

Dress To Kill

By Elizabeth Hess

Rebecca Smith
LedisFlam
584 Broadway
Through March 28

Sylvie Fleury
Postmasters
80 Greene Street
Through March 21

Sonia Balassanian
The Sculpture Center
167 East 69th Street
Through March 28



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBIN HOLLAND

Above left, Rebecca Smith:
Broomstick Skirt (1991);
below left, Sylvie Fleury:
Polson (1992); **above, Sonia**
Balassanian: *The Other Side*
(detail, 1991)

Fashion is also an oppressive element in Sonia Balassanian's dramatic installation of 11 seated figures, each one cloaked from top to bottom in a black robe. We don't have to be told that these figures are female; their stoic passivity and hidden faces are instantly recognizable. A number of fuse boxes hang in a separate gallery with eyes peeking out through uniform slots. Perhaps these are the disembodied eyes of Balassanian's veiled women.

This is a work that must be experienced. The artist places bright

Art

spotlights behind each seated figure that focus on the entrance to the room. The lights are momentarily blinding, but as we walk through the installation, our eyes adjust. There's a kind of justice in this glare. Balassanian asks us to consider subjects that we can not actually see, which have everything to do with the social constrictions on women's lives.

There is something so real about this installation that viewers might watch for a sign of life: one wants at least one of the figures to move, do something. The stillness in the room is initially awkward and eventually instructive. The artist seems to be bridging a cultural gap between Western and Eastern women, although there is little substantive information in this show. Still, these women have tremendous authority; they are not powerless, despite their veils. Captivity seems to have bred determination. ■