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He's distinguished - for his mix of art, poetry and politics

Abbe, Mary. **Star Tribune** [Minneapolis, Minn] 28 June 2010: A.9.

Iranian-born sculptor Siah Armajani, whose best-known Minnesota work is the blue-and-yellow bridge spanning Interstate 94 between Loring Park and the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, has been named the 2010 McKnight Distinguished Artist. The annual award, presented by the McKnight Foundation, is considered the state's most prestigious cultural honor and includes a \$50,000 prize.

When Armajani arrived in Minnesota from Iran 50 years ago, he was an idealistic young radical in love with democracy and opposed to the shah who ruled his homeland. Over the next half-century he gained international recognition by channeling his passion for democratic concepts into sculptures that reflect American vernacular architecture and often incorporate quotations from American poets, writers and philosophers.

His early sculptures typically had a functional purpose, doubling as reading rooms, lecture halls, garden pavilions, picnic tables or bridges. The bridge over I-94 includes an inscription from a poem by John Ashbery, and a plaza he designed for the **University of Minnesota** incorporates quotations by Minnesota statesman Hubert Humphrey.

Besides shows at museums and galleries in New York and abroad, his sculptures are permanently installed in Amsterdam, Los Angeles, Strasbourg, France, and other international sites.

Established in 1998, the McKnight award honors a lifetime of work and goes to Minnesota artists who are nominated anonymously and then chosen by a five-member committee. Armajani was the group's unanimous choice, said committee member Stewart Turnquist.

"His early work often had relationships to science and art as well as philosophy, which he majored in at **Macalester College**, so right away he had a very powerful impact on artists in the region, and he continues to put points of view and ideas about art together in ways that fascinate you," Turnquist said.

Politics infuses Armajani's recent work, condemning the violence that has engulfed the Middle East. In 2004-05 he made a 17-foot-tall sculpture called "Fallujah" that visually quoted Picasso's famous mural "Guernica" to express his distress about the war in Iraq. Last year he angered Iranian officials with "Murder in Tehran," an installation inspired by the 2009 death of a young Iranian woman protesting the reelection of Iran's president.

Armajani "unites humankind's hardest truths with the optimism that we can do better, if we acknowledge and understand the bridges that brought us here," McKnight president Kate Wolford said in a statement.

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PREVIOUS WINNERS

Composer Dominick Argento, potter Warren MacKenzie, writer Robert Bly, choral conductor Dale Warland, publisher Emilie Buchwald, painter Mike Lynch, conductor/composer Stanislaw Skrowaczewski, sculptor Judy Onofrio, theater artist Lou Bellamy, sculptor Kinji Akagawa, writer Bill Holm and theater artist Bain Boehlke.

Credit: MARY ABBE; STAFF WRITER