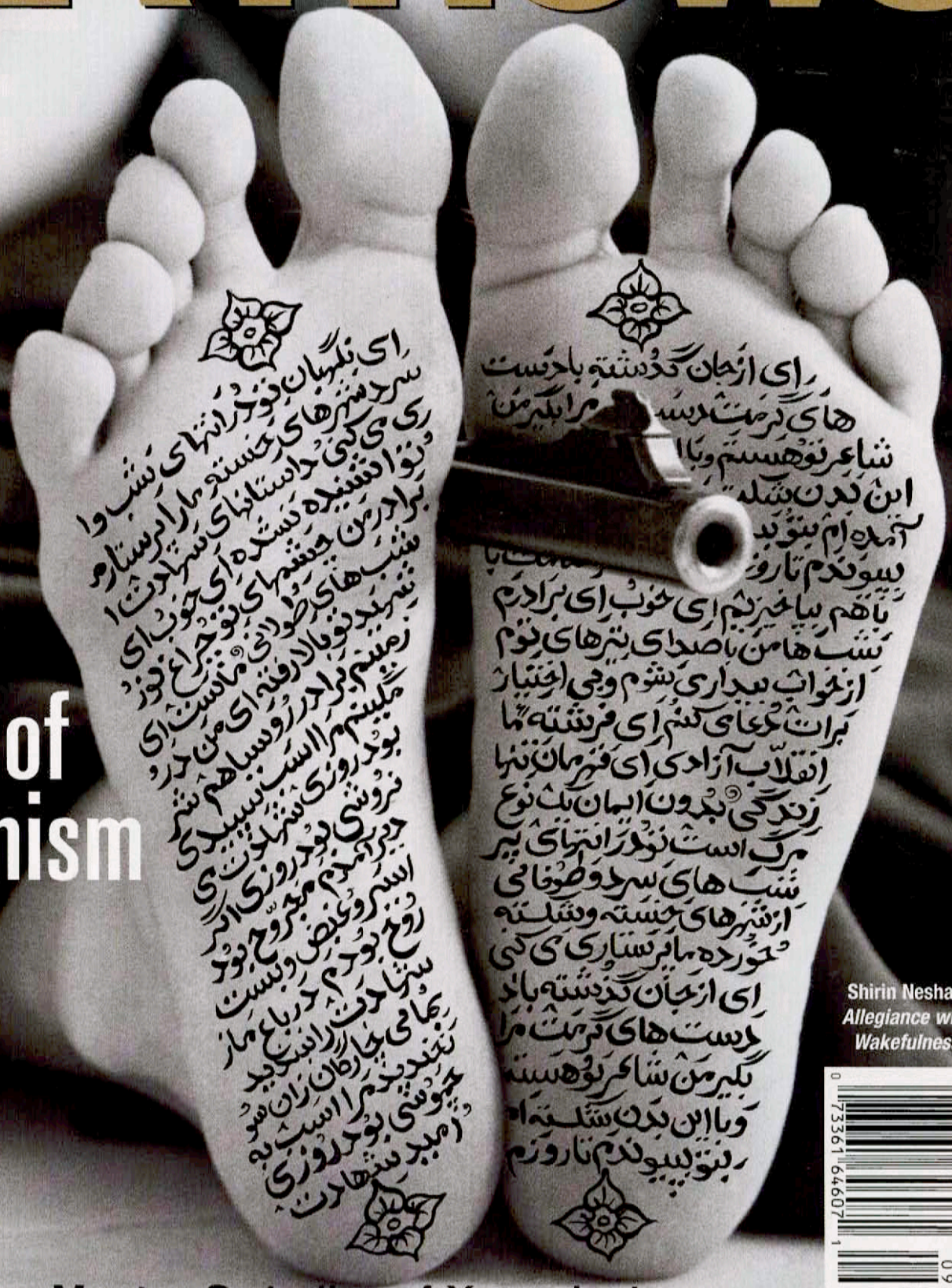


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The New Look of Feminism



Shirin Neshat, *Allegiance with Wakefulness*

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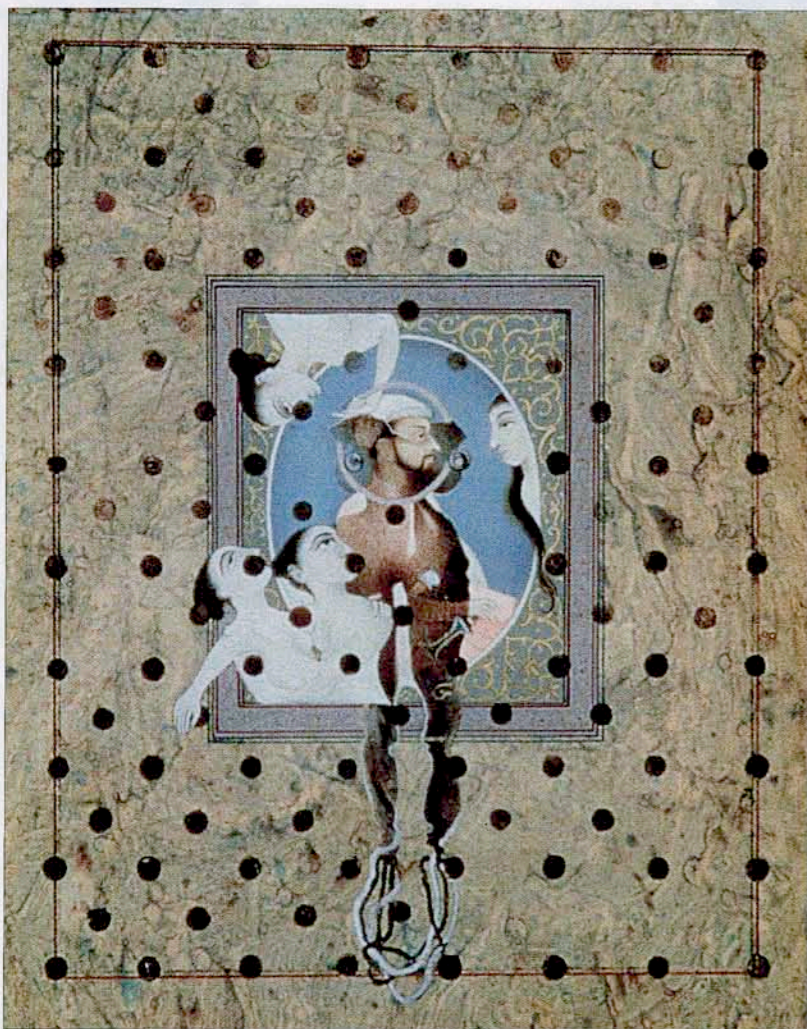


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THE NEW LOOK OF FEMINISM

Using everything from stitchery to baking flour, women around the world are lashing out at all kinds of extremism—even strident feminism • By Barbara Pollack



Characteristically, as in *Perilous Order*, 1997, Shahzia Sikander embraces, appropriates, and updates the Mughal miniaturist tradition.

In Shahzia Sikander's miniaturist paintings, details of the artist's personal life get mixed up with Muslim and Hindu iconography. Sikander—born in Pakistan, trained in Indian Mughal painting, and now living in New York and showing her work on the international circuit—is in many ways typical of today's artists. Ten years ago, someone like Sikander might have been marginalized as impenetrably foreign, but today she is able to pursue a major career in the mainstream.

"When I first came here, the identity politics of the 1990s was very exciting," says Sikander, 32, who has already had solo exhibitions at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., the Whitney Museum at Philip Morris in New York, and the Renaissance Society in Chicago. "But now I am still always asked about being Pakistani or being a Pakistani woman," she laments, adding that "you don't always want that baggage on your work." She first arrived in the United States in 1993 for a solo exhibition at the Embassy of Pakistan in Washington, D.C., and stayed on to pursue an M.F.A. at the Rhode Island School of Design. There, classmates chided her for making pretty pictures—"girly art"—not realizing that Sikander's choice to engage in the miniaturist tradition was her own form of rebellion against the banal, academic, modern painting classes back in Lahore. "They did not understand that this 'art' was the work I grew up hating because it was so touristy and very kitsch," she says, referring to the miniaturist work that she now embraces and appropriates to her own ends.

