Rocznik Historii Sztuki, tom XLI
PAN, 2016

JOANNA INGLOT
MACALESTER COLLEGE, SAINT PAUL (MINNESOTA)

TRANS-CULTURAL DIALOGUES IN THE ART OF IRANIAN DIASPORA: SHIRIN NESHAT AND PARASTOU FOROUHAR

> We are set–stuck, really–somewhere between Scheherazade's famed *One Thousand and One Nights* and the bearded terrorist with his manic wife disguised as a crow. By way of flattery, we are told that we are Persians and that Persia was a great empire. Otherwise, we are Iranians. The Persians are in Montesquieu's writings, in Delacroix's paintings, and they smoke opium with Victor Hugo. As for the Iranians, they take Americans hostages, they detonate bombs, and they're pissed at the West. They were discovered after the 1979 revolution*.
>
> Marjane Satrapi

Since the late 1990s, there has been an explosion of exhibitions and publications on contemporary art from Iran and the Middle East, both in the countries of the region and abroad. This process has been largely catalyzed by the globalization of the art world; the increasingly international art market and auction houses, art fairs, festivals, and biennales (e.g., the Art Dubai International Fair, the Sharjah Biennial, the Istanbul Biennial, and the Cairo Biennial) have all done much to spark the excitement about the contemporary art of this region[1]. Paradoxically, equally important to this proliferating interest has been the growing tension between Islamic and Western cultures after the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the ensuing U.S. – led "global war on terrorism"[2]. The spread of anti-Islamic sentiment in the United States and across Europe has revived centuries-old Orientalist and colonialist tropes that include images of despotism, oppression, backwardness, and the alleged violence of Muslim culture as a whole, generating complex debates amidst heated political controversies.

Traversing this public discourse are persistent dichotomies of tradition versus modernity, oppression versus freedom, fundamentalism versus secularism, and East versus West. These polarities are also themes that run deep in the artistic production of contemporary artists Shirin Neshat and Parastou Forouhar, who in the past twenty years have emerged as two of the most powerful voices from the Iranian diaspora. Working from different locations, the United States and Germany, respectively, both artists constantly move across the boundary between the seemingly disparate practices and values of Islam and the West. Combining and manipulating Persian, Muslim, and Western motifs and traditions, they unsettle the hegemonic discourses of Shiite Islam, Western Orientalism, and neocolonialism, opening up what the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha has identified as a "third space," or a site of ambivalence where cultural meaning resists

---

* M. Satrapi, "How Can One Be Persian?", in L. Azam Zanganeh (ed.), *My Sister Guard Your Veil; My Brother Guard Your Eyes: Uncensored Iranian Voices*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2006, p. 20.

[1] For a detailed study of contemporary art scene in Iran and the Middle East see H. Keshmirshekan, *Contemporary Iranian Art: New Perspectives*, London: Saqi Books, 2013, and H. Keshmirshekan (ed.), *Contemporary Art from the Middle East: Regional Interactions with Global Art Discourses*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2015.

[2] J. Winegar, "The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror," *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 81, No. 3 (Summer 2008), pp. 651–681.

homogenizing forces and disrupts fixed cultural identities[3]. By fragmenting, diffusing, and decentralizing the dominant discursive frameworks that define Muslim female subjects, these artists have also forged new cross-cultural and transnational dialogues between Western and Muslim worlds.

Shirin Neshat is the most acclaimed artist of the Iranian diaspora. Her groundbreaking photographic series *Women of Allah* (1993–1997) brought her instantaneous international success when it was first exhibited in New York in 1996, and since then it has continued to attract the attention of audiences, critics, and scholars. Consisting of thirty-eight stark black-and-white photographs featuring Iranian women clad in chador, mostly representing the artist herself, these works critically intervene into the dominant representations of Muslim women in the West and within the prescriptions of Islamic laws. Provocatively employing culturally and politically charged symbols such as "the veil," calligraphic Persian script, and weapons, Neshat simultaneously evokes and unsettles the putative cultural binaries and totalizing ideological constructs that frame her subjects historically, especially in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

In interviews, Neshat has often repeated that she created *Women of Allah* as a direct response to the postrevolutionary changes in her homeland after the establishment of the Islamic Republic by the Shiite leader Ayatollah Khomeini on February 1, 1979. Born in Iran in 1957, she left the country in 1974, just a few years before the upheavals broke out. She was unable to return until 1990, when the turmoil of the revolution and the ensuing Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) finally subsided. Commenting on the abrupt sociopolitical and cultural shift that had occurred while she was out of the country, she noted "[B]efore I left they were Iranian-Persians, and now they were strict Muslims. Visually everything was black and white, and women had to be in dark clothes"[4]. On another occasion she added: "Street names had changed from old Persian names to Arabic and Muslim names […]. This whole shift of the Persian identity toward a more Islamic one created a kind of crisis"[5]. In constructing *Women of Allah*, Neshat selected the trope of a veiled Muslim woman as shorthand for these symbolic and material cultural transformations and also as a sign for Western concepts that discipline and homogenize Muslim women into a single, reductive category.

