

Siah Armajani

by Jonathan Goodman

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Born in 1939, Siah Armajani has become one of America's most venerable sculptors. Originally from Iran, the artist came to Minnesota in 1960 to study at Macalester College, where he has since stayed and, over the last fifty years, produced a remarkable body of work closely tied to the American democratic tradition and poetry. His sculptures, drawings, and paintings are not overtly political, but their associations are linked to a progressive view of history—for example, *Tomb for Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (2016), a sculpture titled after the German Lutheran clergyman murdered by the Nazis for his active resistance to their regime. Writing is also high on Armajani's list of influences—modern and contemporary poetry books were available for reading in the gallery.

Armajani is an American artist who has consistently devoted his work to ongoing issues and social problems in American history, but his political passion never yields to aesthetic literalism. One of the most profound things about his work is its metaphorical depth and formal originality, perhaps the result of his intense consideration of the American poetic tradition. Viewers can see his affection for poet Frank O'Hara, the outstanding city poet who turned academic verse on its head during the 1950s and '60s. By turns, campy, irreverent, and always informal, O'Hara presents an inspired alternative to an otherwise dusty kind of writing that was being produced by the universities at the time. In *Tomb for Frank O'Hara* (2016), one of the strongest works in the show, Armajani has constructed a work composed of a two tables painted in white. A black coffin rests on the larger table, while the backs of various chairs are set into and penetrating both tabletops. The overall gestalt of the sculpture alludes to Armajani's powerful, regularly used image of a bridge. What he does here is affect a link between poetry and sculpture, literature and art's most ancient forms. Echoing the intensely unceremonious and unedited nature of O'Hara's work, we find Armajani brilliantly improvising a gathering for O'Hara's lost spirit, which seems nearly to hover over the chair backs, tables, and coffin. It is a true memorial to a major American poet.

Armajani's *Tomb for Dietrich Bonhoeffer* is an altogether darker piece. The work consists of a bright red open coffin, supported at table height by two sets of wooden sawhorses. Inside the coffin is a noose made of thick cord. The implications are terribly clear: an early death awaits those who cannot stomach injustice. It is increasingly hard not to see Armajani amongst some of the strongest American political artists of our

time. Somehow he has found the psychic space to refer to actual historical events in a manner that does justice to the moment's social heroes.

In the ink on Mylar drawing, *100 and One Dead Poets* (2016), Armajani quotes lyric writers from across epochs and geographies, then covers the writing with correction fluid. It is an act of self-censorship, something that poets unfortunately still feel compelled to do, not only in totalitarian states, but also even in mercantile democracies. (Armajani's inspiration comes from a quote by the British poet W.H. Auden: "The death of the poet was kept from his poems.") From a distance, the square column, which the drawing wraps around, looks like a piece of travertine. An extraordinarily beautiful work of art, *100 and One Dead Poets* hauntingly reminds us of the vulnerability of the writer, who remains, for reasons not fully understood, the most politicized of all categories of artists. Being deeply interested in poetry, I cannot but wonder at the imaginative spirit of a man from Iran who understands writing in America so well. But even so, his claim is not only local but global, giving us a taste of an extraordinarily cosmopolitan creativity.

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