

**PORTRAITS**

**SONIA**

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I dedicate this book to the memory of those women who perished as a result of political turmoil.



#### **INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST EDITION**

**The repetitive, visual manipulation of the artist's self portrait in this book symbolize disfigured women, victimized by events beyond their control. These haunting images stand as tribute to their irony; ironic as symbols of our own humanity, in their lives, and simultaneously, its complete denial, in their deaths.**

**These portraits are a further development of those presented by the artist in her installation/exhibition, "Black, Blake Days" shown at Franklin Furnace, New York, NY, November-December, 1982.**

*Before the pageant of veiled Middle Eastern women turned ubiquitous on the walls of Western art galleries, before the image of the exotic female in **hejab** became a staple of glossy art magazines, before international news organizations were fixated over the figures of cloaked mothers and sisters grieving over their martyrs, there existed Sonia Balassanian's **Portraits**, a searing photographic sequence from a single frontal shot of a woman in traditional head-cover holding fast to the onlooker's gaze no matter how despoiled and tattered her face appeared from one print to the next.*

Salar Abdoh

The year was 1982. During the exhibit of the artist's works, at the Franklin Furnace Gallery in New York City, the distorted self-portraits were separately mounted on wooden poles like weathered markers to disaster. Meanwhile, the collage work and the tinkering with the faces made them appear splintered, edging towards ruin and, perhaps, oblivion. The written words we see in the present book were not part of the work back then. The direct indictment on the page was as yet invisible, and no crossed-out declarations showed up alongside the picture of the woman whose dead-on gaze was like some unbearable vigil here to haunt us. The following year, however, the series materialized in the form of the book we see today and was part of a large group show titled **Committed To Print** in New York City's Museum of Modern Art (MOMA).

Here, we had the same fractured face page after page, the same tribunal aura of interrogation to the subject's fixed stare regardless of how immolated the broken-up features appeared. This was the stare of someone who had witnessed the unspeakable. The suggestion, deliberately left unspoken, was that this woman - who was all women - was not just any witness but an iconic one, as she had been a spectator and a survivor to her own devastation; hence, the repetitions of not only such words as stoning and rape, but overlays of traditional Persian legal certificates as well as multiple fingerprint-signatures. The mug-shot had suddenly become as pregnant as a museum of memory with its captions inscribed on its own surface; the mug-shot, in other words, had become historical evidence. And the weight of the words challenged the viewer to acknowledge that even though the intimated horror had already taken place, the terror itself was timeless, that it had happened yesterday and it would happen again tomorrow.

Faced with this accusatory glance, the viewer might feel the weight of innocence lost, as if one had been complicit both at the moment of the violation and at its aftermath. Furthermore, the routine of denial, in the form of lines drawn over the words, recalls to us how easy it is to make evidence disappear. Or, conversely, how impossible it is to keep the act of forgetting from becoming habitual. Yet Sonia Balassanian's Portraits are here to force us to remember, and to remember hard. They demand that we hold this woman's gaze, even though the proof of what befell her has been whitewashed, crossed out, put aside, and mostly forgotten.