The Persian word "chador", which literally means "a tent", refers to a semicircular long black cloak that covers a woman's entire body, except the face, hands, and feet, and has been worn in different periods by Muslim and non-Muslim women in Iran. Connected with the Islamic practice of *hijab* (meaning "to hide from view" or "to conceal"), this style of dress has functioned at different times as an emblem of prestige and high status for upper-class women and as an emblem of modesty, defining women's proper comportment in religious contexts[6]. In the early twentieth century, however, the veil was transformed into an object of political, social, and religious contestation. It acquired a special significance during the Pahlavi dynasty, especially during the reigns of Reza Shah (1926–1941) and his son, Mohammad Reza Shah (1953–1978), when Iran experienced rapid Westernization and modernization. On January 8, 1936, Reza Shah ordered the compulsory unveiling of women and the adoption of European dress for both women and men, as a reflection of social progress and a new image of the country for the twentieth century[7]. During the following decades, Iranian society, especially in urban areas, grew accustomed to this Westernized mode of dress, but in the mid-1970s, when the resistance movement against the Western-backed dictatorship of the Shah developed, women, who emerged as a major political force in the opposition, willingly embraced the traditional chador as a sign of protest. After the establishment of the Islamic State in 1979, the Supreme Leader of the Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1979–1989), reversed the Shah's policy, implementing Sharia law and mandating compulsory veiling in 1983 to communicate Iran's rejection of Western domination and to the reinforce religious Shiite identity of the new revolutionary Iran. For large segments of politically and religiously engaged women, wearing the mandated hijab and especially the traditional chador demonstrated their alliance with the revolution and the expression of their

---

[3] H.K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London–New York: Routledge, 1994.

[4] J.B. Ravenal, *Shirin Neshat: Double Vision*, in N. Broude, M.D. Gerrard (ed.), *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History after Postmodernism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, p. 448.

[5] Shirin Neshat quoted in S. Horsburgh, "No Place Like Home", TIME Europe, August 14, 2000.

[6] F. El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy, and Resistance*, Oxford: Berg, 1999, pp. 13–21. For other discussions on the veil see J. Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007, and F. Shirazi, *The Veil Unveiled: The Hijab in Modern Culture*, Gainsville: University Press of Florida, 2001.

[7] A. Najmabadi, "Hazards of Modernity and Morality: Women, State and Ideology in Contemporary Iran," in D. Kandiyoti (ed.), *Women, Islam, and the State*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991, pp. 22–48.

redefined national and religious identity[8]. Shirin Neshat evokes this layered and politically potent symbolism of the veil in *Women of Allah*, while at the same time setting up a dichotomy with Western discourse.

The image of a Muslim woman in diverse body coverings, such as the chador, burqa, dupatta, hijab, or niqab, popularly referred to as the "veil," has have been the most visible marker of difference between Islam and the West at least from the Enlightenment. However, the fantasies of mysterious, erotic, submissive, and alluring veiled Muslim women built up during the nineteenth century (perhaps best seen in the paintings of North Africa and Arabia by Jean-Léon Gérôme, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and Eugène Delacroix) have become the defining leitmotifs of Orientalist discourse[9]. Since the 1960s, these romanticized visions have increasingly given way to more disturbing associations with political violence and terrorism. The first visual reference to veiled women and terrorism appeared in Gillo Pontecorvo's film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). This connection was magnified by media during the Iranian Revolution, the American hostage crisis (1979–1981), and the Iran-Iraq war, when photographs of masses of revolutionary Iranian women in chadors carrying guns were featured in the magazines and on television, as well as in Iran as propaganda[10]. Shirin Neshat condenses and overlays all of these referents and narratives in her *Women of Allah* series, in which the veiled woman appears simultaneously as an emblem of oppression, liberation, Orientalist fantasy, and potential danger.

At least half of the photographs in the series depict women bearing guns, sometimes provocatively pointed at the viewer. In *Rebellious Silence* (1994) (Fig. 1), for instance, the camera captures an alert and assertive veiled woman confidently holding a rifle and boldly returning the gaze of her viewer. The triangular shape of her body, covered in black chador and set against a minimal white background, reinforces her physical presence and magnifies her power. Standing still, she at once resembles a committed guardian of the revolution while at the same time appearing remarkably static and emotionally withdrawn. Such presentation and the stark contrast between black and white underscores the perceived Western dualities of Muslim threat and violence contrasted with Orientalized female passivity.

In other images the placement of guns appears more benign, almost playful. *Allegiance with Wakefulness* (1994) (Fig. 2), for example, features a metal rifle barrel protruding almost like a toy from between the woman's tiny bare feet with Farsi inscriptions, while in *Speechless* (1996) (Fig. 3), the gun is placed decoratively next to the woman's face, like an earring making her look alluring. In other photographs in the series, the women appear vulnerable, introspective, sensual, and at times maternal (Fig. 4)[11]. As art historians Iftikar Dadi, Susan Babaie, and Mitra Abbaspour have pointed out, instead of rejecting Western stereotypes, Neshat deliberately enacts them to reveal connections among violence, politics, and spirituality in Islamic practice and to disclose dualistic position of Iranian Muslim women, who while subservient to men in many public areas become powerful force in revolution and war[12]. Simultaneously, however, she undermines the Western cliché of the Muslim woman as a passive and submissive victim of her own culture. Dressed in traditional chadors but at the same time wearing heavy eye makeup and unabashedly gazing at the viewer (both practices at that time prohibited by Islamic law), Neshat's women clearly reject and transgress the cultural constructs available to them as modern Muslim women and exist on the border between modernity and tradition and between their "subjugated" and "liberated" positions[13].