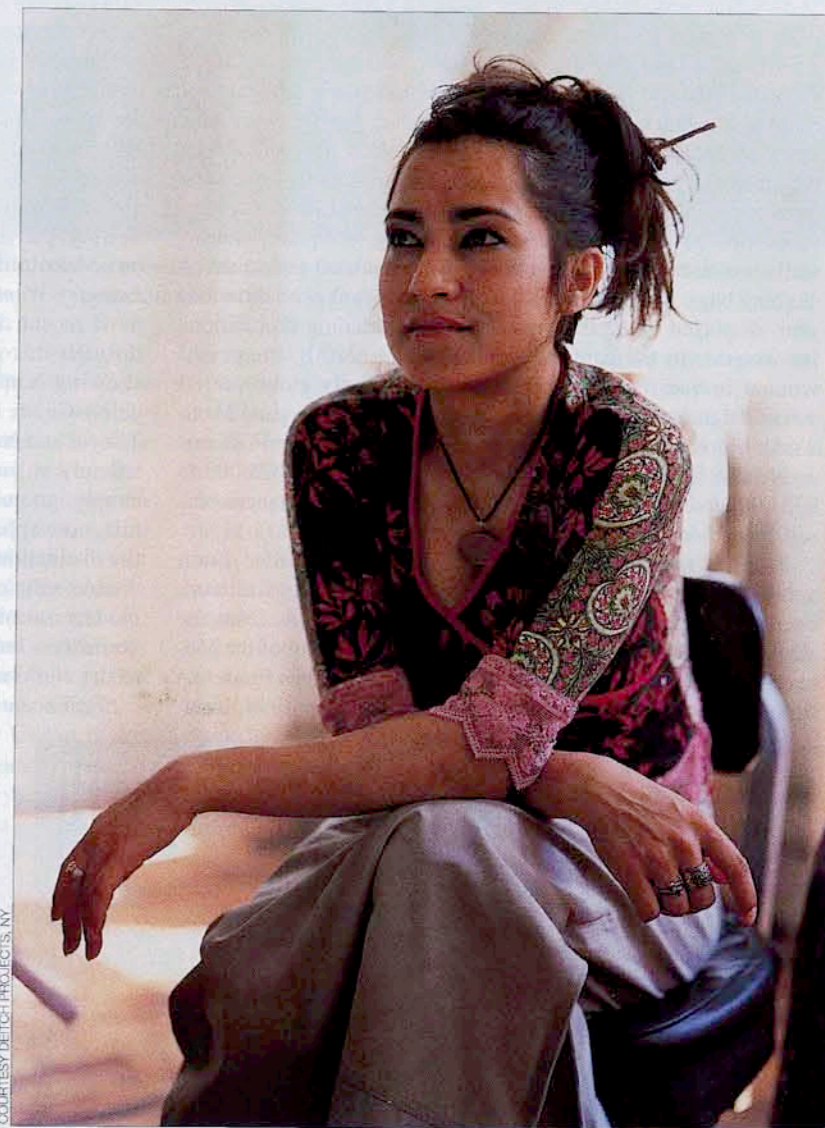
Sikander, who shows with Deitch Projects in New York, where her paintings now sell for \$6,500 to \$13,000, is one of the many women artists from countries far from major art centers who have received serious international attention in the past five years. Iranian-born Shirin Neshat, 44, represented by Barbara Gladstone Gallery in Manhattan, and currently among the most prominent of this group, is another. The New York-based artist won the first International Prize at the 48th Venice Biennale in 1999 and the Grand Prix at the Kwangju Biennale last year. Neshat—whose stark self-portraits (in which she appears wrapped in a chador) and haunting films about Iranian women have sold for as much as \$150,000—will have her first live performance at the Kitchen in Chelsea next month. Likewise, the work of Japanese artist Mariko Mori, who creates slick digital fantasies in which she presents herself as a cyber geisha girl or a New Age Hindu spirit, is in high demand.

