

**SONIA
BALASSANIAN**

S C U L P T U R E C E N T E R

SONIA BALASSANIAN

THE OTHER SIDE
AN INSTALLATION

MARCH 3 - 28, 1992

ESSAY: GEOFFREY YOUNG

SCULPTURE CENTER
167 EAST 69TH STREET, NEW YORK, NY 10021

THIS EXHIBITION WAS MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH THE GENEROSITY OF THE NEW YORK STATE COUNCIL ON THE ARTS, THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS, THE GREENWALL FOUNDATION, THE JEROME FOUNDATION AND FRIENDS OF THE SCULPTURE CENTER.

SONIA BALASSANIAN: THE OTHER SIDE

What happens when the primacy of eyesight, our central sense for interpreting the world around us, is denied? Vision has always been the critical factor in making sense of reality's shifting images. To have sight suddenly neutralized is disorienting. It affects mind and body equally. We're forced to tune in to our environment via other senses, entertain other voices, read the scene with our bodies, slow down. Sonia Balassanian's lighting in "The Other Side" is the crucial catalyst of our experience of her sculpture. Entering a room through a narrow door in a wall, our everyday relations with art and life are made strange as we are stuck by the light from an array of standing lamps. Like sentinels, or guardsmen, unadorned and spectral, the light from these lamps seems to pin our wings to the wall, stripping us of the very sense we trust most. But this light that strikes us, also strikes whatever else is in the room. Eventually, we can make out a semi-circle of dark seated figures, eleven of them in fact, draped in black cloth, situated just in front of the lamps, as elegant, as mute, as inscrutable as sphinxes.

Everything we know about physiognomy and the garb of different cultures tells us that these veiled presences are women. What is their role in this dark site? Draped from head to toe in black cloth, we can determine only some minute variation in the folds of their drapery, their upright posture, their "boniness," their immobility. Oppressed by the light in our eyes we wonder: are these silent souls sitting in judgement, do they have the power to interrogate or condemn us? We have walked, unwittingly, into the place where the powerless look for mercy from the inquisitorial authorities. Not only can't we see these seated figures very well, we can't "see" what they want from us. How sinister is it? What would these figures likely say if they spoke? How are we related to them, we who parade our faces as unquestioned badges of our identities? What would happen if these seated figures suddenly stood up, threw off their veils and walked away? How far would they get? What is holding them back? To what dark forces have they succumbed?

This is no Allegory of the Cave, though it is about ideas. Rather we are being set into the dynamic of complete repression. The discomfort is palpable in this stark and confrontational space. How do we feel? Though some viewers might rationalize: "This could never happen to me, I've got a cab waiting for me outside," most of us will submit in the context of art to Balassanian's shock theatre, undergoing sudden flashes of empathy for the cold sweat and the anger and fear that any victim feels before the harsh light of authority.

But remember: every threat to our autonomy is also the chance to show courage, resistance. Though neither our own individuality nor the oppressor's conformity is the issue, commiseration with the plight of the dispossessed and politics of liberation are. "The Other Side" is like an inoculation which prepares us for a worst-case scenario in the world.

Balassanian's seated figures, which over the last two years she has cobbled together from disparate found elements, number eleven. Though the numbers don't match up precisely, nor do the

narratives, they call to mind the robed figures of our own Supreme Court in all their stiff formality. Judges have the power to decide the constitutionality of laws as well as the criminality of individual cases, and thereby affect us all. But Balassanian's figures belong more properly to some nether rung of Dante's hell. That we may never know their true identity is perhaps the point. Whether they have capitulated to the forces of oppression and are themselves part of the regime, or whether their presence in this theatre of anxiety challenges us to think about our own relation to power and authority, the uncertainty and ambiguity are intended. She has kept the terms of her tableau dramatically so as to admit of various readings. For her, it is not enough to show horrible events. The only way to get our attention now is to simulate the conditions whereby we might come to experience the loss of freedom, begin to feel for, and if only for an instant even, suffer the nightmare of the victim. Only empathy, she seems to be saying, will ignite human response. By instinct as well as conviction, Balassanian knows every nuance of the English poet John Donne's celebrated "No man is an island" lines: "Any man's death diminishes me, for I am involved in mankind."

In the smaller back room at the Sculpture Center, she has installed a dozen or so fuse boxes at eye level. Inside each box there are two objects. One, a bulb, lit but out of sight, and the other, a closeup photograph of a young woman's beautiful dark eyes. She gazes out at us through a 3" x 3½" rectangular hole in the face of each box. No other light source has been added to the piece. Walking by these boxes, we notice that her eyes seem to follow us. Suddenly we feel that this young woman is the observer, that we are the observed. Just as we felt stared at in the previous, larger room, by the faceless judgement light of authority, now we can't escape the sustained scrutiny of her eyes. Who is she? What narrative is she the "I" of? Is she trapped within the box? What can we do?

Balassanian is not unaware of minimalist precedents for her kind of industrially produced repetitive objects, but her use of the fuse box is not literal, it's poetic. She wants those eyes, that face, that person, and that culture set free from the shrouds, the cultural shackles and currents that delimit it. And she wants the viewer to be reminded of the difference.

