Feminist Art of the Middle East

Fig. 1 | Shirin Neshat, Rebellious Silence

Politics, Society and Sexuality
Learning from Three Fertile Crescent Exhibitions

By Virginia Fabbri Butera, Ph.D.

Judith K. Brodsky and Ferris Olin, co-directors of the cross-disciplinary project, *The Fertile Crescent: Gender, Art, and Society*,[1] are to be congratulated for organizing a magnificent, multi-partite and multi-site series of events which focuses on the artistic contributions of contemporary women born, raised, and/or living in or having heritage from the Middle East. Seven core art exhibitions and eight complementary art exhibitions plus a multitude of films, concerts, lectures, symposia and conversations were and still are scheduled in and around New Brunswick and Princeton, New Jersey through January 13, 2013. The project’s website: www.fertile-crescent.org provides a listing of all the events and artists. The website, the well-illustrated, written and organized catalogue, plus the exhibitions and events themselves, serve as a wonderful introduction and model for those new to this expansive topic as well as for those of us who think, write, curate and organize with broad cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary goals in other arenas.

One Saturday in September, I visited three art exhibitions in and around Princeton that were presented by different organizations but under *The Fertile Crescent* umbrella. Princeton University is the host to two of the shows that I saw: one was in the main first floor gallery of the Princeton University Art Museum and the other in the Bernstein Gallery in the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. The third exhibition, *Memory of Here, Memory of There: Fertile Crescent Dialogues*, was close by at the West Windsor Arts Council.

Six years ago, Brodsky and Olin, co-directors of the Rutgers University Institute for Women and Art, were inspired to delve deeply into what it means to be a woman artist of Middle Eastern background. Brodsky and Olin identified several crucial themes many artists were exploring that revolved around concepts of gender; politics; societal, sexual and religious restrictions and rebellion; violence; dislocation and precarity.[2] They wisely developed their project to include creations by mature as well as younger artists of varied ethnic, national and religious backgrounds.

That day, my introduction to this multi-layered topic began at the Princeton University Art Museum. Complemented by an excellent installation and in-depth labels, the works on view began to reveal a complexity of messages and meanings. The show begins with Iranian-born Shirin Neshat’s stark and compelling 1994 black and white photograph and ink piece, *Rebellious Silence* (fig. 1). In a self-portrait, the artist shows herself, from the waist up, covered in a black cloak or *chador.*[3] Vertically bisecting her face and the image as a whole is the barrel of a rifle. One of the eleven parts of Neshat’s series, *Women of Allah* (1993-97), *Rebellious Silence*, a confrontational icon, could be a call to arms for Iranian women or a warning to westerners who dare to intrude. However, based on the title, it is Neshat’s response to an Iran that she did not recognize when she returned in 1990 after a 16 year absence and 11 years after the Islamist revolution there.[4] Pushed into the foreground, onto the surface of the picture plane and staring straight out at us, her image is stolid, monolithic and impenetrable. But according to the museum label, she inscribed her forehead and cheeks with readable Farsi texts by two of the contemporary Iranian feminist poets who “had written on the subject of martyrdom and the role of women in the Revolution.”[5] While initially looking like a defender of the revolution, even the knowledge of the presence of dissident text makes us question what was and is a woman’s role in the Iranian revolution and society. Through this lyrical visual disruption of calligraphic words, Neshat subversively indicates that there was also a revolution by some women during and after the Revolution once the conduct of their lives had changed so radically from Western-style modernism to Islamist modes. Moreover, this multi-media pieceintrudes. However, based on the title, it is Neshat’s response to an Iran that she did not recognize when she returned in 1990 after a 16 year absence and 11 years after the Islamist revolution there.[4] Pushed into the foreground, onto the surface of the picture plane and staring straight out at us, her image is stolid, monolithic and impenetrable. But according to the museum label, she inscribed her forehead and cheeks with readable Farsi texts by two of the contemporary Iranian feminist poets who “had written on the subject of martyrdom and the role of women in the Revolution.”[5] While initially looking like a defender of the revolution, even the knowledge of the presence of dissident text makes us question what was and is a woman’s role in the Iranian revolution and society. Through this lyrical visual disruption of calligraphic words, Neshat subversively indicates that there was also a revolution by some women during and after the Revolution once the conduct of their lives had changed so radically from Western-style modernism to Islamist modes. Moreover, this multi-media piece could be a call to arms for Iranian women or a warning to westerners who dare to intrude. However, based on the title, it is Neshat’s response to an Iran that she did not recognize when she returned in 1990 after a 16 year absence and 11 years after the Islamist revolution there.[4] Pushed into the foreground, onto the surface of the picture plane and staring straight out at us, her image is stolid, monolithic and impenetrable. But according to the museum label, she inscribed her forehead and cheeks with readable Farsi texts by two of the contemporary Iranian feminist poets who “had written on the subject of martyrdom and the role of women in the Revolution.”[5] While initially looking like a defender of the revolution, even the knowledge of the presence of dissident text makes us question what was and is a woman’s role in the Iranian revolution and society. Through this lyrical visual disruption of calligraphic words, Neshat subversively indicates that there was also a revolution by some women during and after the Revolution once the conduct of their lives had changed so radically from Western-style modernism to Islamist modes. Moreover, this multi-media piece

