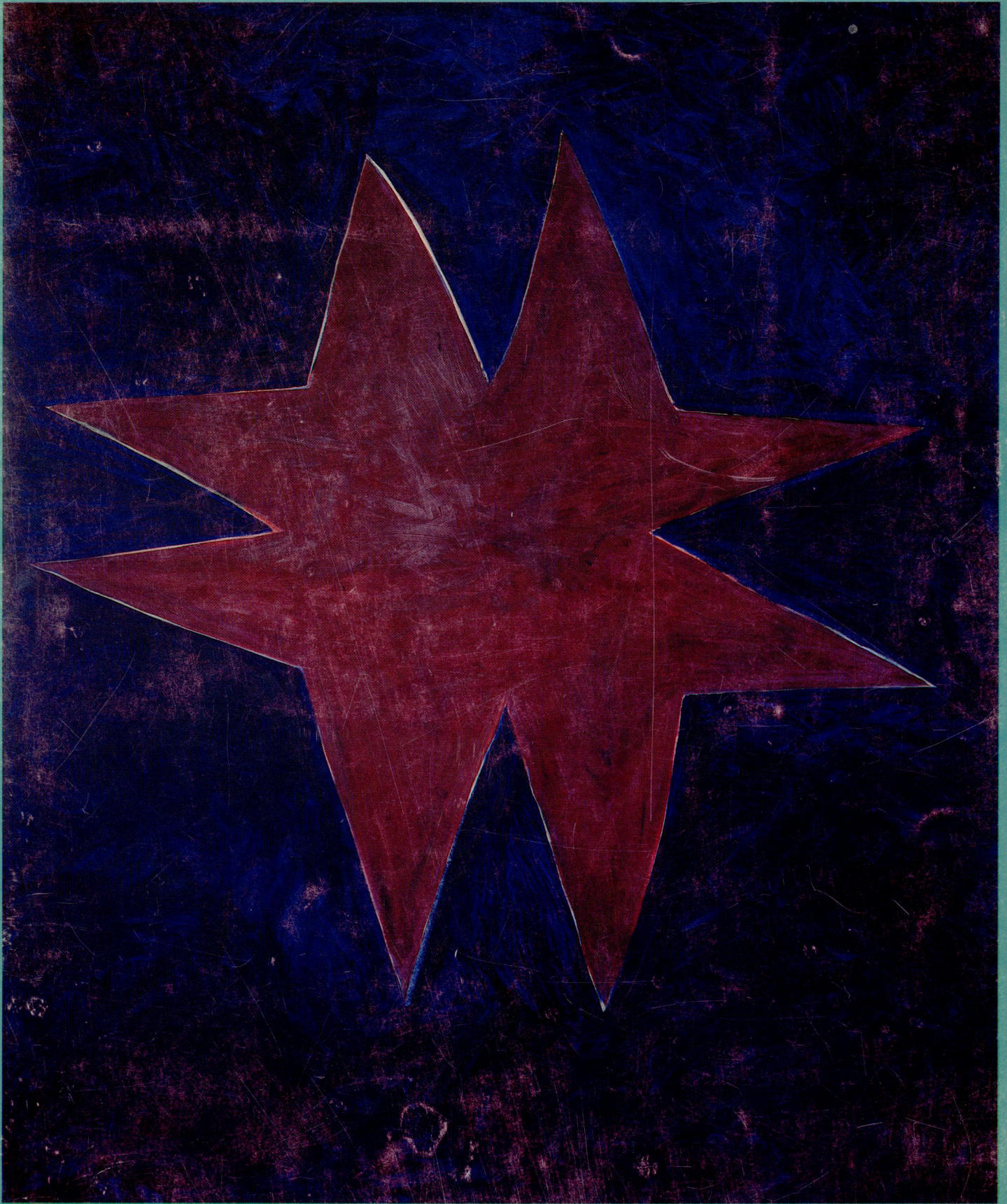


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Sonia Balassanian, *Black Black Days* (detail), 1982. Installation. Courtesy Franklin Furnace.