Neshat builds many conceptual tensions and cultural collisions into her photographs. One of the most important emerges from her technique of inscribing Persian texts on the women's uncovered body parts–eyes, faces, hands, and feet. Borrowing verses from modern Iranian women writers, especially celebrated feminist poets Forugh Farrokhzad (1935–1967) and Tahereh Saffarzadeh (1936–2008)[14], she employs these texts as

[8] M. Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, Chapter 3 analyzes these political shifts during the revolution in detail.

[9] M. Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 39.

[10] I. Dadi, "Shirin Neshat's Photographs as Postcolonial Allegories," *Sings*, Vol. 34. No. 1 (Autumn 2008), p. 126.

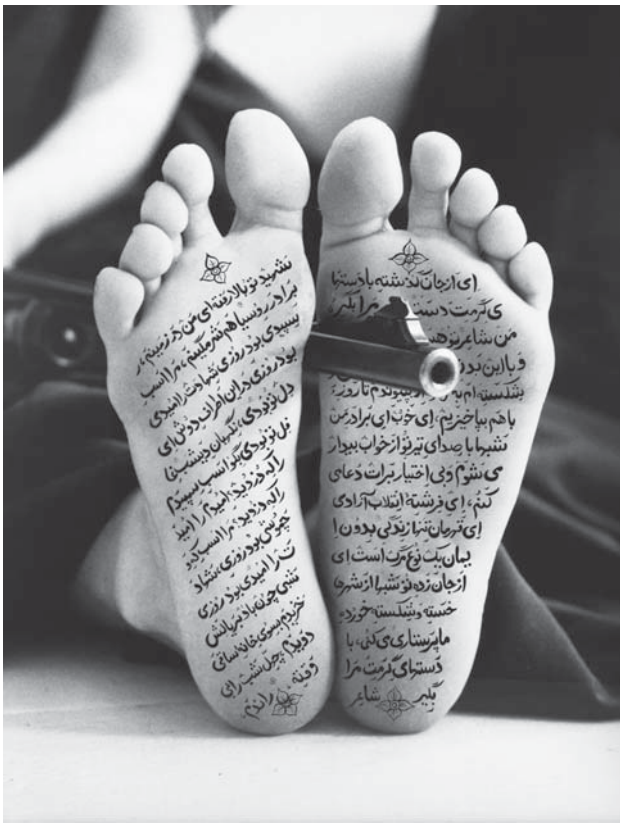
[11] M. Ho, "A State of In-between: Shirin Neshat's Iran," in M. Chiu and M. Ho (ed.), *Shirin Neshat: Facing History* (exh cat.), Washington D.C.: Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 2015, 17.

[12] See for instance: I. Dadi, "Shirin Neshat's Photographs as Postcolonial Allegories," *Sings: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 34, 1, 2008, p. 129; R.R. Hart, S. Babaie, and N. Princethal, *Shirin Neshat*, Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 2013; M.M. Abbaspour, *Trans-national, Cultural, and Corporeal Spaces: The Territory of the Body in the Artwork of Shirin Neshat and Mona Hatoum*, MA thesis, University of California, Riverside, 2001.

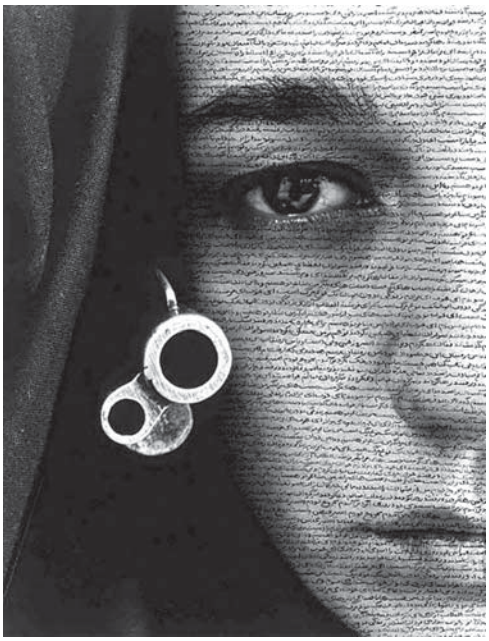
[13] *Ibidem.*

[14] Staci Gem Scheiwiller, "In the House of Fatemeh: Revisiting Shirin Neshat's Photographic Series *Women of Allah*," in Staci Gem Scheiwiller (ed.) *Performing the Iranian State: Visual Culture and Representations of Iranian Identity*, London: Anthem

1. Shirin Neshat, *Rebellious Silence*, 1994, RC print & ink (photo taken by Cynthia Preston), 46 5/8 × 31 1/8 inches (118, 4 × 79, 1 cm). Copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels



2. Shirin Neshat, *Allegiance with Wakefulness*, 1994, Black & white RC print & ink (photo taken by Cynthia Preston), 46 3/4 × 37 1/8 inches (118, 7 × 94, 3 cm). Copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels



3. Shirin Neshat, *Speechless*, 1996, RC print and ink, 46 3/4 × 33 7/8 inches (118, 7 × 86 cm). Copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