The past year's biennials—in Shanghai, Kwangju, Istanbul, Venice,

Havana, and Sydney—have swelled the ranks with many relative newcomers, such as Priscilla Monge from Costa Rica, Lee Bul from Korea, Rivane Neuenschwander from Brazil, Miwa Yanagi from Japan, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons from Cuba, and Regina José Galindo from Guatemala. Like a number of these women, Galindo exhibits her own body in performances, addressing, she says, "the anguish of a woman." In one work, she is in a bathtub, underwater.

Observes Gary Garrels, chief curator of drawing at New York's Museum of Modern Art, curators have been taking "a much closer look at what is going on globally. We start with the contemporary realm and then often work back historically, and in every instance, it turns out that there are and were very important women artists playing a significant role." Garrels—who worked on the groundbreaking exhibition "Inside Out: New Chinese Art," shown at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and in New York at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center and the Asia Society, in 1998—concedes that this approach represents a radical change for American institutions. Whereas in 1984, the Modern included only a handful of women artists and none from Asia, Latin America, or Africa in its "International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture," in 1997 the Whitney Museum of American Art had expanded its definition of "American" to include in its biennial Sikander, who was later joined by Neshat and the Indian-born Rina Banerjee in its 2000 show—all three artists now live in the United States.

"In the last decade, the notion that New York is the only art center—and the only cachet that contemporary artists aspire to—has changed dramatically," says Vishaka Desai, senior vice president of the Asia Society and director of the cultural programs and its galleries. But Desai points out that this new geographical open-mindedness can be problematic. "Today, we risk exoticizing this work," she explains. "We appreciate it as something that looks different, solely because it looks different." Further, she emphasizes that much of the art is often interpreted as a criticism of patriarchal practices in "developing countries"—a term now considered politically incorrect—when, in fact, "many of these countries experienced women's movements long before the United



The Pakistani-born, New York-based Sikander has achieved mainstream international success.

States, along with their independence movements."

Aiming to educate audiences, the Asia Society is presenting "Conversations with Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander" next month. The show brings together two women from different generations working in the miniaturist tradition—one is a highly influential figure within India; the other a major name on the international scene. Sikander, who once might have refused the invitation to exhibit in an Asian-identified institution, now relishes the opportunity. "This opens not only an East-West

dialogue, but also an East-East exchange," says the artist. "It is one of the most exciting aspects of showing there."

For many of these artists, it has been a struggle to find the right balance between the traditions and cultures of their birthplaces and the esthetics and politics of the mainstream contemporary art world. Many are addressing personal experiences or making work directly reflecting the conditions of women in their homelands. Yet, wary of falling into didactic categories, few want to be labeled "feminist," although they often show the influence of such wide-ranging feminist artists as Carolee Schneemann, Miriam Schapiro, Barbara Kruger, and Cindy Sherman.

"I am working with these contradictions," says Egyptian-born artist Ghada Amer, 38, whose new show, which opens at Deitch Projects at the end of this month, follows last year's critically acclaimed exhibition "Intimate Confessions" at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Amer emerged in the mid-1990s with subtle and lyrical works portraying homemakers or porn stars (appropriated from popular magazines) stitched across the surfaces of raw canvases. She has since expanded into painting, sculpture, and installation. Her *Private Rooms* (1998), a rack of embroidered clothing bags, installed at P.S.1's "Greater New York" show last year, displayed excerpts from the Qur'an, detailing prohibitions for women. In the canvas *Red Diagonals* (2000), images of women in various sexual positions are loosely embroidered across bright splashes of color. Despite the obvious parallels to works by other American women artists, such as Sue Williams and Elaine Reicheck, Amer, whose paintings sell for \$25,000 to \$35,000, and installations for \$50,000 and higher, distances herself from didactic examples of feminist art.