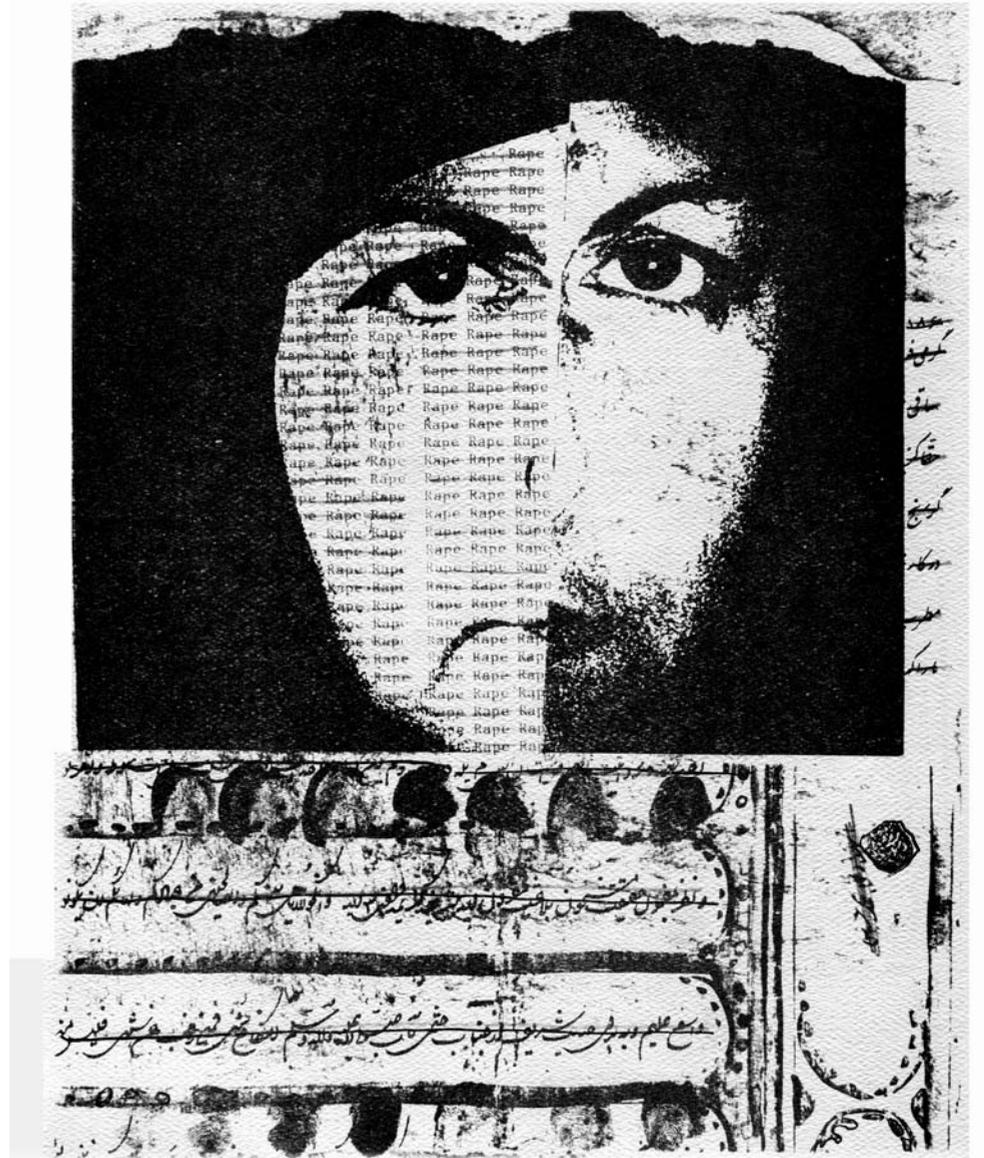
















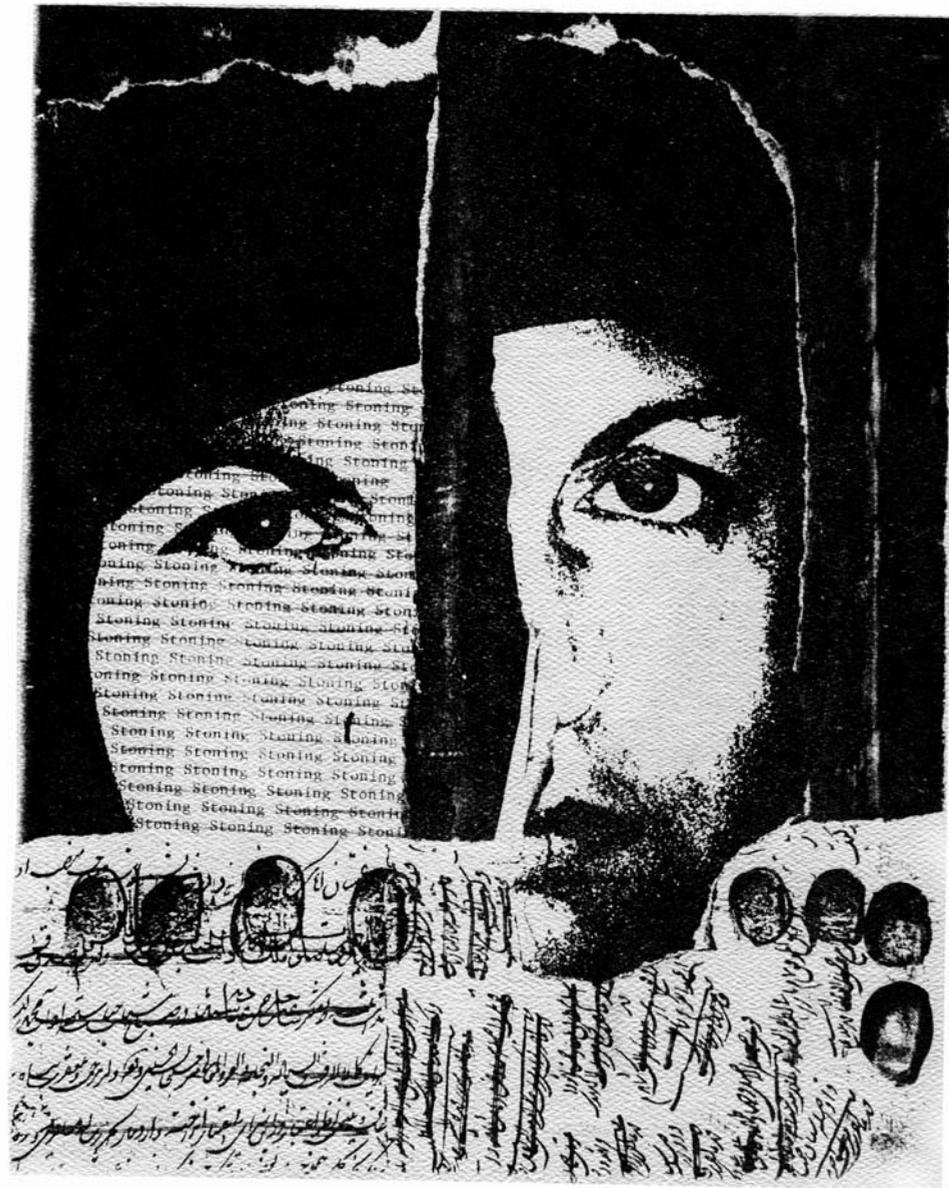


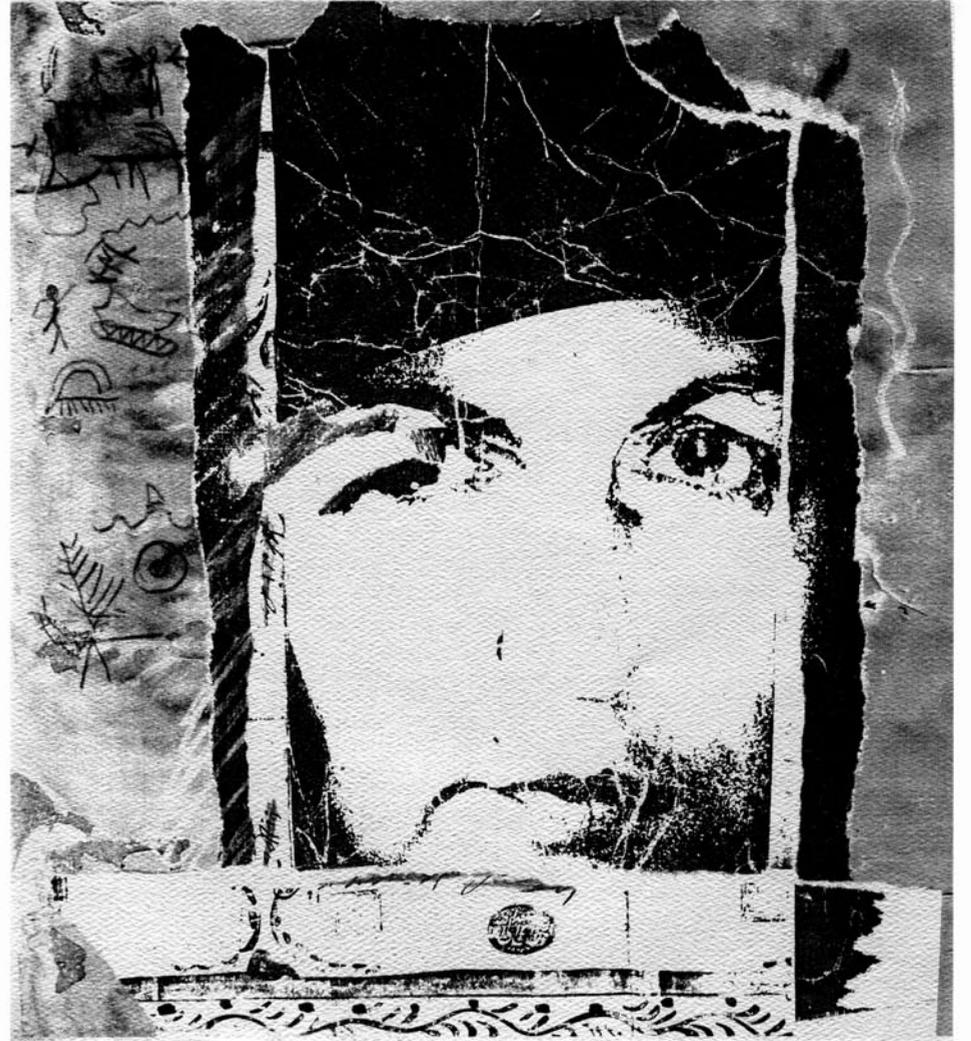






















## **SONIA BALASSANIAN**

Artist/Poet Sonia Balassanian (née Amirian) was born on April 8, 1942, in Azna Village near the city of Arak, Iran. She currently lives and works in both New York City and Yerevan, the capital of Armenia.

She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the Joint Program between the University of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1970 and her Master of Fine Arts degree from Pratt Institute in 1978. She is also an alumnus of the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program.

She has taught art at the Institute of Fine Arts of Tehran and National and Farabi Universities of Iran intermittently between the years of 1970 and 1979.

Sonia Balassanian has exhibited her works in many of New York City's most esteemed venues, having individual as well as group shows at places such as the Museum of Modern Art, the