4. Shirin Neshat, *Bonding*, 1995, RC print & ink (photo taken by Kyong Park), 34 × 51 1/2 inches (86, 4 × 130, 8 cm). Copyright Shirin Neshat. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

interventions into otherwise illegible representations to unsettle monolithic ideological and cultural perceptions of contemporary Iranian women[15]. The textual inscriptions convey a wide range of often conflicting feminist narratives, ranging from secular-liberal critiques of Iranian patriarchy to the reinforcement of the fundamentalist values of the Islamic revolution. Selected passages from Forugh Farrokhzad, for instance, explore the intimacy of female sexuality and offer a critique of women's oppression. In contrast, quotations from Saffarzadeh, an avid supporter of Khomeini and Islam but also an advocate for women's rights, glorify the revolution and Islam as a path to liberation of the entire society[16]. These poetic inscriptions, as numerous scholars have suggested, are the key to understanding these images, for they radically undercut any totalizing and essentializing claims about the experience of Muslim women both inside and outside Iran[17].

Neshat's Farsi transcriptions rendered in calligraphic Arabic script, create yet another duality, that between Iranian and Western audiences. The text is illegible to outsiders building an impenetrable boundary and emphasizing the distance between cultures, turning the speaking subject into the signifier of otherness. Instantaneously, the decorative syntax of calligraphy plays right into Western Orientalist expectations that highlight the purely visual, aesthetic aspects of Islamic arts, and ignoring the deeper content and cultural specificity of its meaning. Europeans have had a longstanding fascination with Persian and Islamic ornament, including various calligraphic, botanic, and geometric patterns, that goes back to the medieval and Renaissance periods, but its popularity increased in the nineteenth century with the romanticized colonial visions of the Muslim world that Edward Said identified as a larger Orientalist discourse[18]. Orientalists conceptualized Islamic visual culture as a timeless and purely decorative tradition, disconnecting it from its historical and religious contexts. Their aesthetic conflations and willful blurring of stylistic, regional, and chronological differences of Arab-Persian-Islamic visual tradition was preserved throughout the twentieth century and theorized as rooted in an innately Oriental psyche considered to be fundamentally different from the iconographic tradition of Western representational art[19]. Neshat's juxtapositions of the representational images with the perceived ornamental fabric of the script enact these Orientalist discourses, while drawing on postmodern deconstructive strategies such as those employed by American conceptual photographers Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, and Barbara Kruger. These artists deployed written texts and images to reveal the deception of unified signs and to break down metanarrative structures of power. Following this postmodern trajectory, Neshat expresses ideas similar to those of Jacques Derrida about a rupture or break in the fundamental structure of Western epistemology, when, in semiotic terms, the concept or sign, or "transcendental signified," the ultimate source of meaning, cannot be represented or substituted by any adequate signifier. This deconstructive strategy thus decenters the construction that rests on binary pairs of oppositions, putting all the elements into play and emphasizing that there is no one fixed or stable "truth"[20].

Ideas about deceptive surface of the ornament and the tension between the seductive beauty of the pattern and the hidden or emptied-out contents of the image are also central themes in the work of another Iranian-born and internationally renowned photographer and graphic artist, Parastou Forouhar. Inspired by the feminist and postmodern revival of interest in decoration and Persian ornament, Forouhar incorporates these elements in her work, which includes multimedia installations, digital drawings, computer animations, flip books, and photographs. Like Neshat, she often combines calligraphy, miniatures, and other visual elements of Islamic arts with Western references, introducing jarring contrasts and contradictions within a singe work and inviting ambiguities that fragment the cohesiveness of hegemonic narratives.

Born in Teheran in 1962, Forouhar has lived in Germany since 1991 and became a permanent exile there in 1998, following the political assassination of her parents, Dariush and Paravaneh Forouhar, prominent Iranian dissidents and pro-democracy activists. The investigations of their deaths, led by the lawyer, human rights advocate and 2003 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Shirin Ebadi (who represented Parastou

Press, 2013, p. 201–202. For further discussion of Farrokhzad's and Saffarzadeh's feminism consult F. Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*, London: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 1992, Chapters 6 & 7.

[15] Many scholars have written on the importance of these texts. For detailed analysis see N. Cichocki, Veils, Poems, Guns, and Martyrs: Four Themes of Muslim Women's Experiences in Shirin Neshat's Photographic Work," *Thirdspace*, 4, 1, November 2004.

[16] Staci Gem Scheiwiller, *op. cit.*, p. 207–208.

[17] Many scholars have explored the meaning and significance of these texts. See, for instance, Cichocki, *op. cit.*

[18] E.W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

[19] G. Necipoğlu and A. Payne, *Histories of Ornament: From Global to Local*, 3.

[20] J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Corrected Edition, trans. G. Chakravorty Spivak), Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

Forouhar in legal proceedings against specific factions of the Iranian government), revealed that these brutal killings were part of a series of murders of dissident intellectuals carried out by Iranian government operatives between 1988 and 1998. The victims included more than eighty writers, translators, poets, political activists, and other citizens. The pattern of these murders came to light in 1998, when Forouhar's parents and three other dissident writers were murdered within a span of two months[21]. Her personal tragedy and her ceaseless efforts to investigate this crime and bring the perpetrators to justice became a motivating force in her work, widely interpreted as a bold protest against social and political oppression and a fearless exposure of the abuses and violence of the Iranian regime.

