

## **Sonia Balassanian: The Art of Brooding**

by Donald Kuspit

Sonia Balassanian gives us figure after figure, all of them conspicuously prehistoric and uncanny: dark ghosts from some strange zone of inner self-annihilation. The male profile figures, with their erections-some are headless, most have phallic noses, suggestive of the birds' beaks of certain Egyptian deities-are in the minority. Other figures show their skeletal roots; they have the totemic intensity of ancestral figures that have been consumed in some obligatory act of piety. Most of these figures are asexual, but some have female indicators, breasts and bulging Willendorffian bellies. The figures are consummately grim and black and holy, and self-contained, like the chrysalis of some new species of human that bears an unwelcome resemblance to known humans, and presages something unexpected while at the same time being a throwback. They are executed with a verve that bypasses by now academic expressionistic spontaneity, through a touch intensified by frottage strategies and a peculiarly purposive delicacy. They are isolated stalactites suspended in a void, anti-representations of the human, more precisely, residues of the human in its descent to oblivion-leavings of the human, as convincing in their morbidity as the momentary image of gritty, sacred suffering captured on Veronica's napkin.

In other words, the sense of transience and ambivalence is pervasive, and appropriate for internal objects-for these figures are the inhabitants of Balassanian's spirit, the core constituents of her self. Absolutely instantaneous, permanently momentary, perpetually in process, they emanate a sense of death. Its spirit is ultimately unrepresentable yet indelible in the most intimate moments of self-awareness, such as these images represent. Balassanian's death-infected, existentialized figures have been regarded as political in purpose-a reflection of her Armenian identity, her Armenian sense of being a victim of repeated genocidal intentions. But this cultural source cannot be all that gives them their look of destiny; women's sense of negative identity and unfortunate destiny also informs them. Balassanian was brought up in Iran, where, as she says, woman was defined as a servant for sexual and generally domestic purposes-a type of non-entity from a Muslim point of view. To be both Armenian and woman is to be made to feel doubly undesirable, second rate, oppressed, unreal. It is to have anonymity forced on one and compounded-to have one's existence degraded, and defiled by a recognition that negates defiled into non-identity. Indeed, Balassanian's figures are de-differentiated, de-individualized, unreal-unrecognizable as true persons. They have only collective identity; personal identity-indeed, personhood as such has been blotted out.

Clearly Balassanian has learned the lesson of suffering well; she has been schooled in the best concentration camps. Her terse figures embody society's inhumanness and injustice. Her awareness of the death in life has been formed by a world that does not give her the right to exist in her own terms. The isolation of her figures reflects the ambiguity and insecurity of her existence: her indifferent treatment as an Armenian and woman, making her pursuit of autonomous existence difficult, perhaps unrealizable. The blurred quality of the figures-the hallucinatory quality that suggests the "impossibility" of their existence-reflects their strange handicap: they give the appearance of not existing-of non-existence. This experience of non-existence-in-existence is the terrible inner fate of an Armenian and woman. She has the sense of being dead in the world's eyes while still alive in her own. The blur communicates an irreducible uneasiness; unexpectedly, it also conveys an uncompromising will to live, but a rejection of the terms-Armenian and woman-the world has given one in which to do so. But there are no other terms left for Balassanian.

Through the abstractive blue the figure becomes a generalized victim. More particularly, it becomes representative of all victimized women. Balassanian's new figural work is continuous with her "repetitive, visual manipulation" of her portrait photograph in a series of 1983 images, dedicated "to the memory of those women who perished as a result of political turmoil." She uses herself to "symbolize disfigured women" in general, "victimized by events beyond their control"-events simultaneously in the world and the self. Certainly the new works continue the mood of her 1982 Franklin Furnace exhibition "Black, Black Days" But they "metaphysicalize," as it were, the painfully physical, abstracting mortal flesh into a fluid form of immortal suffering.

The windows and particularly the doors in the exhibition also belong to the mood of hardened negativity-despair which has become a kind of militant position, a stiffened banner-with their earth-encrusted, dark surfaces, and general air of pride and destruction. Balassanian has said that she is interested in their abandoned state, their bleakness; this goes hand in hand with the sense of pastness and loss that informs her images, and that is inseparable from the sense of death. Subliminally, whenever we see something old we are reminded of death, because it bespeaks loss; Balassanian's works are full of age and souvenirs of death; yet they are inconsolable, that is, they convey stoic endurance.

Balassanian's art addresses directly what I think, beyond the question of tribal movements and individual achievement, is the pressing issue of contemporary production: how to be sensitive, or, to put this another way, how to get beyond (postmodernist) cleverness yet stop short of (quasi-expressionistic) mawkishness. To put this still another way; how to use sensitivity to style-the language of art-to be sensitive to life. Such sensitivity is the most authentic kind of seriousness today. The real innovation is to find new ways of being sensitive, of conveying the proper emotional weight of events, their intimate impact. The problem is how to convey a sense of adequate response to horrendous external events-a response that accurately acknowledges them without submitting to them: that stands up to them while acknowledging their reality. It is a response that constitutes a durable subject by assimilating a bad enough environment without succumbing to it. The problem of sensitivity haunts all art today, and may be its special responsibility, because there seems precious little sensitivity in the world at large. Art ought to use its seductive visibility to offer an alternative responsiveness to the more entertaining kind generally hawked in our society. (So much art seems to want to have the shrill, instant-impact voice of entertainment these days-a voice that stifles rather than catalyzes reflection.) In the end, only a fresh invention of sensitivity can give art credibility.

