MA XXI Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo

SHIRIN NESHAT
DO U DARE!

Curated by Bartolomeo Pietromarchi
Associate Curator Anne Palopoli

November 13, 2026> January 10, 2027

Gallery 5 | maxxi.art | Press Area

Rome, November 12, 2026 – On November 13, MAXXI, the National Museum of 21st Century Arts, presents **Shirin Neshat. Do U Dare!**, an exhibition curated by **Bartolomeo Pietromarchi**, with **Anne Palopoli** as associate curator, conceived specifically for the museum's Gallery 5. An immersive journey through film and photography invites visitors into the visual and psychological world of the Iranian filmmaker, one of the most prominent and internationally acclaimed voices in contemporary art.

Through a cinematic trilogy and a series of photographs produced between 2025 and 2026, **Shirin Neshat** revisits some of the central themes of her artistic practice: exile, the condition of women, the relationship between individuals and power, the construction of identity, and the tensions between East and West.

The project draws inspiration from the true story of **Nasim Najafi Aghdam**, an Iranian woman from the Bahá'í community who immigrated to the United States to escape religious persecution. In her adopted country, Nasim found in YouTube video production a means of personal expression, financial independence, and social recognition. Through performances, music, dance, and content addressing animal rights, among other subjects, she developed a distinctive and recognizable online identity. Her relationship with the platform gradually deteriorated, culminating in the tragic events of 2018, when she opened fire at YouTube's headquarters in California, injuring three people before taking her own life. Neshat chooses to move beyond the news story, transforming these events into a broader reflection on loneliness, marginalization, the need to belong, and the forms of control exercised by contemporary society and the pervasive rise of authoritarianism in America. Through a visual language suspended between realism and dreamlike imagery, the artist constructs a narrative in which an individual biography becomes a metaphor for a collective condition.
The trilogy unfolds across three distinct settings in the New York metropolitan area, each expressing a different relationship between the individual and society. In the first chapter, **Wall Street**, the story takes place at the heart of American economic power. Surrounded by the skyscrapers and monumental architecture of Manhattan's Financial District, the protagonist confronts a system that seems to exclude her. The narrative gradually shifts into a theatrical and surreal dimension, in which the woman finds herself both spectator and performer. The image thus becomes a means of asserting visibility and questioning the mechanisms of power.

In **Brooklyn**, the protagonist moves through a neighborhood marked by marginalization and economic insecurity, conditions further emphasized by the use of black-and-white imagery. She silently observes a reality to which she seems not to belong, maintaining a detached perspective. The narrative then shifts to a setting where an American politician delivers slogans that stand in stark contrast to the surrounding reality.The protagonist's entrance into a wig shop, accompanied by a transition to color, marks a symbolic turning point in the narrative: through disguise, she reinvents her image, transforming herself into a kind of Wonder Woman. This gesture suggests a shift from apparent passivity toward a newfound sense of self-awareness.

The third film, **Suburb**, is set in an American residential suburb, among neatly maintained houses, gardens, and symbols of a seemingly reassuring prosperity. Inside a domestic space filled with wigs, mannequins, clothing, and props, the protagonist continuously constructs and reinvents her identity. The house becomes a film set, a laboratory of image-making in which the boundary between

authenticity and representation grows increasingly blurred.

Together, the three films form a single narrative and conceptual journey in which the female body becomes a site of transformation, resistance, and negotiation with power. The recurring transition from black and white to color throughout the trilogy signals the emergence of an emotional and symbolic dimension.

Complementing the films is a series of evocative photographic works by Neshat depicting human figures resembling delicate porcelain dolls. Faces, torsos, and hands become ghostly presences, inviting viewers to question the extent to which our identities are shaped by the pervasive influence of social media. Drawing on the visual language of surrealist photography, these images transform the familiar into something uncanny. They raise the question of whether individual autonomy can truly survive in a world inclined to impose conformity and ultimately cast aside those whose lives do not fit established norms. Enriched with excerpts from poems by **Forugh Farrokhzad**, the images acquire an additional layer of emotional and poetic resonance.

As part of the exhibition *Shirin Neshat. Do U Dare!*, on **Friday, November 13, 2026, at 6:00 PM**, the MAXXI Auditorium will host a new event in the *Conversations with Artists* series, featuring the Iranian artist. Drawing on the themes explored in the exhibition, the event will offer a reflection on human vulnerability in an age of hyperconnected loneliness, examining the relationship between identity, digital appearances, and alienation. Introduced by **Monia Trombetta**, Executive Head of Programming and Curatorial Office at MAXXI, the conversation will bring together **Shirin Neshat** and art historian **Maria Alicata**. The event will be held in **English with simultaneous interpretation**. **Admission is free, subject to availability.**

Do U Dare! was first presented in the exhibition of the same name at Palazzo Marin in Venice (May–September 2026), curated by Ilaria Bernardi and Bartolomeo Pietromarchi and produced by Associazione Genesi and Banca Ifis. The exhibition was accompanied by the publication of the catalog *Do U Dare!*, published by Magonza.

Special thanks to Romaeuropa Festival for its collaboration.

SHIRIN NESHAT

Born in Qazvin, Iran, in 1957, **Shirin Neshat** lives and works in New York. She is one of the most influential artists and filmmakers on the international contemporary art scene.
Deeply shaped by her experience of exile, her artistic practice explores the relationships between identity, gender, religion, power, and cultural belonging, with particular attention to the condition of women and the relationship between East and West.
Beginning with her early photographic series, including *Women of Allah* (1993–1997), in which the female body and face become surfaces inscribed with Persian calligraphy, Neshat has progressively expanded her artistic practice to encompass video art, cinema, and opera direction.
Her works, presented at leading museums and cultural institutions around the world, are distinguished by a highly symbolic visual language that intertwines poetry, cinematic storytelling, and political reflection. In recent years, she has further expanded her practice into opera direction, including a production of *Aida* at the Salzburg Festival.

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