Red Is My Name, Green Is My Name I (2007) (Fig. 5, 6) is a series of eight digital drawings that powerfully address this subject. Drawing on the Persian tradition of miniature and ornament, the works are filled with intricate detail and brilliantly colored patterns, obsessively meticulous in their regularity and multiplication of form. Printed tightly within a grid, the rhythmic designs mingle like the patterns of a kaleidoscope, captivating with their dazzling symmetries and the implied harmonious order. Yet the harmless beauty of the ornament is disrupted when we recognize that these patterns are composed of instruments of torture–whips, knives, scissors, pliers, and pistols. The design of these works derives from traditional Iranian fabric patterns used in Shiite mourning rituals on the day of Ashura, the annual memorial for the venerated Shiite martyr Imam Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. Marchers who fill the streets on that day carry black, green, and red banners (representing the colors of the Iranian flag along with the traditional black of grief) and beat their bodies with bare hands and iron chains in commemoration of their spiritual leader, who was decapitated and mutilated in a war waged by the Sunni caliph Yazid in the Battle of Karbala (Iraq) in 680 A.D. The tragedy of Karbala – a central theme of Shiite martyrology – has been integrated into popular Islamic rituals, the iconography of modern Iranian art, and popular drama known as *ta'zieh* (Passion play), performed during Muharram, the month when Iman Hussein and his family were slaughtered[22]. *Red Is My Name, Green Is My Name* acknowledges the long history of bloodshed and violence in Iran, while the digital manipulation of the prints links this tradition to the present. Other drawings in the series feature stylized male and female genitalia arranged like flowers on Persian carpets or ceramic tiles, evoking sexual abuse and rape and acting as symbols of organized political violence by the oppressive Iranian regime, which undoubtedly also reference Forouhar's personal tragedy and her political protest.

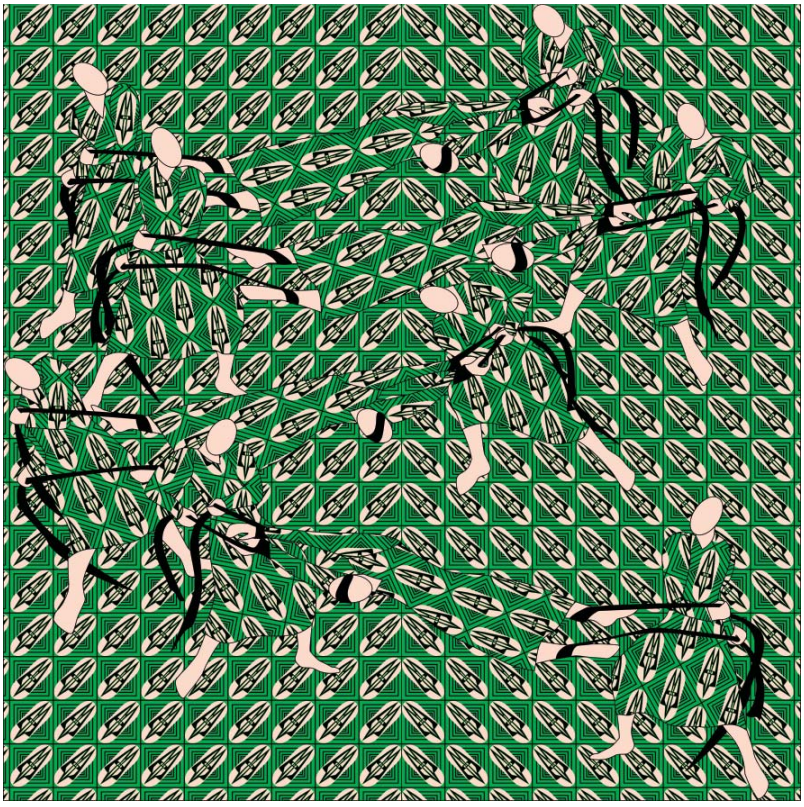
In *A Thousand and One Days* (2003–2012), a large multi-media project consisting of digital drawings, flipbooks, balloons, wallpaper, and animations, Forouhar depicts equally violent scenarios. A subversive twist on the one thousand and one nights of the *Arabian Nights*, all of the works in the series show faceless figures enacting scenes of torture. In digital drawings, for instance, the silhouetted pink bodies that emerge from symmetrical yet irregular black patterns (reminiscent of Rorschach inkblot tests) are interlaced with but also strangled by the meandering elegant arabesque lines resembling the characters in Persian calligraphy (Fig. 7, 8, 9, 10). Yet, while the stylistic and iconographic elements link these works to the Persian past, and the content alludes to abuses in contemporary Iran, the piles of naked bodies, blindfolds, and leashes also bring to mind images and accounts of violence and torture that circulated in the media after the revelations in 2004 of abuses at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and in other U.S.-run prisons in Afghanistan and Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, revealing violence embedded in all structures of power. The computerized animations that are part of the installation, allow the viewer to switch back and forth between the role of victim and perpetrator, with the click of a mouse. Forouhar uses similar techniques in her small flipbooks and hundreds of white and pink helium balloons with printed images of torture (Fig. 11). She invites the audience to set in motion these criminal acts with our own hands, implicating all of us in these horrific acts.

