

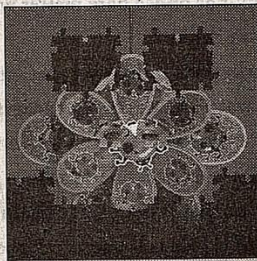
Culture Corner

Negar Farajiana and Shirin Neshat: Two Iranian Artists in Seattle

By Susan Platt, www.artandpoliticsnow.com

During October and November, the M.I.A. gallery, a chic new art space in downtown Seattle (1203 Second Avenue, near Seneca) exhibited "Match and Unmatch" art works by Negar Farajani. Negar is from Tehran, Iran. I had the opportunity to talk with her about her art work and life in Iran. Negar is part of a group of young artists in many media who are based in Tehran. In addition to her own art, she also curates exhibitions and organizes projects with other artists.

Negar was born in Yazd, one of the oldest cities in Iran. Yazd is in the center of Iran, a spectacular city in the midst of deserts (formerly an oasis), with historical architecture, crafts traditions, and Zoroastrian shrine. She went to art school there. Negar now lives in Tehran with her husband, who is a musician; he plays the "tar", a predecessor of the guitar. He also composes music for films. They have a four year old son.



in Tehran, she said no, she could just toss this scarf over her head. So that suggests, at least for the privileged urban elite, the patrolling of women's head coverings is in abeyance at the moment.

The artist explained to me that In Iran people often speak wordlessly with their eyes and indeed the eyes in these works were huge and expressive. But her main message was the idea of making a cultural bridge between cultures. She is hopeful that she can be a part of world peace.

This exhibition is just one fragment of Negar's work, adapted for travel. On her website you can see the full range of her installations and projects, in many different media. (www.negarfarjiana.com) For example, she curated Tehran Monoxide Project, photographs of her friends with their children. The theme is the bad air in Tehran and how difficult it is for children to play outside, but what you see in the project is one young family after another, enjoying their small children. Such a simple set of images immediately gives us a much needed glimpse of real people living their lives.

It was delightful to meet her, and indeed, a small encounter like this with one person from Iran makes such a difference. I went home from meeting Negar and was immediately plunged into the Presidential Debate and its endless repetition about

The exhibition in Seattle consists of intersecting works, based on the same format, the jigsaw puzzle. The artist cut the jigsaw pieces from dry mounted photographs of things in her life such as her son's teddy bear, an ipod, a toy car or elephant, then reassembled the images by mixing and matching (all of the jigsaw puzzles are identical in their cuts). She took them through US customs as games for her child.

The result is a provocative suggestion of the intersections of cultures and the complexity of life. Inserting some unidentifiable object into a teddy bear and calling it terminator is an idea that can be understood anywhere.

The most identifiable group consists of a reference to a trial: the accuser, the attorney, the witness, (see above) and the executioner. It was not clear if each layer had a specific reference or metaphor, but the overall effect is that reality and truth are elusive and sometimes frightening.

But Negar emphasized that people in Iran were leading ordinary lives. She was wearing a pink knit sweater and softer colored pink scarf hung around her neck. When I asked her, as no doubt everyone does, if she had to cover herself in black

preventing Iran from getting a nuclear bomb and increasing sanctions. We have such a narrow view of the world in the US.

Shirin Neshat's two channel video "Tooba" is on view at the Seattle Asian Art Museum. It is inspired by the Iranian novelish Sharnoush Parsipur's novel of the same name. Neshat focuses on a magical tree of Paradise in a symbolic garden that is magically inhabited by a woman. The video includes two societies, that of men and that of women, the men approaching the tree from a closed circle around it, and gradually invade its precinct. The woman at the heart of the tree gradually disappears into the tree. In its construction it echoes the separation of genders in traditional societies. But in its scale and lavish imaginary, as well as its stark aesthetics, it speaks of the many



resources available to the artist.

The contrast between these two artists couldn't be greater. Neshat left Iran before the Iranian revolution, but even in Iran her privileged family had Westernized values. She was trained in the US and her career has been entirely based in the international art scene. Although she bears the stamp of her Iranian roots in her frequent homage to writers in her works, particularly the early series *Women of Allah*, her perspective on the society of Iran after the Revolution is based on her Western experience. Her women are enveloped in black, her men are a separate society, in her videos. In contrast, Negar, was trained in Iran; her friends are middle class intellectuals in many media.

Shirin Neshat *Women of Allah* photograph

Najat Farajiani *20 Beast* (meaning perfect score in Persian) mixed media

A comparison of one photograph from Neshat's series *'Women of Allah,'* 1995 and Farajiani's work in *"Mix and JnMatch"* shows striking similarities and differences. Both artists are working with self portraits, but Neshat clothes herself in a black chador, the standard perspective on Iranian women, Farajiani has an animated contemporary look. Both are entirely frontal, Neshat holds a rifle, again part of our Western clichés on terrorism and Islam, while Farajiani is giving us layers of puzzling references. Neshat has inscribed the poetry of Forough Farrokhzad on her photographs, a prominent Iranian feminist poet who died prematurely in a car accident in 1967. Neshat is outside Iran, but with deep respect for Iranian feminist culture. Farajiana is inside, she is more contemporary, more experimental, she does not want to be labeled as an exotic Iranian artist.

Nothing is at it seems to us as outsiders, and we would do well to think about that as often as possible.