

When Anahid Ghorbani sought a metaphor to express the separation and suppression of women in our contemporary cultures, she drew from what she knew best, her own experiences and the history of her native country of Iran.

The 1963 White Revolution in Iran initiated by the reigning monarch Reza Shah Pahlavi aimed first at land reforms and modernization. It also enfranchised women and granted them family and societal rights they had never had before. At the same time, his policies denied them the right to fully express themselves or dissent. In 1979, the Islamic Revolution changed all that.

Many women participated in the Revolution, even to the point of wearing the formerly banned black chadors to signal their support. After the Revolution many things changed. Women who appeared in public were required to wear headscarves, either the long chador or the shorter hijab. Black was the official color.

Black became the metaphor Ghorbani sought for her images.

Black, however, has a complicated past as a visual symbol in the larger world of art. And it carries with it a different iconography in Iran, Spain, Russia, or America. Although it has many uses and symbolisms, black is always an extreme and thus is the color for those who reach the point at which there is no other choice.

In looking back into the history of the color black in painting, one can see that point of extreme came for Francisco Goya privately. Black was a necessity for his psyche after surviving the horrors of war only to be engulfed in a political atmosphere of the murderous revenge of a dethroned king propped up by a foreign power. At the end of a long, bright career, the deaf and ailing Goya chose to become a recluse, entombing himself in 1819 in his rural house. He painted murals that dominated every wall that were darkened by the subjects of witches, fates, old hags, peasants beating themselves bloody, and demented religious pilgrims. The *Pinturas negras*, as his black paintings are called, were a secret exploration of his tortured imagination known only to his inner circle of family and friends.

Curiously, black may also be the choice near a career's beginning. Kazimir Malevich painted his first black square in 1915, claiming that it was the equivalent of zero, and that it was only from zero, he believed, that the true movement of being could begin. Black, in such abstraction, came to signify nothingness, which has hardly new as it was essential to several ancient creation stories. For instance, the King James Bible begins the world with the darkness upon the face of the deep, while in the Quran (15:26) we read of our own human origins, "And indeed, We created man from sounding clay of altered black smooth mud." (Shakir translation)

Ghorbani also takes black as her starting point as an artistic metaphor, even though some viewers may restrict it to an inescapable symbol for the surviving revolutionary political actions of her country. Though her work may seem Iran-centric and specific, she means it to be a source for an expression directed to the struggle for the equality of women everywhere.

In her photographs, black suppresses and obscures the individual, letting only a hint of hair or hand find a moment of visibility. It becomes a crushing weight upon figures on the ground and a living tomb for those it shrouds. Its insistence is unyielding and ruthless.

In her video work, black takes on its fluid state in a changing role. A thin line becomes a moving shadow and makes its way across the base of a desert dune gradually evolving into the shape of someone walking. When the figure itself appears in the frame, it is draped in black and becomes an anonymous silhouette. We may pause to ask what is the meaning of this presence, this black that culturally preceded her and now follows her everywhere attaching itself to her motions and fears. The video continues. Now we see the figure reverse direction and balance along a path at the edge of the shadow of a dune. Later it makes its way directly toward us in our protected viewer's space. Only on occasion do hands, feet, face, and hair show, echoing the way Goya indicated the humanity buried in the black surrounds of the mass of pilgrims with blotches of flesh-like paint.

We sensed from the beginning through the face and hair that it is not the concealed figure of a man who feels helpless and overwhelmed in the vast, deadly landscape. Men never drape themselves in black this way. Only the women do. And that is the point.

Finally, there is a segment that ends the video, not as a resolution but as a question. The silhouette appears again even smaller but still alone and lost. There is a feeling of being abandoned as she walks to a spot and lies down. She devolves herself into a black shape. No motion occurs from then on. We, too, are now arrested asking: Is she at rest, is this death, or is it the figure of the thought of hope expiring?

David Travis