



SONIA
BALASSANIAN,
"The Other
Side,"
installation
view, 1991.
Photo courtesy
of Sculpture
Center.

Sonia Balassanian

Sculpture Center
167 E. 69th St., 212/879-3500

Iranian-born artist Sonia Balassanian disarmed the viewer with her two psychologically loaded installations at the Sculpture Center. *The Other Side* featured 11 anonymous figures draped in black shrouds seated in a semi-circle, while *Fuse Box Series*, in the rear of the room, was a discreet arrangement of 13 discarded fuse boxes personified by interior photographs of women's eyes. Both pieces cleverly turn the tables on the viewer, with the artwork itself becoming the voyeur of the audience.

Entering *The Other Side* provided a jolt to the nervous system. A deadening silence enveloped the entire room as one came face to face with the stark row of seated figures. They are in actuality skeletal structures of sewn fabric seated on chairs and draped entirely in black silk to resemble the austere *Chadori* worn by Middle Eastern women. Backed by glaring spotlights that accost the eyes while simultaneously creating elegant shadow plays, these apparently female figures form their own creepy tribunal. Balassanian has set up a new power structure between artist, object, and audience, leaving one to question who is really in control of the situation. This tribunal provides no answers, yet the anonymity and silence of the figures is devastatingly judgmental.

The Other Side more clearly reflects the artist's Middle Eastern heritage than *Fuse Box Series*, although both are aesthetically accomplished and visually compelling works of art. In light of last year's Gulf war, we may view Balassanian as an outsider who might be more relaxed about exploring the roles of women in her native land in an American setting. Certainly there is an underlying hostility behind art that so immediately puts the viewer off guard. Is the black material a symbol of evil or sanctity? Do the lights represent the purifying light of heavenly judgement or the cruelty of interrogation techniques? Balassanian's work goes beyond cultural and governmental distinctions, however, in its commentary on the function of the female gaze in contemporary art. This is made clear in *Fuse Box Series*, where the discarded fuse boxes line a dark room at eye level.

Each one contains a tiny light bulb behind photographs of a set of women's penetrating eyes. Depending on one's position in the room, one feels followed by these eyes—the observer observed. Balassanian says to us that there is a responsibility involved in the viewing of art, and she'll make anyone who rejects that duty feel guilty.

Prices unavailable.

Jude Schwendenwien

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Stephanie Pogue, Joyce Wellman

Howard University Gallery of Art
2455 6th St. NW, 202/806-7070

In this lavish assemblage of primarily abstract monoprints, color viscosity prints, lithographs, and linoleum-cuts presented to open the gallery's 1992

season, printmakers Joyce Wellman and Stephanie Pogue offered an evocative study in parallels. The artists, after all, have traveled similar paths. Both have culled their printmaking prowess through workshops, most notably Bob Blackburn's in New York. They both relish the versatility of printmaking, avidly mastering its many forms, as the quality and innovation inherent in the nearly 100 works shown here attests. And, although thematically disparate, Pogue and Wellman's works achieved a visual equanimity, a comfortable symmetry derived largely from technical similarities.

Yet the artists' departures from this common ground and from their own former paths provided the show an air of eclecticism. Pogue has gained notoriety over the past two decades primarily for her heavily textured, vividly colored prints and paintings. Here, however, she retreats from her former focus on external stimuli to include an enthralling assemblage of emotive self portraits and memory-based imagery. Wellman's work, on the other hand, has long consisted of a densely coded personal language of symbolic imagery, but this exhibition unveiled her responses to more universal themes.

Wellman's renderings included prints from her "Pathway of the Spirit" series, which portrays the journey of blacks from Africa to America, from slavery to freedom, and from southern rural life to the northern urban setting. Notable from this collection was the black-and-white linocut *Pathway Dancers* (1984), where ornately adorned anthropomorphic forms prance atop, and intermittently dissolve into, a heavily patterned backdrop. It is, however, *Journey to Sun City* (1984), a gathering of arrow-like figures and geometric jags superseding a stretch of burnished yellows and reds, that best reflects Wellman's burgeoning deftness with color during this period.

Included too were prints from Wellman's "Sweet Whispers, Nightmares and Dreams" series, executed from 1987 to 1988 while she completed a Ford Fellowship at the Maryland College of Art. A departure from the oil-stick on paper works she completed at the time, these prints were best represented in the brew of swirls, blotches, and dusky markings that course through the lithograph *Bio Soup*. In its inclusion of such recognizable elements as S.O.S. symbols and its portrayal of stress through periodic spirals of confusion,



JOYCE
WELLMAN,
"Journey to Sun
City," linocut
and dry
point, 16" x 20",
1984. Photo by
Sharon Farmer.