



Siah Armajani, installation view, Alexander Gray Associates (2016)

## Siah Armajani

October 27 – December 17, 2016

Alexander Gray Associates presents recent drawings, models, and sculptures by Siah Armajani from his ongoing “Tomb Series” (1972–2016). The Series pays tribute to philosophers, activists, poets, and writers who have informed and inspired Armajani’s art and ideology. This is the second exhibition of his Tombs at the Gallery, and the works on view highlight his interest in the way these cultural figures influence one another in life, death, and output. The “Tomb Series” represents a self-reflexive moment in the artist’s practice. As Armajani explains, “there is no semiology, no quotations, no study of history nor biography.” The variety of media he uses speaks to the democratic nature of his practice; the sculptural elements are built, the drawings made, but within his oeuvre neither process holds more significance than the other.



*Tomb for Arthur Rimbaud*  
2016  
Mixed media  
66h x 24w x 89d in

### ***Tomb for Arthur Rimbaud, 2016***

Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891) was a French poet whose work had a profound influence on a generation of Symbolist and Surrealist writers and artists. Already an accomplished student and writer, he left home at sixteen to travel and continue writing his poetry. Faced with financial insecurity following the end of a stormy love-affair with the poet Paul Verlaine, Rimbaud stopped writing entirely at the age of twenty-one. Until his early death, Rimbaud worked as a merchant in Africa. In *Tomb for Arthur Rimbaud*, Armajani directly references the poet’s oeuvre through his use of pastel colors. In “A Winter Dream,” Rimbaud writes “In winter we’ll travel in a little pink carriage / With cushions of blue.” The poem conceptualizes a carriage as a refuge for two lovers away from the evils of the world. Armajani also utilizes glass in this particular tomb, a material the artist has worked with since the 1970s. Its use references the work of Paul Scheerbart and Bruno Taut, early twentieth-century architects who extolled the use of glass in modern architecture in order to create a utopia in the new technological age.



*Tomb for Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 2016  
Mixed media  
42h x 79w x 32d in

### ***Tomb for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 2016***

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) was a German theologian, writer, and an outspoken critic of the Nazi party. He was imprisoned in 1943 for his associations with the Abwehr, a German resistance organization, and he remained in prison for two years before he was condemned to death. He was executed at Flossenbürg concentration camp, just two weeks before the Allies liberated the camp. In appreciation of Bonhoeffer’s subversive actions, Armajani states that the existentialist Christian theologian “rose up to kill *evil* itself” and the clergy who had previously ignored Bonhoeffer’s warnings “capitulated with ashes in their mouths.” In a departure from all of the other tombs the artist has created up to this point, *Tomb for Dietrich Bonhoeffer* includes an allusion to the man’s manner of dying; a noose which is pulled tightly across the top of the red coffin situated on two sawhorses. Through this compositional element Armajani communicates Bonhoeffer’s status as a martyr and identifies the pastor’s death as a defining moment of his legacy.



*Tomb for Frank O'Hara*  
2016  
Painted wood  
54h x 103w x 65d in

### **Tomb for Frank O'Hara, 2016**

A leader of the New York School of poets in the 1950s and 1960s, Frank O'Hara's (1929–1966) poems were informal and personal in style, often incorporating the vernacular language of everyday conversations and advertisements. He also drew from the artistic vocabularies of dance, music, and painting. He was one of the first New York poets to write art criticism, and worked at the Museum of Modern Art as a curator until his early death, which speaks to Armajani's interest in interdisciplinary practice. Armajani places O'Hara's black coffin on a disjointed table surrounded by mismatched, wooden chairs arranged at various heights. The table is of particular interest to the artist as it recalls the bridge, an integral part of his own practice. He states, "Whatever we can say about a table can be said about a bridge. A table is something in-between. A table unites the people and brings people together." The desire for human connection is a constant theme in Frank O'Hara's best known body of work, "Lunch Poems," published in 1964, in which the poet references his friends, lovers, and everyday life in New York City.



*Written Iran, detail*  
2015–16  
Ink on mylar  
40 x 223 in

### **Written Iran, 2016**

Armajani's *Written Iran* depicts the cityscape of Tehran where he grew up prior to attending college in the United States in 1960. All of the texts are in Farsi, indicative of the Persian verses he memorized during his childhood. Armajani pays tribute to a selection of seven seminal poets, six men and one woman, across various time periods. Only one, Nima Yushij, considered to be the predecessor of modern Persian poetry, is well-known in the United States. *Written Iran* is the third in a series of large-scale calligraphic drawings, including *Written Minneapolis* (2014) and *Written Berlin* (2014–2015). *Written Iran* is the most colorful of the three works, containing schematized trees with vibrant geometric leaves, and one stylized, multi-colored tree that dwarfs several of the surrounding buildings. This work also contains more isolated building fragments, as opposed to entire architectural structures. Armajani incorporates sequestered arcades and lone darkened portals surrounded by fields of calligraphy, indicative of the artist's experience growing up in Tehran during the mid-twentieth century. Several of the included structures are iconic Iranian landmarks, such as the two-tiered bridge Si-o-seh pol in Isfahan or the domed yakhchals used by ancient Persians to store ice in the desert, highlighting Armajani's interest in architecture as a discipline that prompts contemplation and facilitates connection.



Installation view  
Alexander Gray Associates  
2016

### **Models**

In addition to each tomb sculpture and drawing, Armajani also completes a model for each of the four tombs. In the models for *Tomb for Frank O'Hara* and *Tomb for Arthur Rimbaud*, Armajani constructs elaborate geometric bases to support the miniatures. The base for Arthur Rimbaud's tomb is composed of stacked, metallic shapes and the base of Frank O'Hara's tomb is comprised of a number of layered squares. The models for *Tomb for Richard Rorty* and *Tomb for Dietrich Bonhoeffer* are substantially larger than the previous models in the series, with Richard Rorty's tomb standing on its own unique base; an open, black box that mirrors the construction of the coffin. Additionally, Armajani also constructed a model for the Tomb drawing *100 and One Dead Poets* (2015–2016). The sculpture takes on the obelisk-like form of a column, emblematic of a monument or memorial to the poets that have inspired Armajani throughout his life.



*Tomb for Dietrich Bonhoeffer*  
2016  
Ink on mylar  
36h x 60w in

### **Drawings**

Armajani illustrates each tomb on mylar and highlights the material's transparent quality through his pointillist technique and use of the correction fluid. Text is a prominent component of each drawing, and Armajani has obscured the lines of verse with the semi-transparent liquid. In *Tomb for Richard Rorty*, the texts are situated in discreet rectangular sections as the background for the tomb, whereas in *Tomb for Arthur Rimbaud*, the text and correction fluid are incorporated into the tomb itself. The artist also employs unconventional perspective, depicting each tomb from a slightly skewed and elevated vantage point that one cannot replicate in three-dimensional space. Additionally, in *Tomb for Arthur Rimbaud*, the tomb appears twice, as if it has been rotated, enabling the viewer to examine the work from two different angles.



*Tomb for Richard Rorty, 2016*  
Painted wood and ink  
77h x 84w x 38d in

### ***Tomb for Richard Rorty, 2016***

Richard Rorty (1931–2007) was an American philosopher and pioneer of neopragmatism, which draws on the writings of other significant twentieth-century philosophers such as John Dewey and Martin Heidegger. Rorty disavowed the traditional notion of absolute truth, and instead asserted that human beings invent truths through language and experience. He also believed that an empathetic framework is necessary to understand and interpret the inner-workings of humanity. In *Tomb for Richard Rorty*, Armajani creates a modular structure which houses the philosopher's open coffin. The tomb relies on neopragmatist ideals; namely the rejection of both objective beauty and representation. However, Armajani has added a decorative detail to the tomb's surface; the visible grain of the wood is not natural. The artist has meticulously drawn lines on each panel, integrating elements of his sculptural and drawing practice.



*100 and One Dead Poets, detail, 2016*  
Ink on mylar  
40 x 168 in

### ***100 and One Dead Poets, 2016***

In *100 and One Dead Poets* (2016), Armajani honors poets across geographies and generations. The artist recorded excerpts from poems by various figures and then meticulously covered the inscriptions with correction fluid. This act of self-censorship is inspired by the quote by W.H. Auden, "The death of the poet was kept from his poems," a reference to notions of artistic legacy and the bearing of the past on the present and future. He describes the resulting surface as a "retinal experience." The 14-foot drawing is an abstract composition of text embedded with small representational elements that function as vignettes; for example one notices a small rendering of a pear, a common motif in his earliest calligraphic work dating from the late 1950s while he was still living in his native Iran. Armajani records the texts in sections unconstrained by the traditional modes of linear writing. The amalgamation of verses resembles a calligram, or text where the form and arrangement of the words reflect the meaning of the words themselves.