
Siah Armajani: An artist out of exile: Iranian-born sculptor Siah Armajani talks about revolution, democracy and culture.

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July 04--When Minneapolis sculptor Siah Armajani visited Tehran five years ago, returning to his homeland as a guest of the government, he got a rock star's welcome. Besides dinners, TV coverage and a limousine waiting at the airport, there were adulatory crowds wherever he and his wife, Barbara, went, people straining to touch them and crying out, "We love America; we love Americans."

But were Armajani to land in Iran now, he said, he would be arrested and imprisoned. The reason? His radically new political sculpture, "Murder in Tehran." More than 11 feet tall, "Murder" is a cage-like box of glass and wood holding casts of dismembered hands and topped by a hooded and blood-stained figure. The severed limbs represent Neda Agha-Soltan, a young woman killed during protests following the 2009 reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The artist's contempt for Iran's present regime is evident in a quotation printed on the sculpture: "Satan, drunk on victory, squats at the feast of our undoing."

"My name is on the list," Armajani, 70, said recently over coffee in his Minneapolis Warehouse District studio.

Intensely private, Armajani is a slight, tweedy intellectual whose quiet demeanor makes him appear a highly unlikely threat to Iran's present rulers. He was just named the 2010 McKnight Distinguished Artist, a lifetime achievement award for Minnesota artists that includes a \$50,000 prize.

As always, Armajani is a generous host of old-school propriety, offering fresh berries and insisting that visitors share a rich chocolate torte even at 10 a.m. The shelves of his white-walled studio are lined with decades' worth of project models, many resembling rustic Midwestern buildings -- silos, corncribs, grain elevators, railway trestles. The down-home architecture is central to his notion that sculpture should be functional and accessible as well as intellectually complex.

Armajani's graciousness doesn't extend to allowing himself to be photographed, however. It's not necessarily that he fears for his safety or that of relatives in Iran, but rather that he has a lifelong aversion to the cult of personality that often surrounds artists. His sculptures celebrate the anonymous builder-craftsmen of early American culture, and he prefers their company.

"I just cannot handle it," he said of being photographed. "I try to be private; that's why I became an artist. Among 300 million people, you just become one."

Love of democracy

International politics don't enter into the selection of McKnight honorees, but the five jurors were aware of Armajani's values, said Stewart Turnquist, a member of the panel that unanimously chose him. "He has a fierce appreciation of independence and an aversion to authoritarianism, so his love of democracy was in many ways a factor in his work from the beginning," said Turnquist. "It was all part of his identity but not necessarily apparent in his art."

There's nothing inflammatory about his local work, which includes a University of Minnesota plaza honoring former Vice President Hubert Humphrey and the blue-and-yellow bridge spanning Interstate 94 to connect Loring Park and the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden. Nationally he is probably best known for a caldron-topped structure designed to hold the Olympic flame at the 1996 Atlanta games. His other projects range from a covered walkway at **General Mills** headquarters in Golden Valley and a bandstand in Mitchell, S.D., to a "Floating Poetry Room" outside Amsterdam and gardens and gazebos in Strasbourg, Nice, Munster and elsewhere. Art mavens recognize his innumerable exhibitions and commissions in sites as far-flung as Berlin, Prague, Paris, Madrid and Edinburgh.

"He is arguably the most important international artist living and working in Minneapolis today," said Elizabeth Armstrong, curator of contemporary art at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. The museum recently added a major Armajani sculpture as a cornerstone of a new contemporary collection it is developing. Walker Art Center also owns his work, as do New York's Guggenheim, Whitney and Museum of Modern Art, as well as dozens of prominent institutions elsewhere in the United States and abroad.

Minnesota modesty

Despite his renown, Armajani has maintained a low profile in Minnesota, where he has lived since 1960, when he arrived to attend **Macalester College**. An uncle of his chaired the college's history department, making the school a logical choice for Armajani, although he says he wasn't consulted.

"In those days [parents] wouldn't ask your opinion; they would decide for you," he said.

Armajani's father, a businessman with a literary bent, encouraged Siah's interest in art and arranged for private drawing lessons when the boy was in grade school. The teacher soon gave up, Armajani recalled. "He said to my father, 'Your son has no talent whatsoever. He is mischievous.' As soon as we got to the sidewalk, my father said, 'He's old and of a different school. Don't listen to him.'"

Armajani's own artistic style -- a carpenter vernacular overlaid with quotations from poets and philosophers -- was shaped by the intellectual milieu of his childhood. There were more than 10,000 books in his home, and every night his father would read poetry to him at bedtime. His mother, he recalled, would often read Sartre or Camus in French and translate them into Persian.

At Macalester, he majored in philosophy. After graduating in 1963 he went on to establish himself as an artist/intellectual whose work is a unique hybrid of sculpture and architecture. His early work was inspired by covered bridges, barns, rail trestles and skyways. Nailed together with a kind of picnic-bench aesthetic, his sculptures seem workmanlike and accessible, though they are rarely so simple.

His reading rooms, lecture halls and garden sheds have honored philosophers and thinkers as diverse as architect Louis Kahn, political theorists Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine, and anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti. They are always garnished with quotations from diverse sources, including novelist Herman Melville, philosophers John Dewey and Ralph Waldo Emerson, poets John Ashbery and Walt Whitman, European intellectuals Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, the subject of his latest sculpture.

"Politics has always been huge in his work, but he's also concerned with the individual, so there has always been a sense of humanity in his work," said Josie Brown, director of Max Protetch Gallery in New York and a friend for more than 25 years.

Besides "Murder in Tehran," his recent political work includes "Fallujah," a 2004-05 sculpture that alludes to Picasso's famous "Guernica" mural as a way to protest the wars of the past decade.

"When I was a public artist between 1968 and 1999, I was harnessing my personal emotion and ideology," he said. "I was always very discreet, but in 1999 and 2000, I just could no longer withhold my personal feeling, so I became overtly political."

In the center of his studio stands a huge glass-and-steel sculpture containing a desk, a folding chair and a kind of picnic table attached to a gigantic wheel. Part of the sculpture is draped with black curtains. Called "Classroom for an Exile," it is an autobiographical piece he's been working on since 2002. When it is finished, or perhaps before, he will embark on what he calls "my last phase." That will be a series of tombs honoring thinkers he admires, starting with St. Augustine.

Asked if he felt himself to be in exile, even after half a century in an adopted country he deeply loves, he said, simply: "Right."