

Compare and Contrast: Tomoko Sawada + Shirin Neshat

Art + Social Justice

The logo for the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, featuring the text "SANTA BARBARA MUSEUM OF ART" in a black, sans-serif font, enclosed within a black square border.

SANTA BARBARA
MUSEUM OF
ART

Themes

- Identity
- Feminism
- Cultural Stereotypes
- Representation
- Liberation
- Intersectionality
- Oppression

The following artworks are in the permanent collection of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art.

Each work relates to the theme of art and social justice. Explore their meanings, answer questions, and discuss together.



Tomoko Sawada

Tomoko Sawada

(Japanese, b. 1977)

Omiai #24, Wedding Album, 2001

Chromogenic print, ed. 1/10

SBMA, Museum purchase with funds provided by
the Wallis Foundation, 2005.58.2

© Tomoko Sawada



Tomoko Sawada

1. Observe the outfit and accessories that the individual is wearing. Share your observations using descriptive details.
2. Where does it look like this photograph was taken?
3. What purpose do you think this photograph might be used for?



Tomoko Sawada



Tomoko Sawada is a Japanese contemporary feminist photographer and performance artist who frequently uses self-portraiture to explore the theme of identity. This photograph is from a series titled *OMIAI*—referencing the traditional photographs that are often used by family members to arrange marriages for young women in Japan. The photographs are carefully produced to show a woman's identity for a prospective suitor and his family. Dressing up as a different woman each time, the artist went to a professional photography studio to have her portrait taken. She then arranged the photographs in a book. The series plays upon stereotypes and cultural traditions as a way to showcase new modes of individuality and self-expression.

Shirin Neshat

Shirin Neshat

(Iranian, b. 1957, active USA)
Rebellious Silence, from the
series, "Women of Allah," 1994
Gelatin silver print with ink,
ed. 11/50

SBMA, Gift of Arthur B. Steinman, 2000.50.67

© Shirin Neshat



Shirin Neshat

1. Observe the photograph. What is held up to the center of the woman's face? What might its placement and inclusion mean?
2. The woman wears a veil around her head and body. What does a veil make you think of?
3. How might the artist be confronting the idea of oppression and/or liberation in this work?



Shirin Neshat



Shirin Neshat was born in Qazvin, Iran in 1957 and grew up in a family that prioritized women's access to education. In 1974—a few years before the 1979 Iranian Revolution—she was sent to the United States to continue her studies, where she still lives today. Listen to Neshat talk about being an artist in exile in this [10-minute talk on YouTube](#) from 2010.

This photograph is part of a series that explores the complexities of women identities amid the changing cultural landscape of the Middle East. In each photograph, the artist presents four important symbols: the gun, the veil, text, and the gaze. The photograph shows a woman with the barrel of a rifle held up between her eyes. The woman stares intensely back at the viewer, with Farsi script handwritten across her face.

Shirin Neshat



The text is an excerpt from Tahereh Saffarzadeh's 1980 collection of poems, "Allegiance with Wakefulness," a body of work that celebrates the conviction and bravery of martyrdom. Neshat specifically chose a poem written by a contemporary Iranian woman to emphasize the range of viewpoints on the role of women in the Islamic Revolution. The photograph—with its stark symmetrical split—considers the violent and psychic fragmentation that many women experience as they navigate tradition vs. modernity or the East vs. the West. As Neshat has explained: "As the artist, I took on the role of performer, posing for the photographs. These photographs became iconic portraits of willfully armed Muslim women. Yet every image, every women's submissive gaze, suggests a far more complex and paradoxical reality behind the surface."

Compare + Contrast



DISCUSS: What are the similarities and differences between these two artworks?

Compare + Contrast



DISCUSS: How do the artists address cultural stereotypes and women's liberation in these works?

Art + Social Justice



This presentation was created by the Education Department at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in 2020 in collaboration with Santa Barbara-based high school teachers.

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