How else can we interpret this work? The eyes are confrontational, but sad. There is a hint of resignation to a fate not under the woman’s control, and yet, since it is a self-portrait of the artist, who was and is based in New York City, it must also be a reflection of the insubordination she felt and saw in the faces of some of the Iranian women. She puts herself in their place, makes herself a stand-in for the Iranian women who protest this political/societal shift, but who remain silenced. The eyes are unwavering, but do not indicate impending aggressive action — only the gun might suggest that. Its presence underscores the violent and precarious nature of female life in Iran. If/when Iran develops nuclear bomb capability, would the rifle continue to have any meaning?
Neshat rivets us with her gaze. But here it is not male scrutiny that dominates and objectifies the female, but rather it is the female gaze and purposely veiled body that is defiant, here controlling the phallic power of the rifle, not being subjugated by it. In another image in the Women of Allah series on view in the Princeton University Art Museum, Neshat’s Offered Eyes (fig. 2) also conjoins Iranian feminist poetry with a view of her own eye/I. The artist’s ocular crevice is controlled by her alone, and is not, for example, the visually plucked and isolated eye of Lee Miller that the American surrealist artist Man Ray used multiple times as a symbol of his desired control over her, his lover and photographic assistant.\(^6\) The art historical and theoretical literature is rife with analyses of the notion and meaning of the male domineering gaze,\(^7\) but Neshat’s total image in Rebellious Silence is vulvar in outline and density. The phallic gun/slit divides the labia-like folds of the chador which often hides Western-style, liberated clothing and thus attitudes. This woman may be verbally silent for the moment, but her mind, eyes, writing and art hold untapped vaginal and feminist power.

Another Iranian-born artist, Parastou Forouhar, is based in Berlin and effectively uses violence, its threat, effects and implements, to visually and emotionally startle the viewer. In works such as the digital print on photo paper, Ashura Butterfly (fig.3), from the 2010 seven-part series Butterfly, and her 2010 Triptych using the same medium, she contrasts the pink of flesh tones with the horror of killing.\(^8\) Ashura Butterfly invokes the brutal murder of her parents, who fought for democracy in Iran but were killed in 1998 for their stance.\(^9\) Forouhar places bound, wounded and bleeding bodies within a butterfly shape that references her mother’s name, Parvaneh, which means butterfly in Farsi.\(^10\) Triptych (fig. 4), similarly, uses many bodily shapes to form three weapons: a pistol, a grenade and a dagger. Horrifyingly, the bodies themselves are, in turn, constructed by the very images of the now miniaturized weapons that they collectively build. It is a Pilobolus-like, contorted contemporary dance of death, where implements of destruction infiltrate and effect obliteration. Presented on flat moss-green backgrounds, these weapons/souvenirs are perverse trophies.
Each artist and almost every work in the exhibition reinforce the unnerving sense of precarity and insecurity that the project-at-large proposes as a central theme. Mona Hatoum’s 2007 bronze sculpture, *Round and round* (fig. 5), of toy-size soldiers aiming their rifles at each other in an endless circle of violence, says it all. In 2006, Hatoum created *Projection* (fig. 6), a textural bas-relief in cotton and abaca, of the Peter’s version of the world map. The Peter’s projection reveals an elongated correction of the continents showing North and South America off to the left, and not centralized and larger than it should be, as it appears in the Western-centric Mercator projection.

*Projection* is also meant as the great equalizer through another means. In complete opposition to the Italian artist Alighiero Boetti’s woven vibrant maps with national flags and colors defining the borders of countries carved out by men, Hatoum neutralizes all the land masses. No borders are shown. Indeed the light beige continents are physically depressed below the level of the oceans, perhaps a metaphor indicating that the ocean levels have risen or that they may eventually turn to ice, a reminder that we had better find a way to work together because in the end Nature may win, not people through their wars and petty squabbles over land, borders and control.
Israeli-born Sigalit Landau, who lives in Tel Aviv, further illustrates the fallacy of man-made borders, “of drawing lines in the shifting sands,” through her 2005 three-channel video, *Dancing for Maya* (fig.7). Two women, dressed differently, one darker skinned than the other, dig undulating lines in the sand from two different directions as waves echo and wash over their endless and frustrating mark-making. The women meet at a point and step around each other to close off each other’s track, making a braid-like form or a row of endless eye shapes. Videos tend to fail my quest for understandable and meaningful visual stimuli, but not so here. I watched the 16 minute hypnotic piece all the way through and then in bits and pieces as I circled and re-circled the exhibition trying to understand everything that was being presented and implied. The melting of the woman-made shapes into the tide and the uncertain effects of dedicated effort resonates as a metaphor of uncertainty and contested borders in Landau’s political, ecological and humanitarian film.