In their cropping, coloring, and serial repetition, Forouhar's works bring to mind Pop images by Andy Warhol, especially his "Death Series" from the early 1960s, which desymbolize the subject, emptying it

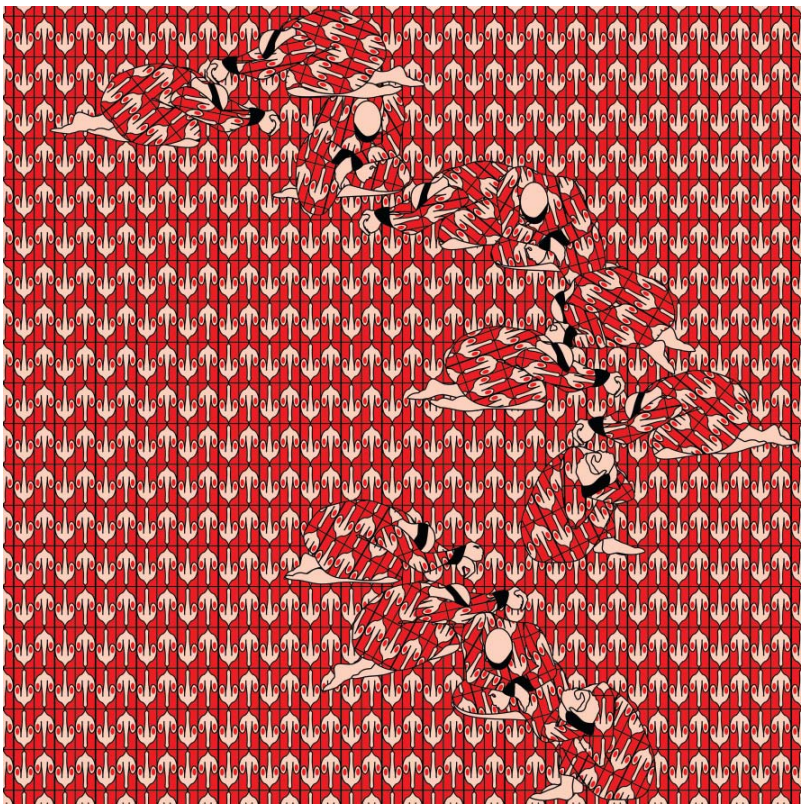
---

[21] J. Inglot, *Ornament and Crime: Parastou Forouhar*, exh. cat., St. Paul, MN: Law Warschaw Gallery, 3. See also documents relating to the investigation into the politically motivated murders of Dariush and Parwaneh Forouhar <http://www.parastou-forouhar.de/english/Documents-Parwaneh-and-Dariush-Forouhar.html>

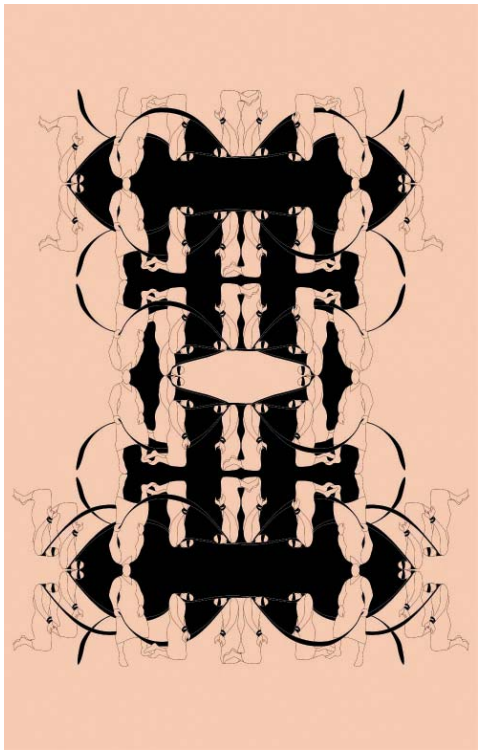
[22] M. Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, p. 97.



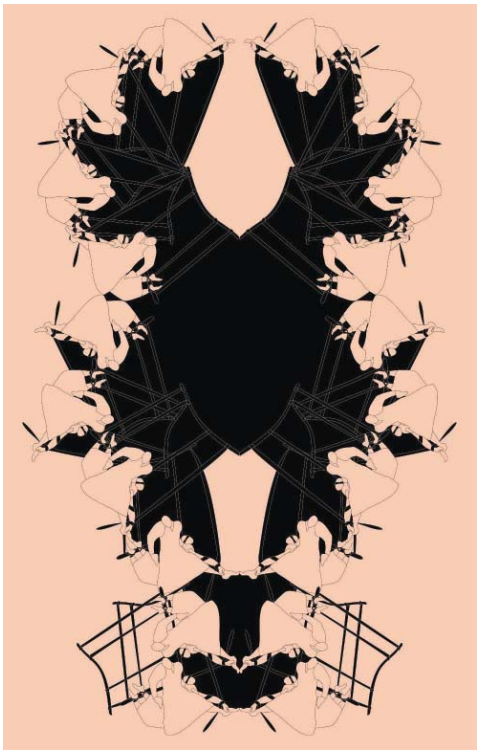
5. Parastou Forouhar, from the series: *Red Is My Name, Green Is My Name I*, 2007, digital drawing, digital print on Photo Rag, 40 × 40 cm. Courtesy and copyright of Parastou Forouhar



