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**IRANIAN-BORN VISUAL ARTIST
SHIRIN NESHAT,
KNOWN FOR HER EXPLORATIONS OF
ISLAM AND GENDER ROLES,
IS RECOGNIZED WITH ONE OF
THE LARGEST PRIZES IN THE ARTS**

THE 2006 DOROTHY AND LILLIAN GISH PRIZE
October 12, 2006, New York City

“It is my desire, by establishing this prize, to give recipients...the recognition they deserve, to bring attention to their contributions to society and encourage others to follow in their path.”—Lillian Gish

NEW YORK—Iranian-born visual artist **Shirin Neshat**, known for her hauntingly beautiful explorations of Islam and gender relations, will be recognized for her work with one of the largest awards in the arts—the **Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize**. Over the past 15 years, Neshat has created provocative expressions drawn on her personal experiences in exile, and on the widening political and ideological rift between the West and the Middle East. Her potent statements in still and moving images evoke the struggles that define her. Neshat will receive a silver medallion and approximately \$300,000 at an awards ceremony to be held October 12, 2006, at the Hudson Theatre, Millennium Broadway, New York City. A preview of scenes from her latest work will be screened at the event—*Women Without Men* is her first feature-length film, marking a new phase in her career.

Now in its 13th year, the Gish Prize pays tribute to trailblazers who have redefined their art and pushed the boundaries of excellence in their field. Recipients have shaped the cultural landscape in drama, music, dance, art, architecture, lighting design, film, and literature. With a strong female voice, Neshat reflects the spirit of the Gish sisters, who brought their unique sensibilities to bear on an art form then in its infancy. The impact Dorothy and Lillian Gish made on silent films continues to be felt on the big screen, and in the strong images of women produced by Neshat and other artists working today.

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Shirin Neshat is the latest to join the select assembly of Gish Prize winners that includes theater/opera/festival director **Peter Sellars** (2005), jazz innovator **Ornette Coleman** (2004), dancer/choreographer **Bill T. Jones** (2003), theater director **Lloyd Richards** (2002), lighting designer **Jennifer Tipton** (2001), dancer/choreographer **Merce Cunningham** (2000), author/playwright **Arthur Miller** (1999), author **Isabel Allende** (1998), singer/songwriter **Bob Dylan** (1997), artist/director **Robert Wilson** (1996), film director **Ingmar Bergman** (1995); and architect **Frank Gehry** (1994).

“I am honored with this recognition and am grateful for the support it will afford me to continue my work,” says Neshat. “In art, one is able to untangle complicated ideologies, demystify group and self identity, observe humanity, and interpret memory. Issues that cannot be solved on the political stage might somehow find workable solutions when condensed into a work of art. This Prize is an important acknowledgement of the power of art.”

Born in Qazvin, one of the most religious cities in Iran, **Shirin Neshat** is perhaps the most famous contemporary artist to emerge from that country. Neshat left Iran just before the Islamic revolution (1979) and the fall of the Shah. Her consequent visits to Iran after the revolution led to creation of a body of work which launched Neshat’s artistic career. However since 1996 she has not been able to return to her country due to the controversial nature of her art. After receiving her degree in art from the University of California at Berkeley, Neshat moved to New York, where she continues to live and feel the pull and push of her roots. She examines her homeland from a distance, as well as in closer perspective on her travels across the Middle East.

On today’s complicated global stage, Neshat’s voice is unmistakably relevant. She first gained prominence with *Women of Allah* (1993-97), a series of photographs depicting women in veils carrying guns with their skin covered in Islamic poetry. These arresting images reflected Neshat’s sense of how the revolution had changed the Iran that she knew, especially the lives of women seeking freedom, rebelling in martyrdom and militancy.

By 1996, Neshat began experimenting with film, producing a trilogy—*Turbulent* (1998), *Rapture* (1999), and *Fervor* (2000)—about gender roles in the restrictive Islamic society. In the first two cinematic statements, she immerses the viewer literally in the middle of the works,

which are projected on two screens, each occupied by actors of one sex. The men and women are physically separated here in art, as in real life. In *Turbulent*, Neshat explores singing as a metaphor for freedom, inspired by an Iranian ban on women singing. In *Rapture*, she continues her theme with a story about women moving across the desert, and how a few eventually break free to leave on a small boat. *Fevor* expresses the passionate yearning of a couple who can only make contact with their eyes, closing the trilogy with an emphasis on the common ground shared between the sexes.

On a more personal note, Neshat explores her own displacement in *Soliloquy* (1999). Again using duo projections, she places an image of herself in the Middle East on one screen, and an image of herself in the West on another, visually revealing the split between the two very different cultures that are both a part of her life. Her latest work and first feature-length effort *Women Without Men*, based on a novel by Iranian female writer Shahrnush Parsipour, will be released in 2007-2008.

Shirin Neshat is the winner of numerous awards, including the Hiroshima Museum of Contemporary Art Peace Award (2004), the Infinity Award of ICP in New York (2002), the Grand Prix of the Kwangju Biennial in Korea (2000), and the Golden Lion Award, the First International Prize at the 48th Venice Biennial (1999). She has exhibited widely around the world at institutions including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Hamburger Bahnhof Museum in Berlin, Museo de Arte Contemporaneo in Leon, Spain; and the Tate Gallery in London.

The Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize

The Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize is one of the largest awards in the arts. It has no application process and is not determined through a competition. The Gish Prize committee, a group that changes every year, chooses each recipient. Composed of leaders in the arts community, the committee for this year includes chairman **Kenneth Brecher**, executive director, Sundance Institute; **Adele Chatfield-Taylor**, president, The American Academy in Rome; **Arthur Danto**, professor, author and art critic at The Nation; **Oswaldo Golijov**, composer; **Walter Mosley**, author.

Established in 1994 by the Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize Trust and administered by JPMorgan Chase Bank as trustee, the Prize is given annually to “a man or woman who has made an outstanding contribution to the beauty of the world and to mankind’s enjoyment and understanding of life.” In her will, Lillian Gish stated: “It is my desire, by establishing this prize, to give recipients of the prize the recognition they deserve, to bring attention to their contributions to society and encourage others to follow in their path.”

Dorothy and Lillian Gish both followed their mother onto the stage at an early age. The older of the two sisters, Lillian took her first theatrical curtain call in 1902 at the age of eight in the play *In Convict’s Stripes*. In 1912, Mary Pickford, a childhood friend, introduced the sisters to filmmaker D.W. Griffith, launching their film careers. Lillian would become one of America’s best-loved actresses and is considered by many the First Lady of the Screen. In her 85-year career, she appeared in over 100 films—from D.W. Griffith’s *An Unseen Enemy* (1912) to Lindsay Anderson’s *The Whales of August* (1987)—and also took numerous roles in television and on stage. Dorothy Gish began her acting career on stage at the age of four and went on to make over 100 films, many of them with Lillian. At the end of the silent era, Dorothy moved to England and turned her attention to the stage, returning to film and television only occasionally. She died in 1968 with her sister by her side. Lillian died in 1993. Both sisters left the bulk of their estates to the arts, including a trust for the formation of The Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize.

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Contact: Pamela Johnson
Gish Prize Administrator
615-460-6178
pamela@gishprize.com

Photo Credit: Shirin Neshat
Rapture
1999
Production Still
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