Sculpture Center and Exit Art. She has also exhibited her work in Washington D.C., Philadelphia, and South Carolina. Her work has been displayed internationally in such places as Iran, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, as well as in Armenia.

In 1975 her first works as a poet were published in the 18<sup>th</sup> edition of "Nor Ej" (New Page) an Armenian literary periodical in Iran.

Sonia Balassanian has published 2 books of selected poems in Armenian in New York ("*There Might Have Been and Insane Heart*", 1982 and "*To Present Dreams of Emotions to the Noisy Rain*", 1991, which later have been republished in a single volume in Yerevan, in 2006). She also published the first edition of "*Portraits*" in 1983, which was dedicated "to the memory of those women who perished as a result of political turmoil". The book was exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art exhibition entitled "*Committed to Print*" (1988). Balassanian's poems have also appeared in periodicals such as "Shirak" (Beirut), "Quatra" (Paris), "Sovetakan Hayastan" (Yerevan).

The second edition of the book "*Portraits*", has been published on the occasion of the artists return to Iran after a 30 year absence where enlarged digital reproductions of its pages will be exhibited at Tehran's "Aria" Gallery.

Since 1992 Sonia Balassanian has been involved in helping advance fine arts and presenting Armenian contemporary art in the international arena. In this vein, she has organized and has acted as artistic coordinator of pavilions of the Republic of Armenia at consecutive International Art Biennales of Venice since 1995.

In 1994 her involvement culminated in founding the Armenian Center for Contemporary Experimental Art ("NPAK" in Armenian acronym), which since then has become an active center where Armenian artists "search" for new means of expression, conduct creative experiments in contemporary art and quest for new frontiers.

In Armenia Sonia Balassanian has introduced and helped advance mediums of installation, video art, and multi media events.

