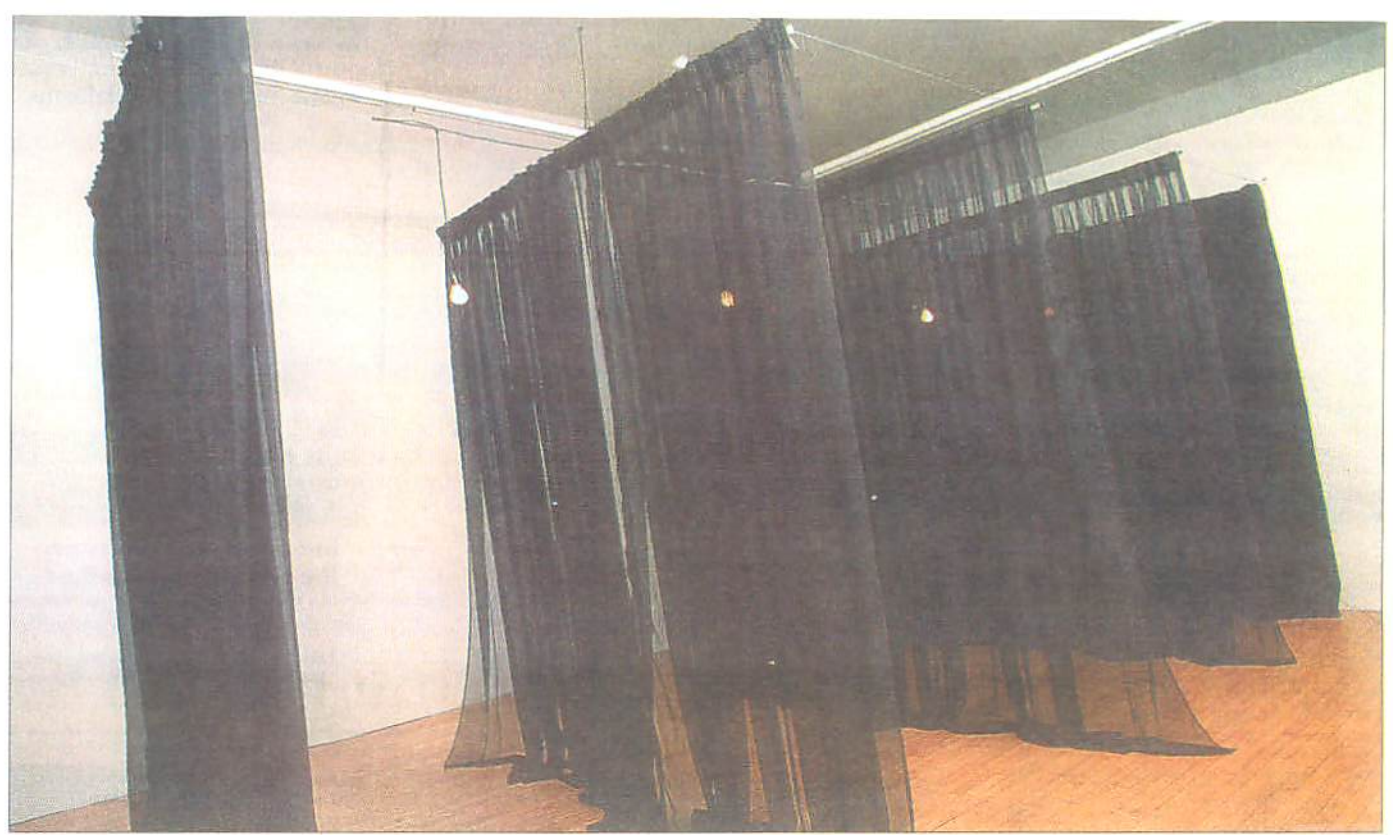




Fariba Samsami, *Memory of Body*.

Clothing that tyrannizes

Iranian artist explores how women are 'weighed down'



Fariba Samsami, *Curtain*.

THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR
SATURDAY, APRIL 24, 2004



REGINA HAGGO

Showtime

Who: Fariba Samsami
Where: Hamilton Artists Inc., 231 Bay St. N.
When: Until May 8
Hours: Noon to 5 p.m. Tuesday to Friday, Noon to 4 p.m. Saturday

Clothes make the man, but they often break the woman. Revealing or concealing, clothes can be a society's means of oppressing women. Fariba Samsami explores the traditionally uneasy relationship between women and clothing in an engaging exhibition at Hamilton Artists Inc.

Samsami, born in Tehran and living

in Montreal, has exhibited since 1995.

In using clothing in her art, she follows in the footsteps of such contemporary Canadian artists as Betty Goodwin, Gathie Falk and Jana Sterbak. But Samsami brings a different perspective. She says her pieces are inspired by women's lives in Iran and Islamic communities elsewhere.

"I am interested in touching on oppressive issues that keep women tyrannized and weighed down by the cruel and unjust use of power," she says. Her art is critical of "convention or tradition which encourages women to be passive, voiceless and submissive."

Her installation contains four works, all made of fabric, much of it from used clothing. Despite the mundane materials, they have the feel of monuments or memorials.

Curtain, the largest work, consists of five black curtains and four bare lightbulbs. Each three-metre-high curtain is gathered on a rod and hangs almost from ceiling to floor.

Parallel to one another and equally spaced, the curtains form four com-

partments with a lit bulb hanging in the centre of each.

On the one hand, the compartments look like stark domestic interiors, all identical, rather than individualized. By leaving these spaces open on two sides, Samsami invites us to walk into them.

Once inside, we can see the lights in the neighbouring spaces through the thin black fabric. But we're seeing only more confined areas with artificial lights, not the light of the outside world. One thinks of Plato's imaginary cave. Because its inhabitants have never seen the sun, they think a dim reflection of its light is the real thing. Is it the same with freedom?

On the other hand, these five curtains all neatly lined up have an eerie humanness to them, like tall veiled women about to stride forward.

By working with used clothing, Samsami means to evoke human — and female — presence in her work.

This is most obvious in *Memory of Body*, a used white terry-cloth bathrobe laid on the floor. The bathrobe is, of course, worn indoors,

so it is a reminder of a woman's domestic life. Its position requires the viewer to look down at it, underlining the woman's lowly status and her vulnerability.

The arms are stretched out as though someone is still wearing it and her scent might still linger. The robe's neatly folded flatness, however, speaks to the wearer's absence — or invisibility.

Samsami has covered the robe with long black hairs. Like the robe, hair is something which can be very private.

In ancient Greek society, for example, and in some contemporary Islamic communities, women are expected to cover their heads while in public.

The short-tufted fabric of the robe contrasts with the long hair and both provide textural interest. But this piece is not for touching, and it draws attention to a taboo on touch.

Hair enhances a woman's appearance, but it is also associated with punishment. Has this hair been pulled out during an act of violence?

A hair shirt, or coat, is something worn by penitents. And hair on the

floor is to be swept up and discarded. Is this what has happened to the owner of the robe and hair?

Entangled Knots, a big rectangular wall-hanging, is also constructed from used clothing.

Samsami has knotted and twisted black kerchiefs onto a wire frame. The knots give the surface a rhythmically raised appearance, and some frayed edges add visual variety.

The kerchiefs, symbols of modesty, femininity and oppression, stand in for their wearers. The knots look like tiny heads in a crowd. Similar in colour and size, these heads suggest uniformity and anonymity.

But on closer inspection, we notice different patterns and types of fabric, like a suggestion of individuals in the crowd. And the fraying, however unintentional, hints at the potential for things to start disintegrating.

Regina Haggio, a former professor of art history at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand, teaches at the Dundas Valley School of Art. You can contact her at dhaggio@thespec.com.