At the more casual venue of the West Windsor Arts Council, in a complementary exhibition, I was fascinated by two of the artists’ works which poignantly echo the themes of the larger project but in completely different ways. Iranian born Samira Abbassy now lives in New York City. Her large oil on gesso panel titled *Compulsive Navigation Disorder* (fig. 8), is painted purposefully in a slightly flat naïve style. A nearly life-size woman stands looking out at us. The title as well as the figure convey awkwardness, hesitation and displacement. Abbassy surrounds the head of the woman with multiple chador-covered heads as a stand-in for all the women her singular figure represents. Their doll-like features, in contrast to the sophisticated visage of Neshat in *Rebellious Silence*, underscore the range of imagery open to women attempting to convey the disorientation many feel both within their shifting native culture and/or as an immigrant to another country. In *Compulsive Navigation Disorder*, immigration and migration are undoubtedly signaled by the black butterfly motifs painted on the woman’s red skirt while a third eye in the center of her chest may signify the importance of remaining open to new possibilities.
Fig. 9 | Milcah Bassel, untitled 3

*Untitled #3* (fig.9), one of Milcah Bassel’s installation photographs from the series *dwellings*, “a performance for lens-based media,” features three nude women, intertwined with chopped up, partially painted and differently sized and shaped sections of planks and posts from a housing project. The women curl, bend and intertwine with each other and the wood so that one understands the concept of dislocation as well as the body as a home, the women together as building a house or creating community, and the various shapes and sections as the attributes we each bring to fill those “constructions.”

Fig. 10 | Negar Ahkami, The Bridge

The opposition of natural versus man-made structures, past versus present culture, is evident in several of the works in *The Fertile Crescent* exhibition installed in the Bernstein Gallery on the lower level of Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School. In Negar Ahkami’s 2007 work, *The Bridge* (fig.10), an acrylic, glitter, and nail polish on gessoed panel painting, the curving organic profile of a mosque’s dome and a muezzin’s exaggerated loudspeaker melt into a waterfall of delicately delineated distorted Persian patterns in shades of blue, green and yellow, weeping into the middle of her 60 x 30 inch image. The bridge on which the artist paints a self-portrait both divides and links Middle Eastern forms from and with the gridded steel and glass buildings of her New York existence. Note, in the right background, New York City’s Chrysler Building and, in the right foreground, the columns and pointed arches of the modernist structure which are reminiscent of those on the fallen World Trade Center buildings. Ahkami’s works continue this juxtaposition and
in Iran.

Fig. 11 | Laila Shawa, Night and the City

The movement from organic to gridded forms reminded me of the work of Palestinian born Laila Shawa, whose 2008 *Night and the City* (Fig. 11), acrylic on canvas painting, is on view back in the Princeton University Art Museum. Ironically, “according to the artist, the distortions to which she subjects traditional Islamic forms, particularly mosaics, finds a parallel in the misrepresentation of Arab and Islamic culture in Dubai;”[11] where Dubai is the Western stand-in/sell-out, and the ten-sided Arabic star transforms itself into a chain-link fence.

Fig. 12 | Shadi Ghadirian, From the series Miss Butterfly

For Shadi Ghadirian, born and living in Tehran, a prison fence is represented photographically as a spiderweb. She weaves a poignant Aesop-style tale of *Miss Butterfly* caught in a spider’s sticky maze (fig. 12).[12] Like women who refuse to sacrifice others to attain their own freedom, Miss Butterfly refuses to put vulnerable insects into the entangling web for the spider’s meals in order that she would be set free. Impressed by her self-sacrifice, the spider lets Miss Butterfly go anyway. The societal and religious parallels are not hard to see; many women are caught in a patriarchal web. The problem, however, is that the patriarchy is not usually kind and sympathetic, willing to release a captive citizenry. Rather, like Odysseus’s wife, Penelope, weaving a tapestry by day and tearing out the rows by night, each woman must stay faithful to her goals. After 20 years of keeping suitors at bay with her strategy, Penelope was released when Odysseus finally came to rescue her. Who and what will rescue the imprisoned Middle Eastern women? Will it be art, the audience or another revolution? Similar to the Iranian women, Egyptian women hoped for greater freedoms and more of a role in government during and after the Arab Spring. It doesn’t seem to be happening…
Other artists in the Woodrow Wilson School exhibition, such as Zeina Barakeh, play with perpetual conflict and shifting alliances. Her photographs of real and fictive passports document the constant change that her Lebanese-Palestinian family has had to endure, while her video animations such as *Scenarios of Return* (fig. 13), re-propose her as a giant fighting in her father’s city, Jaffa, against the British in order to win and reverse history.