"I started with the proposition that feminism had failed, but it was a positive failure, meaning there were still things to work on," says Amer, who received a B.F.A. and M.F.A. from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Nice, and studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Institut des Hautes Etudes en Arts Plastiques, Paris. She moved to New York in 1994. Ironi-

cally, she found the French theoretical approach to feminism to be as stifling as the growing Islamic fanaticism back home in Egypt, and she struggled for a way of expressing this contradiction in her art. She discovered the solution when in 1988 she stumbled upon a sewing magazine. "It was a special issue for Muslim women, sort of *Vogue* for the veiled woman," she recalls. "I didn't want to address the issue of the veil like, 'Oh, those poor women, they need help,' as if in the West, we had all this freedom. I had to find a way to address extremism—both feminism and religious fanaticism and their parallel problems with the body and its relationship with seduction."

Another artist who juxtaposes fabric and sewing with issues of the body is Kim Sooja, 44, now based in New York after living most of her life in Seoul. Her early work, included in the 1996 "Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions" exhibition at the Asia Society, resembles 1970s feminist performance art and "femmage" (a type of collage in which Kim uses fabric and materials associated with women's work). Sewing, piercing, carrying bundles of fabric and washing, Kim turned to traditional women's activities in works such as *A Laundry Woman* to show stereotypes of Korean women. Her most recent installation, *A Needle Woman*, on view at P.S.1 through this month, consists of eight video monitors, each showing Kim standing on a street corner in a different locale—Cairo, Mexico City, Lagos, London, Bali, Shanghai, Tokyo, and New York—her back to the camera, remaining absolutely still and unfazed as people variously shove, rob, or simply ignore her. Her work, once regarded as explicitly feminist, now appears to bear on a broad range of issues, not least, the distinctions between foreign and familiar—how to retain a distinct ethnic identity in the midst of international travel and modernization. The artist performs no longer as a demeaned seamstress but as the eye of the needle through which the rest of the world must pass.

"Feminism is part of my nature as a woman artist, but I never wanted this to be my only intention," says Kim, who now shows at The Project gallery in New York. "My work is more about globalism, which is really all about locality, because keeping a specific identity, a local identity, is becoming a big issue as the world increasingly becomes bland, having no character at all, no mystery."

"There are some very important women artists addressing the issues of being female within their culture," observes Dana Friis-Hansen, chief curator at the Austin Museum of Art in Texas, who cocurated "TransCulture" with Fumio Nanjo at the 46th Venice Biennale in 1995. "That said," he continues, "I challenge the idea of 'global feminism' and would say that there are 'feminisms' which artists are tapping into depending on personal and local situations." To underscore his point, Friis-Hansen draws attention to the feminist art movements in Japan and to the artists who eventually became major international stars, such as Yoko Ono and Yayoi Kusama. More recently, Miwa Yanagi, who shows with Kodama Gallery in Tokyo and Almine Rech in Paris, has been making an impact with her digital "elevator girls," surrealistic views of the young, omnipresent hostesses in Tokyo's shopping malls. But, notes Friis-Hansen,

the artists he met while working in Japan in the early 1990s would have been shocked to be called feminist—that is, except for Yoko Shimada, who, he says, "has made work addressing the role of women in Japan during World War II, akin to Rosie the Riveter in the U.S., and more recent work about the prostitutes who served U.S. servicemen after the war."

By contrast, Berni Searle from South Africa finds her identity as a black woman inescapable. "I use my own body, so it is inextricably tied to issues of gender, but it is also connected to race and class," says Searle, who acknowledges the influence on her work of American artists such as Lorna Simpson and Pat Ward Williams. For her "Colour Me" series, Searle created large-scale photographs and video installations of her body stained with spices and ink. In the video *Snow White*, the artist sits under a drizzle of flour until she is entirely covered, then scoops up the white powder and kneads it into a loaf of bread, a performance that can be read either as a meditation on the subjugation of women or as an ironic comment on the current politics of reconciliation in South Africa, which asks its citizens to blithely build a future out of the ashes of apartheid. (*Snow White* is included in "Authentic/Ex-centric: Africa In and Out of Africa," curated by Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe, at this year's 49th Venice Biennale. "Colour Me" debuts in the artist's first New York show at Axis Gallery this month.) Searle, who continues to live and work in Cape Town, is acutely aware that audiences in Europe and the United States may find her image exotic. "Using my body is a tricky thing to do because it can reinforce stereotypes," she says, explaining that to ward off simple voyeurism she intentionally inserts an element of confrontation into her self-portraits.