The use of blackness, with its sense of depletion, is one obvious mechanism of seriousness. Blackness made urgent has been a staple of modern expressivity since Goya. Balassanian contains and concentrates it in her abstract figures and figural emblems (the door is a surrogate figure, the windows surrogate eyes). The blackness becomes the liquid in her barometric figures, registering the catastrophic with consummate nuance. Balassanian's sensitivity consists in being able to make figures, permeated by a sense of world-historical catastrophe, show their devastation in an intimate, immediatist format.

The point can be sharpened by comparing Balassanian's lyric figures to Kiefer's epic space. Kiefer offers a diffuse, generalized blackness-a universal scene of smoldering ruin-with 'life-conserving' figures (more the vessels and symbols of abstract life that alive in themselves) external to it, Kiefer's broad space does not always convey the simultaneity of death-in life/life-in-death that Balassanian's taut black figures do. His blackness, for all the drama with which it presents itself, is peculiarly inert, and as impervious to life as ashes, whereas Balassanian's black figures are blunt axe-heads still full of cutting life. One reads into her charred beings not only the pain and wailing of mourning, but the anger of healthy outrage. For all their dispiritedness, her figures are vitalized by unspent violence. Kiefer's black scenic space, ironically supported by fake flames of eternal hope, is a well-groomed fatalism. Here, I think, Balassanian points the way to an important element of the new sensitivity: the necessary abandonment of irony, as an intrusion on -false intervention in-brooding. Irony has become an often bombastic form of sentimentality these postmodernist days. Increasingly, it mocks the melancholy it means to underscore, trivializing all that it touches, and anesthetizing feeling.

Postmodernist irony increasingly looks like a joke on itself-a form of timidity in the face of world-historical events and the catastrophic sense of selfhood they initiate. Post-postmodernist sensitivity will use the language of art not to naively make a worldly extra-artistic point, as some all too obviously political art does, but to suggest the link between basic artistic processes and internal primal processes, as Balassanian's figures do.

Much postmodernist manipulation unwittingly involves an attempt to escape this link, spurred on by the dismissal of, in Foucault's words, "the authority of the creative subject." In fact, the creativity of the subject is a kind of critical response to the codes of language and behavior that shape, dominate and threaten to turn it into an object-to compel it to forget or forego or simply not attend to its feeling of being a subject, however indeterminate yet indisputable and inherent that feeling seems to be. The importance of Balassanian's art-the larger point it makes, beyond the sublimity of individual works and the fine-tuned integrity it conveys as a whole-is that it re-asserts the subjective as a refusal of the atmosphere of indifference in which events tend to occur in the world. (It is this indifference which instills-even indoctrinates-insensitivity to and disrespect for the feeling of being a subject.) At the same time, her figures assimilate that "objective" indifference in that they look like catastrophes. They internalize the world's indifference by becoming catastrophic in appearance. In other words, creativity is rooted in a refusal of passivity; the involuted animateness of Balassanian's figures, evident in a different way in her doors and windows, is at once an assimilation and refinement of the idea of passive acceptance of events, and a throwing of the idea back in the world's face by subjectivizing it-indicating that it is an existential choice which does not have to be made. Balassanian's art shows that one may not be able to change the world, but can make a dynamic, creative response to it, calming one's sense of helplessness, if not eliminating it.

The repetitive character of Balassanian's figures-the sense of their disfigurement being an endless variation of their anxiousness, a spontaneous multiplication of their inner turmoil, as though the figure wanted to rid itself of its suffering but could only replicate it interminably and awkwardly suggests not simply their obsessional character, but their ability to remain integrated despite the tension that threatens to tear them apart. It is as though, by

hammering home the same figure, Balassanian lets us know that it is a survivor as well as a sufferer—a survivor of its own suffering. In *The Country Doctor* Kafka spoke of a patient who had nothing but his wound to bring into the world, a wound beautiful with glowing red worms. Balassanian also seems to have a beautiful wound, but there are no worms in it. World events—above all Balassanian's response to them—will keep it forever fresh. Are these works then more symptom than art? Is there any good art that escapes being symptom? Isn't part of its goodness that it can represent more than itself—that it can transcend its fictionality by making it humanly convincing—especially representing a response to the pathological world, and make that response seem more real than the world itself? Balassanian's figural abstractions have this quality of conviction. In dialectical intimacy with the world, they let us know that it is a failure, in part because it cannot stifle the self-reparative creative response to it that Balassanian's works are.