

► CRITICISM

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"Him for whom the world was not enough": Siah Armajani at Alexander Gray Associates

by William Corwin

Siah Armajani at Alexander Gray Associates

October 27 to December 17, 2016

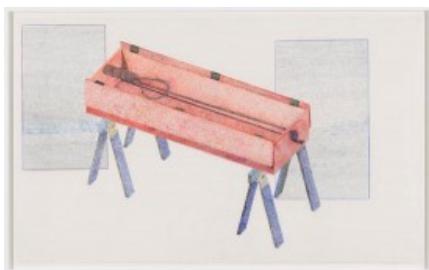
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Installation view, "Siah Armajani," 2016, at Alexander Gray Associates. Courtesy of the gallery.

In a show of new sculpture at Alexander Gray, Siah Armajani has made the gallery a mortuary temple stocked with the tombs of two poets, one philosopher, and one martyr. The sculptural/architectural proposition of the tomb has traditionally encompassed both subversive and normative figures from Alexander to Oscar (the Great and Wilde, respectively), so his choice of Arthur Rimbaud, Frank O'Hara, Richard Rorty and Dietrich Bonhoeffer doesn't stray from tradition. Still, the act of publicly commemorating cultural figures via intricate and monumental sculptural tombs certainly fell out of favor over the course of the 20th century, so Armajani's pieces, invoking wit and anger with his crisp visual riddles rather than melancholy, is a welcome return to one of humanity's more enduring tropes of visual culture. The artist's process is on display in the exhibition as well, with preparatory drawings presented alongside the executed sculptures, but this decision posits much more of a quandary: while the two-dimensional renderings of the monuments are arresting in their sharp orthogonal perspective, their inclusion, as well as that of maquettes for the larger works, primarily serves to double the number of objects in the show and display a variety of scale that is largely irrelevant. In an architecture exhibition, drawings and maquettes are included because the final product isn't. Armajani is not an architect, he is a revolutionary in terms of the direct connection between politics, life and art which he insistently draws in his work, and the inclusion of these Lilliputian doppelgangers only serves to create a false sense of the magisterial controlling master plans that are the bane of most monumental architectural projects. Armajani's sculptures, despite their aspirations to the eternal and their sleek signature aesthetic, are humble, deeply heartfelt and personal.



Do the tombs evoke the individuals they represent, or are the titles more of a playful allusion to the artist's own intellectual meanderings? It's hard to tell: Armajani expects a lot of his viewers in terms of background knowledge. *Tomb for Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (2016), a sleek vermilion coffin on black sawhorses, clearly evokes the courageous minister, fitted with a noose, which was the instrument of his martyrdom at the hands of the National Socialists. The tombs of Rorty, Ribaud and O'Hara are not quite as explicit. *Tomb for Frank O'Hara* (2016) is a jolly affair and a much looser interpretation of the tomb — five disembodied and legless chairs emerge from two tables implying a late-night drunken conversation. The presence of a dark casket arbitrarily placed on the white tables pulls the whole assemblage back to the funereal; but this surreal centerpiece serves to heighten the absurdity, again directing the mind towards a besotted Irish wake rather than an eternal resting place. *Tomb for Arthur Rimbaud* (2016) also is a play on furniture-as-sculpture, lifting the everyday to the

Siah Armajani, Tomb for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 2016.
Ink on Mylar, 36 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associates.



Siah Armajani, Tomb for Frank O'Hara, 2016. Painted wood, 54 x 103 x 65 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associates.

monumental. The “punch line” or pivot around which the piece moves is a pink and baby blue ramp or distorted table, perhaps alluding to Rimbaud’s youth and melancholy nostalgia, as well as his overall surrealism — in this tomb there is no box for a corpse.

The philosopher’s tomb, *Tomb for Richard Rorty* (2016), is the most architectural, and by that token the least sculptural; a large beige box stands atop a scaffold, like a fisherman’s hut on a pier, while the end of an umber coffin emerges from a rectangular orifice in the side. Both the coffin and its housing are not completely opaque: there are sizeable chinks between the wooden slats allowing for a visual permeability that negates the monolithic quality of the massing. How this is related to the father of neopragmatism is anyone’s guess though. It does seem a very pleasant dwelling place for the hereafter.

Written Iran (2015-16) and *100 and 1 Dead Poets* (2016) utilize text in much the same ironic way that the artist repurposes furniture (and, to a subtler extent, architecture). In both cases, Armajani uses words to construct a fabric: in the former, text becomes an urban expanse, and, in the latter, an abstract pattern punctuated by a few small drawn objects referring to the text. As with the tombs, text becomes the jumping-off point of visual experience, and what the words actually say is sometimes less important than what they symbolize or the individual who wrote them. *Written Iran* brilliantly hops back and forth between the proposition that the city is a regulating geometry and presentational structure for the writing versus the words supplying the building blocks of the city. Armajani’s bridges and towers, recurring images for the Iranian-born

artist, function much in the same way — their obvious but limited practicality only serve to highlight their metaphysical and textual meaning as beacons and links between people. In his sculpture, Armajani emphasizes a clear but limited color palette — and one that seeks to visually delineate the different parts of the construction — rejecting the idea of unifying the form through a sameness of medium but instead outlining a narrative by distinguishing the multiple parts and aspects of the piece. This brings a depth of vibrancy, warmth and humor to a dauntingly titled series.



Siah Armajani, Tomb for Richard Rorty, 2016. Painted wood and ink, 77 x 84 x 38 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associates.