"Searle is dealing with issues relating to women, race, color, language, and specific questions about South Africa's recent history," says Oguibe, a Nigerian-born curator and artist living in New York. He points out that while Searle's work is esthetically beautiful, it is also an entry into the complex history of Africa and other regions. For example, he explains, being "whited-out," as enacted in *Snow White*, refers to the official policy of "erasing" indigenous populations in countries such as Australia and Tasmania. The use of nudity, which Western viewers tend to associate with pornography, actually goes back to the anticolonialist demonstrations in Eastern Nigeria in 1929, in which crowds of naked women took to

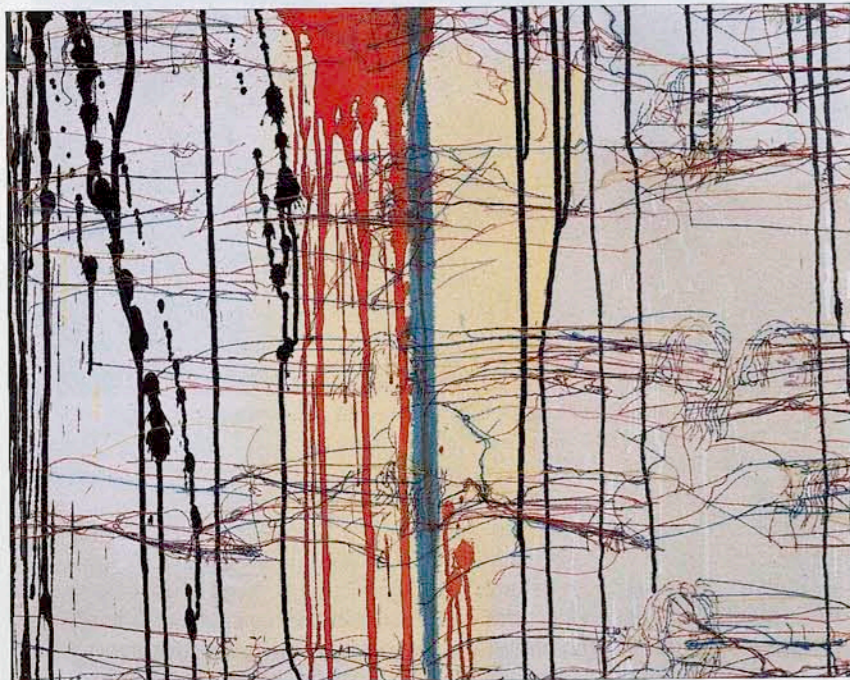


Fabric, sewing, laundry, the body—they've long been Korean artist Kim Sooja's preoccupations, as here, in *Bottari with the Artist*, 1994.

the streets in protest, thereby bringing down the British poll tax. Nudity is a formidable issue for Indonesian performance artist Arahmaiani, 40, whose works have generated hostility on the part of both Islamic community leaders and political authorities. Her performances and installations examine the violence against women in her own culture as well as in much of the rest of the world, but she has encountered the most resistance in her home country. In 1983 she was sent to jail for a month for drawing pictures of tanks on the street, a creative gesture not appreciated by the Suharto dictatorship. "After I had this trouble, I was kicked out of school and I went to live on the street," she recalls. "It gave me a really clear picture about the society in which I live, especially for women and the weak." But she never backed off from making controversial art projects. In her 1994 solo exhibition, "Sex, Religion, and Coca-Cola" at Oncor Studio in Jakarta, Muslim viewers ob-



