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WEST VILLAGE

Rummana Hussain

Through April 30. [Institute of Arab and Islamic Art](https://www.instituteofarabandislamicart.org/), 22 Christopher Street, Manhattan; instituteaia.org.



Installation view of Rummana Hussain's "The Tomb of Begum Hazrat Mahal" (1997) at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Art. via Institute of Arab and Islamic Art and Estate of Rummana Hussain/Talwar Gallery

Rummana Hussain (1952-1999), one of India's pioneer conceptual and performance artists, was born a secular Muslim into a well-placed political family in Bangalore. She began her career as a painter but her burgeoning political activism prompted her to expand her formal range. Feminism was a shaping force. So was the explosion of anti-Muslim violence by Hindu nationalists in 1992. Together they pushed her to make work that spun from her identity as a member of two embattled minorities.

Her 1997 installation "The Tomb of Begum Hazrat Mahal," reassembled by the Institute of Arab and Islamic Art at their new West Village space, touches on all of this. The title refers to a female Muslim ruler in 19th-century India who led a revolt against British colonial rule. In a series of photographs, Hussain enacts the role of the Begum as a commanding but ghostly presence. The installation, evoking the ruler's mausoleum, holds objects with religious and secular domestic associations, suggesting the power than can be generated by the purposeful assertion of cultural belonging.

Hussain died of cancer at age 47. (She made trips to New York City for medical treatment.) Her surviving body of work is relatively small and has so far been seen in New York only in fragments, notably in exhibitions at Talwar Gallery, which represents her estate. Given the militantly right-wing, anti-Muslim, anti-female path that India, along with many other nations, including our own, is now following, her art is more pertinent and potent than ever. A museum should step up and give us the full scope. **HOLLAND COTTER**