

MY BRILLIANT FRIEND

The acclaimed artist *Isaac Julien* pays a personal tribute to the groundbreaking auteur Shirin Neshat, who explores themes of womanhood, identity and cultural dissonance in her powerfully emotive work



PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF SHIRIN NESHAT AND GOODMAN GALLERY; RODOLFO MARTINEZ

I HAVE BEEN FOLLOWING SHIRIN NESHAT'S work since the mid-1990s, when I was moving away from mainstream cinema to experiment with film in a gallery context. I remember seeing her installation *Turbulent* at the 1999 Venice Biennale and being completely captivated by its power and beauty, which spoke directly to me. It helped convince me to keep making art, but for a new audience. I've always loved the way Shirin works with two screens, which is enthralling because of how it creates a dialectic relationship, a rhythm between the sound and the image, and an interplay between two identities: Iran and America, photography and cinema.

Shirin's latest film, *The Fury* (2023), is a two-screen installation that retains the powerful black and white imagery used in her previous works. It's a timely piece that coincides with the Woman, Life, Freedom movement that started in Iran in September 2022, following Mahsa Amini's death after being held in police custody. The women of Iran have been harassed, assaulted and, often, arrested and tortured for their fight for freedom; in *The Fury*, Shirin addresses this question of liberation through choreography and dance. The stark monochrome contrasts in cinematography emphasise the visual tension between the military personnel and the female protagonist; between



Above: Shirin Neshat. Top: a still from her film *The Fury* (2023). Left: *Daniela #2* from *The Fury* series (2023)

the oppressive gaze of the state apparatus and the female body, which contains in itself both pain and power. As with her breathtaking photography, Shirin is exemplary in capturing the subtlety of human emotions. In one vignette, the woman dances in an abandoned warehouse surrounded by soldiers quietly sitting and observing her performance, bringing the opposition between stillness and movement to the fore. When the scene shifts outside to the streets of New York City, the female body is used

as a political weapon that transposes the boundaries of space and affirms women's rights at the centre of life and freedom. Street witnesses join her in this ultimate act of collective and performative action, through which they physically express their rage and anguish in their dancing.

I am proud to say that I feel closely aligned to the political struggle that Shirin has been leading for a long time. The images of protests and uprisings permeate all of our works, and both of us have been using our art as a call for freedom for more than four decades. Shirin's oeuvre is dedicated to bringing to light the stories of women in Iran; in my case, the theme of emancipation can be seen in pieces such as *Lessons of the Hour*, which draws on the 19th-century freedom-fighting of the abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Shirin's work has always been deeply personal, and she has created an extraordinary moving-image language in *The Fury*, as an artist with a dual identity – an Iranian in the United States – but also as someone who has been living between art and cinema and navigating those spaces courageously. Brava! *Shirin Neshat's 'The Fury'* is showing at Goodman Gallery (www.goodman-gallery.com) until 11 November. The virtual-reality version of the film is on at the BFI London Film Festival (www.bfi.org.uk) until 22 October. □