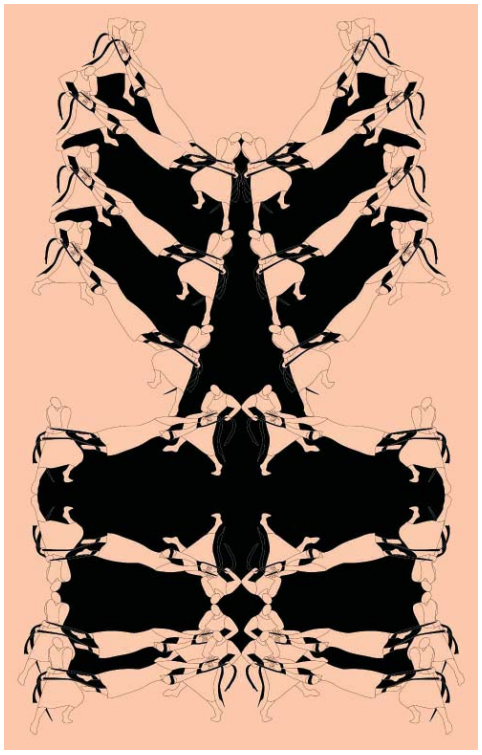
6. Parastou Forouhar, from the series: *Red Is My Name, Green Is My Name I*, 2007, digital drawing, digital print on Photo Rag, 40 × 40 cm. Courtesy and copyright of Parastou Forouhar



7. Parastou Forouhar, from the series:
A Thousand and One Days III, 2012,
digital drawing, digital print on Photo Rag, 35 × 55 cm.
Courtesy and copyright of Parastou Forouhar



8. Parastou Forouhar, from the series:
A Thousand and One Days III, 2012,
digital drawing, digital print on Photo Rag, 35 × 55 cm.
Courtesy and copyright of Parastou Forouhar



9. Parastou Forouhar, from the series:
A Thousand and One Days III, 2012,
digital drawing, digital print on Photo Rag, 35 × 55 cm.
Courtesy and copyright of Parastou Forouhar

10. Parastou Forouhar, from the series:
A Thousand and One Days II, 2009, digital drawing,
digital print on Photo Rag, 30 × 40 cm.
Courtesy and copyright of Parastou Forouhar

11. Parastou Forouhar, *I Surrender*, 2007, digital prints on helium balloons with black threads, installation at John Warshaw Gallery, Macalester College, St. Paul, MN, USA. Courtesy and copyright of Parastou Forouhar

of metaphoric associations, and as Roland Barthes noted, turning it into a simulacral surface[23]. They also remind us Warhol's famous saying: "Because the more you look at the same exact thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel"[24]. Like Warhol, whose images depict victims in car crashes, disasters, and racist attacks, and the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Forouhar is fascinated by a similar concept of mass subject (mass violence) that is turned into nothing more than ornament. This reflection is filtered as much through Pop Art as through her response to Siegfried Kracauer's theory on Mass Ornament, in which mechanized gestures of modern societies, synchronized like rows of choreographed bodies, become a lifeless abstraction[25].

Like Shirin Neshat, Parastou Forouhar is performative and playful, but also uses humour and irony in deconstructions of the hegemonic discourse symbolized by the veil. In her photographs *Friday* (2003) (Fig. 12) and *Flashing* (2009) (Fig. 13), for instance, she uses chador to provocatively challenge Sharia laws that circumscribe women's social and sexual behavior in fundamentalist Muslim societies. In her monumental composition *Friday*, she aggressively breaks the beautiful abstract spread of the floral, silky black fabric of the chador by an erotically charged hand gesture, which looks like a protruding vulva and announces the unashamed female sexuality of her Muslim subject. In Islam, Friday is the religiously sanctioned day of private and public prayers. Forouhar uses the symbolic meaning of this title to subvert religious orthodoxy and to show the multiple contradictions hidden behind the monochromatic façade of officially sanctioned norms. The large-scale screenlike composition of the photograph, which looks like a curtain or the partition that traditionally divides men and women into separate spheres of ritualized cultural practices, further enhances the meaning of Forouhar's social and political transgressions. In the equally suggestive *Flashing* (2004), a woman dressed in a chador is captured in another liberating gesture– dramatically opening up her dress from the front to a handsome *H & M* Western male fashion model in a modern urban window display. However, by doing so, she is not just to openly manifesting her rebellion against Islamic laws and blatantly ignoring the meta-narratives of the "controlling Western gaze," as she stands demonstratively with her back to the viewer, but she is creating a new space of encounter that imagines potential space of coexistence of seemingly incompatible cultural positions.

Engaging with postmodern strategies of irony, appropriation, and deconstruction, the artwork of both Shirin Neshat and Parastou Farouhar intersects with postcolonial discourse. Their works constantly highlight structural oppositions between tradition and modernity, oppression and freedom, fundamentalism and secularism, and Islam and the West. However, in doing so, they do not just emphasize the oppositional

[23] R. Barthes, "That Old Thing," in *Post-Pop*, ed. P. Taylor, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989, p. 25.
[24] A. Warhol and P. Hackett, *POPism: the Warhol '60s*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980, p. 80.
[25] S. Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.