At the level Sonia Balassanian is working, which is that of universal structure, does anything, it may be sad to ask, ever change? "Man's inhumanity to man" seems a constant, forever and without end. A New World Order is just another bandaid phrase, while the scary truth is the constancy of cruelty. But art can focus feelings that make a difference. When we can admit that we too are the faceless, the innumerable, the "disappeared," the soon-to-be erased from history as well as the agents of that erasure, then some kind of reasonable ritual cleansing is in process. For terror can be domestic, it can be in the workplace, it is on the streets. But it is always here. Balassanian sets off an empathic reaction, and like a shaman, would extract our sickness from us; in her carefully simulated doses she offers us a homeopathic cure. The kind of identity-suffocating repression that foreigners, ethnic minorities and women are subject to in this country can find their champion in Balassanian, for as a woman born and raised in a foreign culture, she knows first hand what slights and invisibilities the outsider feels in this deeply competitive socially networked, racially stratified society.

As we open the door into "The Other Side" we are submitting to an experience. Only the viewer, one by one, can say what impact or seed of sensitivity was sown in that moment of disorientation and vulnerability.

Geoffrey Young
1992

Veiled Figures
Mixed media
Artist's studio 1991

Photo:
Armen Garabedian



SONIA BALASSANIAN

Born Iran

EDUCATION

- 1978 M.F.A. Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY
1971 Independent Study Program, Whitney Museum of
-72 American Art, New York, NY
1970 B.F.A. Joint Program of Pennsylvania Academy of Fine
Arts and University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA

SELECTED ONE PERSON EXHIBITIONS

- 1992 Sculpture Center, New York, NY
1989 Exit Art, New York, NY
1982 Franklin Furnace, New York, NY
1980 Elise Meyer Gallery, New York, NY

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1991 Franklin Furnace, New York, NY
"Burning in Hell" A collection of Artists' Book Projects
curated by Nancy Spero
1989 Fine Arts Museum of Long Island, Hempstead, NY
"On the Cutting Edge: 10 Curators Choose 30 Artists"
1988 Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
"Committed to Print"
1986 Exit Art, New York, NY
"Transculture/Transmedia"
1985 Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach, FL
-86 The Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, Philadelphia, PA
Lakeview Museum of Arts and Sciences, Peoria, IL
1985 Marilyn Pink Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
1984 Westbeth Gallery, New York, NY
"Artists' Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central
America"
Pyramid Arts Center, Rochester, NY
"Introspectives"
1983 New Castle Polytechnic Gallery, New Castle, U.K.
"New Work - New York: New Castle Salutes New
York"
Institute for Art and Urban Resources, P.S.1, Queens,
NY
"Seven Women/Image Impact"
1982 Just Above Midtown/Downtown Gallery, New York,
NY
"Decision by Arms?"
1980 Joseloff Gallery, University of Hartford
Hartford, CT
"Rendering of the Modern Woman"
PERFORMING ARTS
1992 Set Design for "Law of Remains." Created and
directed by Reza Abdoh. Produced by Diane White

Dar a Luz, New York, NY.

- 1991 Set Design for "The True Story of a Woman Born in
Iran and Raised to Heaven in Manhattan." Written
and directed by Assurbanipal Babilla, and co-
produced by Purgatorio Ink and One Dream, One
Dream, New York, NY
1989 Set Design for "Eyeless Tears in a Universe of Ether." A
performance conceived, choreographed and directed
by Linda Rappaport, Dia Art Foundation, New York,
NY

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Franklin Furnace, New York, NY
Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA
Tehran Museum of Contemporary Arts, Tehran, Iran
King Abdulaziz International Airport, Jeddah, Saudi
Arabia

ARTIST'S PUBLISHED WORKS

- 1991 "To Present Dreams of Emotions to the Noise Rain,
Selected Poems in the Armenian Language"
New York, NY
1983 "Portraits," New York, NY
1982 "There Might Have Been An Insane Heart, Selected
Poems in the Armenian Language" New York, NY

CATALOGUES

- 1992 Geoffrey Young, "Sonia Balassanian: The Other
Side" New York: Sculpture Center
1989 Donald Kuspit, "Sonia Balassanian: The Art of
Brooding." New York: Exit Art
1988 Deborah Wye, "Committed to Print"
New York: Museum of Modern Art
1980 Robert Hobbs, "Sonia Balassanian: Hostages, A
Diary"
New York: Elise Meyer Gallery

REVIEWS

- 1989 Eileen Myles, "Sonia Balassanian at Exit Art"
Art in America (September)
1981 Robert Hobbs, "Museum Under Siege"
Art in America (October)
1980 Carrie Rickey, "Sonia Balassanian's 'Hostages: A
Diary.'" Artforum (October)
Mina Roustai, "Sonia Balassanian" Arts Magazine
(September)
Kay Larson, "Reports from the Front"
The Village Voice, 2 July
William Zimmer, "Sonia Balassanian: Hostages, A
Diary," Soho News, 2 July

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S C U L P T U R E C E N T E R

The Sculpture Center is a non-profit alternative space. The work of innovative emerging and mid-career sculptors is exhibited; an unaffiliated artists slide file is maintained; poetry readings and panel discussions on important issues are presented. The Sculpture Center has an artist-in-residence program for site-specific installations and a video project series.

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