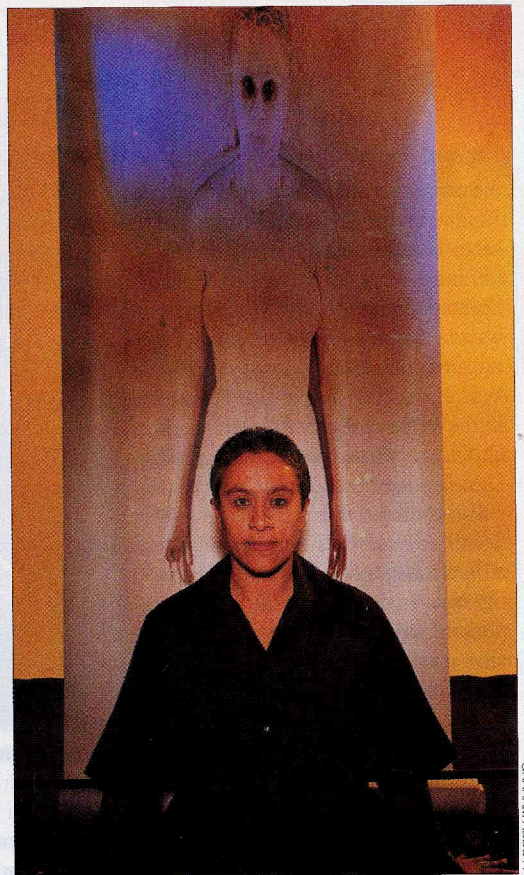
Provocative Indonesian artist Arahmaiani—performing here in her *Corporeal Apology*, 2000—examines violence against women in her own country and abroad.



Ghada Amer stitches subtle, racy scenes over raw canvases. In *Coulores Colores* (detail), 2000, she explores seduction beneath the drips.



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GRAHAM ABBOTT

South Africa's Berni Searle in *Still*, 2001, a digital print based on her politically charged video-performance *Snow White* (left), and in front of her digital print *Off-White: Back to Back* (detail), 1999.

jected to her work *Etalase*, a vitrine in which the Qur'an was displayed beside other international icons ranging from a Coca-Cola bottle to a plastic Buddha. In her performance *Dayang Sumbi Refuses Status Quo* (1999), the artist slowly undressed and then asked the audience to write words and draw on her body. Instead, some viewers charged the stage and tried to get her to put her clothes back on.

Arahmaiani has exhibited widely in Southeast Asia, Japan, and Australia and also had work featured in the "Traditions/Tensions" show at the Asia Society. She was included in the Havana Biennale in 1997 and in "Cities on the Move" at P.S.1 and London's Hayward Gallery in 1998. Her *Corporeal Apology* was in the Lyon Biennale in 2000. Last year, she lived and worked in New York as a resident at the International Studio Program, and she will perform at the Japan Society in Manhattan next month. But she has no intention of permanently leaving her native country.

"All of my work is related to my country, the hard situation for the people here, which I want to comment on in ways that are sometimes quite negative," Arahmaiani explains. "But I feel strongly connected to this place where I was born, a feeling that is becoming even stronger as I travel and get some distance."

Despite their diversity, these artists have all succeeded in overcoming some formidable obstacles—religious constraints, patriarchal educational systems, isolation from contemporary-art centers,

and the disapproval of family members. Nevertheless, "the issues that feminism is concerned with—the representation of women and recognition of women's contribution to culture—are very important to keep on the agenda," says Oguibe, who is concerned that the sudden chicness of "globalism" will sweep other important issues from view. "It is the proverbial Sisyphian task," he says, "but you have to keep at it, because if you let go, it rolls back to the bottom of the hill." ■

Barbara Pollack is a contributing editor of ARTnews.



COURTESY BARBARA G. ASTORNE GALLERY, NY

A production still from Iranian-born Shirin Neshat's video *Passage*, 2001. Her stark portrayals of Iranian women are haunting, iconic images.