Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York City.
nuns, I ended up having a very difficult experience. It was a bit like living in detention. I slowly became ill and developed anorexia. When I went back to my home town after a year and a half, most people could not recognize me because I had lost so much weight.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was felt that a Western education was a good thing. Most upper- and middle-class people were beginning to send their sons abroad to study, but my father sent both his sons and daughters abroad to England and the United States. Eventually my two sisters abandoned their education, returned to Iran, and got married, whereas I ended up remaining in the U.S. and eventually developed a career. My father of course was very proud and often talked about it before he died.

SMD: How did you end up at Berkeley?
Scott MacDonald

SN: Yes, of course. Iranians not only could read and understand the meaning of the poetry but are also very familiar with the history and place of the writers in relation to Iranian society—something that would be impossible to translate to Westerners.

SMD: How did you make the transition from photography to film and video?

SN: I had been working with photography and the subject of the revolution since 1993, but by 1997, while I remained totally interested in the social and political realities of my country, I felt the urge to move beyond the realm of politics and take a more philosophical approach. While thinking about reformulating my concepts, I thought it was also necessary to change the medium that I was working with. I had grown frustrated with the limitations of photography, at least in the way I was approaching it. Photography was a medium that I had no training in, but had developed a particular style, which became the *Women of Allah* series. I needed a medium that offered me a new level of lyricism. So I made what felt like the bold decision to shift from photography to the moving image. My first big attempt was a video I shot with two cameramen in Istanbul.

SMD: Is this *Turbulence*?

SN: No, this was *The Shadow under the Web*, a piece with four simultaneous projections, shot in Istanbul in 1997. This was an installation that basically depicted a woman (myself) draped in black chador running simultaneously.

It is very complicated, if not impossible for someone like me to film in Iran, because of the controversial nature of my subjects. Also, another factor has been the ambiguity in whether I am safe in Iran or not, and I haven’t wanted to take the risk. But even though I work in these other—safer—countries, I pretend that I’m in Iran; I’m very cautious about the type of architecture that I use. For example, I stay away from the traditional, authentic architecture of that country.

In *Rapture*, I filmed in the fortress in the city of Essaouira, because this space was a relevant location for my concept. The architecture of a fortress, particularly in Islamic cultures, represents a typically male space, as it suggests ideas of the military, war, defense, all the roles that are associated with men. Ironically this fortress was built by the Portuguese in the fifteenth century (I believe), but most Islamic cities traditionally were surrounded by walls—a fortress. The city of Marrakesh is a vivid example of that. There was another personal attraction to this fort which was that Orson Welles shot some scenes of *Othello* (1951) there. Orson Welles spent a lot of time in Essaouira. He is very much loved by the local people.
Scott MacDonald

SMD

Can you explain the nature of the speaker’s speech?

SN: He was delivering a moral speech about the subject of sin–sin that arises from desire, temptation for the opposite sex. He uses the story of Youssef and Zoleikha from the Koran. Similar to the story of Adam and Eve.

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Scott MacDonald

public plaza and becomes the focus of everyone’s attention, she imme-
diately disturbs the space and divides the public into two groups: those
who support her and her freedom to behave as she desires due to madness,
and others, furiously insulted by her presence, who demand her immediate
removal.

SMD: We see people arguing in the square after she leaves. Her freedom
has instigated a debate.

SN: Exactly. She creates what we call Fetneh, a social chaos among the
people. Possessed becomes more obvious, in terms of its narrative and its
message, than Rapture and Passage, which are perhaps more
ambiguous and abstract. I personally prefer the latter direction, but I am very happy that I
experimented with what is so far my most conventional film.

SMD: In Pulse, I’m not sure exactly what the woman is doing. First we see
her from a distance; she’s on the floor, holding something, and then as we

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Scott MacDonald

get close, she seems to be holding a radio.

SN: Yes. We carefully organized the room so that it had the feeling of a bedroom, but also resembled a prison cell. The radio becomes her access to the outside world—a tool for escape from her immediate environment. As we approach the woman voyeuristically, we hear her voice singing along with a song that is playing on the radio. She seems to be lost in her own state of ecstasy—fantasy. The entire film was created in one uninterrupted shot from the beginning to the end, from the moment the camera entered the room with the sound of a pulse to the moment when it exits at the end of the song. There was something very erotic and sensual about this movement and her posture. There was no clear narrative but a sort of glimpse into a private moment of this woman’s life.

SMD: Do you think of those two films as a diptych: public and private?

SN: Well, I never quite thought about it like that, but it is possible to draw that conclusion as they were made at the same time with the same actress.

I'll be greeting the sun again
and the stream that flowed in me
and the clouds that were my long thoughts
and the painful growth of the aspens in the grove
that passed through droughts with me.
—Forugh Farrokhzad

The text written on the woman’s face and in translation above is from Forugh Farrokhzad’s *Remembering the Flight: Twenty Poems*, trans. by Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak (Los Angeles: Ketab Corp, 2004), 71. © 2004 by Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak.
Seeking Martyrdom #2, 1995.
B&W RC print and ink.  11 x 14 inches.

© 1995 Shirin Neshat.
Photo by Cynthia Preston.
Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York City.
Untitled, 1996.
RC print and ink. 11 x 14 inches.

© 1996 Shirin Neshat.
Photo by Kyong Park.
Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York City.
ABOVE


© 2001 Shirin Neshat.
Photo by Larry Barns.
Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York City.

RIGHT


© 1999 Shirin Neshat.
Photo by Larry Barns.
Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York City.
Production still.

© 1997 Shirin Neshat.
Photo by Larry Barns.
Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York City.
LEFT AND ABOVE


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Photo by Larry Barns.
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