For me, finally, Parastou Forouhar’s photographic “mistresspiece,” *Freitag (Friday)* (fig. 14), 2003, clutches, in its folds, the passive and aggressive meaning of *The Fertile Crescent*, as place and as exhibition. According to Baum’s catalogue essay, “Art, Precarity, Biopolitics,” the agriculturally rich region around and between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers was an area first referred to as the “fertile crescent” in 1916 by the American Orientalist scholar, James Henry Breasted.[13] Baum also clarifies the compromising role that the ironically named Breasted played as a pawn in the manipulation and exploitation of Middle Eastern affairs in the early twentieth century.[14] By choosing to title their project, *The Fertile Crescent*, Brodsky and Olin recall the Western driven, male-dominated construction of the Middle East as we now know it. But they also humorously and pointedly reference Middle Eastern women’s creativity in all arenas as well as the vulvar and vaginal metaphors that are raised in certain works. *Rebellious Silence* demonstrates one modality, while Forouhar’s *Freitag (Friday)* is even more explicit. The flower-brocaded black material of a chador veils all four panels of this work. On the second panel from the right, a woman’s pink fleshy hand in a pointed arc reaches out of the folds to grab onto the material to cover or reveal more of herself. As the artist remarks, “The unveiled skin of the woman’s fingers is charged with eroticism, contrasting with the cloth of the veil.”[15] The greatest eroticism is created by the juxtaposition of the concealed and revealed. For Middle Eastern women artists in this exhibition who deal with restrictions of power, sexuality, and justice, the ability to control their own artistic fertility is clearly paramount.

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**About the author:**

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[www.maloneyartgallery.org](http://www.maloneyartgallery.org)

**More about the images:**

**Fig. 1** 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

**Fig. 2** Shirin Neshat, *Offered Eyes*, 1993, from the eleven part series *Women of Allah*, 1993–97, Photo credit: Plauto, RC black-and-white print and ink, Framed: 52 3/8 x 36 1/4 x 1 1/8 in. (133 x 92.1 x 2.9 cm), Courtesy of the Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

**Fig. 3** Parastou Forouhar, *Ashura Butterfly* from the seven-part series *Butterfly*, 2010, Digital print on photo paper, 39 3/8 x 28 3/8 in.
Fig. 4  Parastou Forouhar, *Triptych*, 2010, Digital prints on photo paper, Left and right: Each 13 3/4 x 27 5/8 in. (35.1 x 70.1 cm); center: 13 3/4 x 13 3/4 in. (35.1 x 35.1 cm), Courtesy of the RH Gallery, New York, and the artist.

Fig. 5  Mona Hatoum, *Round and round*, 2007, Bronze, 24 x 13 x 13 in. (61 x 33 x 33 cm), Photo credit: Bill Orcutt, Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York.

Fig. 6  Mona Hatoum, *Projection*, 2006, Cotton and abaca, 35 x 55 in. (89 x 140 cm), Photo credit: Ela Bialkowska, Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York.

Fig. 7  Sigalit Landau, *Dancing for Maya*, 2005, Three-channel video, 16:13 minutes, Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 8  Samira Abbassy, *Compulsive Navigation Disorder*, 2011, Oil on gesso panel, 60 x 34 in., Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 9  Milcah Bassel, *untitled #3* from the series *dwellings*, 2012, frame dimensions: 23 1/2 x 24 in., Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 10  Negar Ahkami, *The Bridge*, 2007, Acrylic, glitter, and nail polish on gessoed panel, 60 x 36 in. (152.4 x 91.4 cm), Photo credit: Jeff Barnett-Winsby, Courtesy of Fred Perlberg: Leila Heller Gallery, New York; and the artist.

Fig. 11  Laila Shawa, *Night and the City*, from the twenty-nine part series Sarab, 2008, Acrylic on canvas, 39 3/8 x 78 3/4 in. (100.1 x 199.9 cm), Photo credit: Joanna Vestey, Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 12  Shadi Ghadirian, From the series *Miss Butterfly*, 2011, One of fifteen photographs, 27 1/2 x 39 3/8 in. (70 x 100 cm), Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 13  Zeina Barakeh, Still from *Scenarios of Return* (chapter two), 2012, from the series *And Then….*, 2008-ongoing, Video animation, Duration variable, Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 14  Parastou Forouhar, *Freitag (Friday)*, 2003, Aludobond, Four panels, Each 66 7/8 x 33 7/8 in. (170 x 86 cm), Courtesy of the RH Gallery, New York, and the artist.

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