits, combing their hair, they felt that I was taking care of them, making them feel special and important. They appreciated it; they were being made to look their best. I had them sit down afterwards and look through all the images and see how beautiful they looked. They were always amazed. They entered as strangers and they left with us hugging them goodbye. In a short time, it became a very personal connection.

RB: Can I ask, how this was your first non-political work?

SN: Because I didn't feel connected to the political situation here. The reason my work

has addressed Iranian politics, is because I still feel deeply connected to my country. Here, it was about the humanity of my subjects, the cultural aspect. I know a bit about the history here, but I didn't want to involve myself in their politics. I think I'm interested in history, much more than politics these days, anyway.

When I look back at my own work, I see how my work has framed some historical moments of Iranian culture, such as the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in the *Women of Allah* and the 1953 CIA organized coup which was depicted in my first feature film, *Women Without Men*, and most recently *The Book of Kings* which captures the Green Movement of 2009.

I'm also currently working on a film about the iconic Egyptian singer Oum Kalthoum, which looks at the history of modern Egypt from King Farouk to the present day.

RB: Why did you decide to limit the portraits to monochrome?

SN: I find colour to be too seductive and distracting. I like the severity of black and white. With my film, *Women Without Men*, for example, I drained the colour. In the video work I did with Philip Glass, *Passage*, the people appear to be black silhouettes but the landscapes are in colour. That work referenced the Zoroastrian symbolism of water, fire and air. For me, there should be a reason for using colour.

RB: Can you elaborate on what you were saying about the relationship between politics and history?

SN: I find by looking at the past, you learn how history repeats itself. There is a circular nature to the process of people fighting for power, then resting, then beginning all over again. —CCQ

The Home of My Eyes, Shirin Neshat is on show at YARAT Contemporary Art Space, Baku, Azerbaijan until 23 June 2015