SONIA BALASSANIAN

Sonia Balassanian presented her most recent works of art in an installation entitled *Black Black Days* at Franklin Furnace. This is her first major solo exhibition since her 1980 show at the

important links with her earlier collages. Political content, the news media, memories of her homeland, memorabilia, and the predominantly black color scheme have been important elements in her art since 1979.

ver Gallery, during the political crisis, when she presented her most recent works of art in an installation entitled *Black Black Days* at Franklin Furnace. This is her first major solo exhibition since her 1980 show at the

That was the year of the Shah's ouster and marked a watershed in Balassanian's artistic career. At that time her abstract paintings failed to express the new reality of the artist's life in the United States, and so she began the collages which bombarded the viewer with myriads of issues and images familiar from the news media coverage of revolutionary Iran. Since her collages, Balassanian's work has become much more focused, using only a few powerful symbols and the color

books are also mutilated with pages scorched, glued, torn, and text crossed out.

More books appear in the third part of the installation, serving as grave markers in the cemetery. This area is identified by a small label in the dirt, covering an approximately 9-by-15-foot square area in the large back room. In addition to the closed black books, 36 black stands emerge from the soil. Each stand has a defaced picture mounted on a black board with little gables, shielding the images from the

black to create an environmental tribute to death, the omnipresent political reality in the Middle East.

As one approaches Franklin Furnace from the street, the first disquieting element is a baby carriage precariously suspended from invisible nylon threads in the large front window. The carriage is empty and so are seven tall black coffins leaning against the wall next to each other in the narrow front entrance area. The viewer is forced to pass near these unnaturally long and gaping coffins. They are too narrow in relation to their height; no adult could fit into them and for a child the coffins are too long. Their surface texture is also unusual; they have rock-like veining and the sheen of polished stone. Balassanian carefully achieved this effect by applying over the wooden coffins layers of gesso, modeling paste, and black acrylic paint, which she buffed and covered with shellac. She wanted the coffins to look as harsh and uninviting as the stark reality of death facing so many in the Middle East.

weather. Despite this protection, all the pictures look weathered and desolate. What is curious is that all the photographs, which are actually Xeroxes, depict the same woman, wearing a black scarf that conceals her hair. This woman is the artist Sonia Balassanian.

What does this loaded imagery mean? Incongruous details, such as the artist's reference to herself as being dead, emphasize the surreal and nightmarish feeling of the installation. Although the coffins are very powerful, they are neither accurate nor relevant to the burial practices in Iran, where the dead are wrapped in a white shroud and interred without a coffin. Balassanian's selection of objects is not meant to be literal nor documentary. The idea for the installation evolved over a year beginning in 1981, when she made her first coffin. Each object surfaced in her creative imagination during all the months of emotional turmoil and depression over the deteriorating conditions in Iran and her inability to resolve her emotional ties with her homeland. News about death, de-

Beyond the coffins, in the middle area, one comes upon something unexpected: a blue tiled octagonal pool with two goldfish swimming in the water and potted ivy around the pool. Such pools and gardens are common in traditional Iranian houses. It is customary for families to drink tea and eat fruit in their gardens in the late afternoon. Here, however, the people are absent; instead coffins, black mysterious books, and a cemetery surround the pool. Nearby, a thick black book lies open on a black metal table with its pages glued together, thereby completely sealing its identity and content. Another series of books is mounted on a board, in this middle area, these

struction, and irreverence for human life in the Middle East infuriated the artist. With such a theme, Balassanian's problem was not only how to communicate to an audience that has half-forgotten about Iran since the end of the hostage crisis, but also to find an exhibition space to show her work.

With these problems in mind, Balassanian employed universal objects and symbolism to trigger associations, engaging the viewer's intellect and imagination. Both the selection of objects and their installation in the difficult exhibition space work successfully to lead the viewer in a procession past the baby carriage and coffins to the pool

and books, and finally to the graveyard while inducing meditation and mournful respect for the dead.

Black Black Days is a powerful personal, artistic, and historical testament to the volatile political situation in the Middle East. She has become one of the most significant contemporary political artists in her unending struggle to create new ways to synthesize politics and art. (Franklin Furnace, November 17-December 18)

Elise Meyer showed the host about r Since then continuing with politi plored nev sion. In her Balassania from the t begun to v mental sca inous as death.

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