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In this essay, we want to describe the concepts that led us to organize this exhibition of works by women artists who address their complex legacies from the various countries of the Middle East, and who, in the words of Afsaneh Najmabadi, present us with “unavailable intersections.”

In founding the Rutgers University Institute for Women and Art, we determined that an integral aspect of our mission would be to spotlight women artists from around the globe. Our goal is to bring these artists to visibility in the American university community as well as the American general public. Five years ago, we mounted two exhibitions on women artists from Southeast Asia. In conceiving our next exhibition of artists identified with cultures that originated in parts of the world other than Western Europe, and, aware of the need for more education on and familiarity with the arts of the countries in the Middle East, we decided to initiate this show. This has been a long and complicated journey. The work of the artists has changed throughout this time, as has the world itself. Five years ago, 9/11 was one of the defining events of the period. As of the publication of this catalogue, the critical event for this era may be the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011.

A word about the title of the exhibition, which is meant to be interpreted as a pun on the essentialist concept of women. Both of us are of a generation when United States schoolteachers introduced ancient history to their third- or fourth-graders by referring to the Middle East as “The Fertile Crescent”—the part of the world where agriculture originated. As we began planning this show, we remembered that phrase and thought it might catch people’s attention and provoke reflection. Our objective is to create an environment in which women are not essentialized, and in which diversity and individuality of cultures are not subsumed under a single umbrella. We anticipated that people would understand that the reference was ironic and that, on seeing the exhibition, they would realize that we were aware of its double meaning and colonialist associations when used in conjunction with women from the region active in the cultural sphere.

The University of Chicago archaeologist James Henry Breasted coined the term “Fertile Crescent.” As Kelly Baum explains in her essay in this volume, Breasted’s work paralleled the swelling imperialist aspirations of the European countries and the United States to control the Middle East. Yet it was largely due to Breasted’s *Ancient Records of Egypt,* published in 1906, that the early world of the Middle East and North Africa became familiar in the United States to both scholars and the general public, who, up until then, had thought of Greece and Rome as the primary antecedents to the development of European culture. The popularity of Breasted’s writings resulted in Americans’ widespread recognition of the crucial role played by the people and countries of the Middle East in the development of language, agriculture, law, art, and the other aspects of what we call civilization, despite their simultaneous acceptance of Orientalist stereotypes that posited a view of the Middle East as inferior to the West. American museums began to display artifacts of this world as prominently as they did Greek and Roman art.
theme that runs through *The Fertile Crescent*, it is this concept of “unavailable intersections.” The world as presented by these artists is one of unfixed identities and fluctuating social contexts. They present critically insightful explorations into the complexities of the intersections of contemporary culture, history, gender, and power, revealing that these considerations result in “unavailable intersections.”

The initial idea was to limit the show to artists who deal with gender and sexuality. We were familiar with the exhibitions mounted over the last decade presenting artists whose work is concerned with deconstructing Western stereotypes of Middle East women. But even that category became complicated, as each artist approaches this issue from her individual perspective.

We ultimately selected several artists who contend with deconstructing Orientalist stereotypes of the female body. The most sexually explicit works are those by Ghada Amer and her collaborator, Reza Farkhondeh. In their drawings of women derived from pornographic publications, the sexually engaged figures contrast with images of Middle East women wearing hijabs, chadors, and burkas—the types of representations that usually appear in the Western media. Their images are ambiguous. Fulfilling the concept of unavailable intersections, they can be interpreted as critiquing Orientalist stereotypes, questioning religiously inspired Muslim restrictions on women’s dress, or perhaps flouting the separation between high art and pornography. Amer’s collaborator, Reza Farkhondeh, is a male. We visited her studio and met with both. Amer told us that their colleges and universities included units on ancient Mesopotamia and other ancient Eastern Mediterranean cultures in their curricula, and, as noted above, even schoolchildren like us came to know about “The Fertile Crescent.”

Our curatorial journey began with our research on women artists from the various countries of the Middle East. Ferris Olin had attended the Istanbul Biennial in 2007 and came home excited about the artists she had observed. She brought them to the attention of Judith Brodsky, and it was at that point that the concept of this exhibition was born.

Identifying which artists to feature in the show was the next step; we did so by several means, largely by examining printed catalogues and resources available on the Internet. Faced with a multitude of artists from a dozen different countries, the handling of a wide range of themes, and a broad scope of artistic approaches and perspectives, we realized that we would not be able to include all the artists, nor all of the topics we had encountered. We therefore decided that the exhibition should focus on illustrating the heterogeneity of countries, cultures, and individualities of each artist. We realize that our overview may be simplistic, but we hope that it will rouse interest and reflection. We came to understand that the Middle East is not a unified culture, any more so than the countries of North America—the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Artists have different heritages, different languages, different contemporary situations, but, at the same time, like the North American countries, they also share certain histories and cultural aspects. In fact, if there is any one

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**SHADI GHADIRIAN**

From the series *Miss Butterfly*, 2011

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**ARIANE LITTMAN**

Still from *Mehika/Erasure*, 2006
In 1993–97, I produced my first body of work, a series of stark black-and-white photographs entitled Women of Allah, conceptual narratives on the subject of female warriors during the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979. On each photograph, I inscribed calligraphic Farsi text on the female body (eyes, face, hands, feet, and chest); the text is poetry by contemporary Iranian women poets who had written on the subject of martyrdom and the role of women in the Revolution. As the artist, I took on the role of performer, posing for the photographs. These photographs became iconic portraits of willfully armed Muslim women. Yet every image, every woman’s submissive gaze, suggests a far more complex and paradoxical reality behind the surface.

Shirin Neshat (born 1957, Qazvin), who lives and works in New York City, left Iran in 1974 to study in Los Angeles. She stayed in California, receiving her BFA and MFA at the University of California, Berkeley. She then moved to New York, where she married the Korean art curator Kyong Park; the two jointly ran the New York exhibition and performance space the Storefront for Art and Architecture. Neshat returned to Iran in 1990, eleven years after the Islamic Revolution, and was shocked by what she saw. That trip led to her first body of work, the photographic series Women of Allah, on the subject of female warriors during the Revolution. Neshat works in photography, video, film, and performance, often addressing the theme of the alienation of women in repressed Muslim societies.


Neshat has been the recipient of accolades worldwide, among them the First International Award at the Venice Biennale, 1999; Grand Prix, Gwangju Biennale, Seoul, 2000; Visual Art Award, Edinburgh International Film Festival, 2000; Infinity Award for Visual Art, International Center for Photography, New York, 2002; Fine Art Prize, Heitland Foundation, Celle, Germany, 2003; honoree at The First Annual Risk Takers in the Arts Celebration, given by the Sundance Institute, New York, 2003; ZeroOne Award, Universität der Künste, Berlin, 2003; Hiroshima Freedom Prize, Hiroshima City Museum of Art, 2005; Lillian Gish Prize, 2006; Creative Excellence Award at the Reykjavik International Film Festival, 2008; Cultural Achievement Award, Asia Society, New York, 2008; Rockefeller Foundation Media Arts Fellowship, New York, 2008. Her first feature-length film, Women Without Men, received the Silver Lion Award, Prix La Navicella, and the UNICEF Award at the Sixty-Sixth Venice International Film Festival; and the Cinema for Peace Special Award, Hessischer Filmpreis, Germany, all 2009.
SHIRIN NESHAT
Rebellious Silence, 1994, from the eleven-part series Women of Allah, 1993–97
Photo credit: Cynthia Preston
RC black-and-white print and ink
Framed: 52 x 36 1/2 in. (132.1 x 92.7 cm)
Courtesy of the Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels