

## Armajani dreaming ; Internationally known Iranian sculptor Siah Armajani has his first solo show in his adopted hometown, Minneapolis.: [METRO Edition]

Abbe, Mary; Staff Writer. **Star Tribune** [Minneapolis, Minn] 09 Dec 2005: 18F.

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For a guy whose 35-year art career includes an Olympics commission and exhibitions at museums and galleries throughout Europe and the United States, Siah Armajani has maintained a remarkably low profile in his adopted hometown, Minneapolis.

The Iranian-born sculptor's design for a bridge, tower and cauldron to hold the ceremonial flame at the Atlanta Olympics in 1996 brought international attention. He has work in the collections of Walker Art Center and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and has designed gardens, bridges -including the dramatic blue-and-yellow span linking Loring Park and the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden across Hennepin Avenue - and other facilities in Minnesota. But until now he has not had a solo show in the Twin Cities.

Through Jan. 7, Weinstein Gallery in Minneapolis is showcasing three room-sized Armajani sculptures and accompanying models, plus four huge drawings. Even with just 10 pieces, the show is an eye-popping experience that helps explain and humanize one of the country's most accomplished but enigmatic and cerebral artists. Encountering an Armajani sculpture is never a cozy experience even though you can often sit or walk on his work. His concepts can be stubbornly obtuse, regardless of their utilitarian edge. An intensely private man, he prefers to work as anonymously as possible, disdaining the art world's obsession with celebrity and the cult of personality.

Born in Iran in 1939, Siah Armajani (pronounced SEE-ah Ar-mah-JAH-nee) moved here in 1960 to attend **Macalester College** . There he studied philosophy and met Barbara Bauer, a Minnesota native whom he later married. After graduating in 1963, he rented a Minneapolis loft and began building sculptures in the form of bridges and crudely designed houses. Typically his sculptures have a bare-bones look, with skeletal frames and parts that don't necessarily function in the expected way - uncomfortably straight-backed seats, blacked-out windows, ceilings so low it's impossible to stand.

The carpenter aesthetic was part of Armajani's effort to understand America, a place that seemed to him an exotic country full of independent, practical people given to do-it-yourself projects. He was especially taken with Thomas Jefferson, the polymath philosopher-architect-statesman who constantly remodeled his house in an effort to achieve domestic perfection.

What began as Armajani's self-education evolved into public sculptures designed for practical purposes: the Sculpture Garden's pedestrian bridge, a covered walkway at the **General Mills** headquarters in Golden Valley, a plaza at the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the **University of Minnesota** .

Familiar spaces seen anew

The three Weinstein sculptures continue Armajani's deconstruction of familiar spaces. "Dormer" is a somewhat pyramidal glass-and-steel structure meant to suggest a dormer window protruding from a roof. Nodding to the root of "dormer," which means "to sleep," the sculpture houses a steel platform supporting a folded mattress and pillow. A little model building - an Amish barn or house, perhaps - is tucked under the bed.

A second gallery houses a glass-and-steel sculpture loosely inspired by a fireplace, and a third gallery is filled with "One Car Garage," a huge steel-and-glass room containing a folding chair, an industrial light, ventilation tubes, an old-fashioned toy truck and small models of a grain elevator and other industrial buildings.

Four beautiful drawings in colored pencil animate the gallery walls, each representing a season on the Mississippi River. Drawn on sheets of Mylar 3 feet tall and 12 feet long, the drawings are abstract designs composed of little squares and ribbons of scribbled color - spring greens, autumnal browns, wintry silver - that drift and float like leaves borne on the wind or bobbing in the water. A long boardwalk and a tall building seen from an aerial perspective give each drawing the look of a Japanese screen. Bits of whimsy - a line of drying clothes, a red bicycle, huddled birds, a man's scarecrowed coat and hat - introduce personal footnotes that suggest both transitory seasons and the brevity of life.

Armajani is known for weaving passages of poetry into his installations. Here his beautifully crafted, awkward rooms and lyrical drawings take on a Proustian poetry of their own, dreaming of lost times and near-forgotten places.

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SIAH ARMAJANI

What: Architecture-inspired sculptures and season-themed drawings by the internationally known Iranian artist based in Minnesota.

When: Ends Jan. 7.

Where: Weinstein Gallery, 908 W. 46th St., Mpls.