12. Parastou Forouhar, *Friday*, 2003, digital print on Aludibond, four panels, each 170 × 86 cm.
Courtesy and copyright of Parastou Forouhar

13. Parastou Forouhar, *Flashing*, 2009, digital print on Aludibond, 47 × 70 cm.
Courtesy and copyright of Parastou Forouhar

power dynamics between the so-called First and the Third World–instead, they create new representations that exist on the borders of these deeply entrenched dividing cultural boundaries. While in their photographs and installations they disclose multiple tensions and collisions framing their Muslim subjects, they also persistently highlight intersections of their diverse cultural articulations, forging what Homi Bhabha calls a liminal "third space."

In his seminal collection of essays *Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha argued for a move away from the exploration of authentic and original culture and identity in the contemporary postcolonial world. Rejecting the idea of cultural homogeneity, he contends that all states, cultures, and ethnicities exist in a continuous process of hybridity. According to Bhabha, hybridity is not just a synthesis of old and

new structures but instead a third dimension, in which it is impossible to claim in any definite "origin." Instead, he argues that the intense and multifaceted social and cultural encounters within postcolonial and diasporic contexts in the globalized world produce ambivalent, "in-between" spaces, in which individual identities and social beliefs are dynamically questioned and negotiated. He labels this process "the third space of enunciation," which he also sees as an analytical tool of intervention into dominant structures of representation. Advancing his argument Bhabha explains:

> The intervention of the Third Space of enunciations, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People[26].

Bhabha's concept of "the third space" thus helps to explain complex negotiations and translations of contradictory demands and polarities for all diasporic subjects, including artists, who constantly are moving in and out of and exist in between different cultural positions. Shirin Neshat and Parastou Forouhar are clearly working from such position, illustrating how these intersections, overlappings, and interpellations produce hybridity within their subjects and within a larger culture. Interconnecting Persian, Islamic, and Western aesthetic styles and historical narratives, these artists directly respond to unfolding contemporary social polarities and political conflicts just as they reflect on those that happened in history, intervening not only in Orientalism, colonialism but also in the current dominant discursive paradigms of the "clash of civilizations," "the Muslim threat," and reductive interpretations of religious and gender identities. By employing a wide repertoire of conceptual strategies and artistic devices, such as humor, irony, pop culture, and performative acts, they invite us to find new meanings outside of these hegemonic boundaries, where global audiences can enter into trans-cultural dialogues, question, and unsettle monolithic perspectives and fixed dogmas.

TRANSKULTUROWE DIALOGI W SZTUCE IRAŃSKIEJ DIASPORY: SHIRIN NESHAT I PARASTOU FOROUHAR

Streszczenie

Tematem artykułu jest analiza prac dwóch znaczących artystek wywodzących się z irańskiej diaspory: pracującej w USA Shirin Neshat i mieszkającej w Niemczech Parastou Forouhar. Uczestniczą one w procesie redefiniowania przez sztukę współczesną reprezentacji islamu, a szczególnie kobiet muzułmanek, biorą udział w publicznych debatach, jakie wyłoniły się po rewolucji irańskiej 1979 r. i nasiliły od czasu ataków terrorystycznych 11 września 2001 r. Shirin Neshat i Parastou Forouhar zwracają uwagę na „kulurowy imperializm" świata zachodniego, ukazując głęboko zakorzenione dychotomie, które polaryzują pojmowanie kultury Zachodu i Wschodu według przeciwnych kategorii, takich jak tradycja – nowoczesność, opresja – wolność, fundamentalizm – sekularyzacja, czy zacofanie – cywilizacja. Operując na granicy tych pojęć, obie artystki celowo łączą i kontrastują ze sobą spolaryzowane tematy, praktyki i symbole kulturowe, wzięte z tradycji perskich, muzułmańskich i zachodnich, bezustannie rekonfigurując oś czasowo-przestrzenną, aby umożliwić myślenie niedialektyczne, otwarte na nowe, dynamiczne i płynne pojmowanie podmiotu. Używając postmodernistycznych strategii, takich jak ironia, zapożyczenie i dekonstrukcja, Neshat i Forouhar starają się rozbić hegemoniczne dyskursy szyickiego islamu, zachodniego orientalizmu i neokolonializmu. Można stwierdzić, że w ten sposób wprowadzają one treść swojej sztuki w tak zwaną trzecią przestrzeń zdefiniowaną przez postkolonialnego teoretyka Homi Bhabhę, teren kontestacji i subwersji homogenicznych pojęć kulturowych, ukazujących procesy hybrydyzacji, ambiwalencji, negocjacji i translacji. Jest to również obszar tworzenia tak zwanych między-przestrzeni (*in-between space*), gdzie można uniknąć utrwalonych binaryzmów i rozumienia współczesnych kultur jako czegoś „autentycznego" lub „czystego", szczególnie w czasach nasilających się procesów globalizacji. Neshat i Forouhar fragmentaryzują, rozpraszają i decentralizują dominujące dyskursy reprezentacji, określające tradycyjną perską kulturę, współczesną politykę irańską oraz mocno utrwalone i uproszczone wizerunki muzułmańskich kobiet, ukazując tworzenie się nowych i nieodwracalnych transnacjonalnych znaczeń i powiązań między Iranem/Wschodem i Zachodem, które kontestują ściśle określone kategorie etniczne, narodowościowe, płciowe i uporządkowane kulturowe paradygmaty.

[26] H.K. Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 54.