



# Siah Armajani

**Siah Armajani: *The Tomb Series***

September 4–October 18, 2014

Alexander Gray Associates

## TOMBS 1972–2014

There is no vacancy between life and death.

Death is to punctuate life. Had Americans understood Hegel by reading Walt Whitman, America would have been in a different place with a covenant of a different reading.

The *Tombs* regard philosophers and poets who formed and conditioned my thoughts and work. In the *Tombs* nothing is chosen to stand for something else that relates to semiology, semantics or a scientific study of history, nor biography or literature.

The alchemy of my works comes from the base metals of others. In the year 2000 my work, which since 1968 had been public, functional, neighborly and open, turned personal and melancholic. I have tried for years to fight against and hide this, but failed. So now my work is peculiar and closed. The *Tombs* in this exhibition include:

### *Tomb for Sacco and Vanzetti* (2009)

Nicolo Sacco left Torremaggiore, Italy, for America in 1908. And, two months later Bartolomeno Vanzetti left Villa Falletto for New York. Both were peasants. In America Vanzetti sold fish and Sacco made shoes. First they came to America and then they became anarchists.

### *Tomb for Walt Whitman* (2014)

... "our fearful trip is done,  
The ship has weathered every rack, the prize we sought is won;  
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting."

### *Tomb for Neema* (2012)

Neema Yooshiji was a Persian poet who started the new poetry known as "nimaic" poetry. He changed the rhythm and rhyme and took the poetry out of the ritual of the court. He placed it among the people and the masses. He gave it a new address, a new sensibility, new signs and symbols. He replaced the shop-worn with something fresh and revolutionary. With two or three symbolic references he changed the whole poem into one unit. Neema's poems did not reach the people until Reza Shah abdicated and left Iran. His son, the late Shah, was forced out for good by the revolution in 1979.

### *Tomb for John Berryman* (1972–2012)

John Berryman was 12 when he heard the shot. "That mad drive wiped out my childhood." And the pain in his heart niche remained forever.

"he only, very early in the morning,  
rose with his gun and went outdoors by my window  
and did what was needed."

One day he told his students that he wanted to be buried in Minneapolis' "Lake Street." On January 7, 1972, he jumped from the Washington Avenue Bridge in Minneapolis into the Mississippi River.

Among the works in this exhibition is *Written Minneapolis (The Last Tomb)*, 2014. It is 18-foot-long and a mix of writings and drawings of the neighborhood of my place of work.

At the end of the nineteenth century and into the first two decades of the twentieth, this part of Minneapolis was developed to be used for warehouses and light industry. By now, the neighborhood has morphed from its early years of grain elevators, into a mixed-use of storage houses, residential and criss-crossed with railroad tracks, some useful and some useless.

*Written Minneapolis (The Last Tomb)* is a crooked memory of my childhood and adolescence in Tehran, and then later on after I came to Minneapolis. Empty spaces were filled with poetry that I had to memorize as a student... some Persian and some impromptu translations by my teacher of French symbolist poets.

The buses carried people and goods from one end of Tehran to another. It was a whole day affair. And, the drivers were mostly in a stupor. It was the force of habit that transported people from one point to another. It was noisy and talkative with interruptions of laughter. Sometimes stories were told with huge pauses, and the pauses were never filled. No street was straight and felt as though the driver relied on old memories as he circled the streets two or three times before an objection screamed a halt.

My brain is filled with a lot of poetry, which was force-fed. That is how we communicated. Sometimes walking in the streets of Tehran we heard poetry being recited on the other side of the wall. In fact, poetry was the glue of all in our lives. Out in the city, poetry was arguments, political discourse, love and death, happiness, laughter, quiet weeping, misery, suffering, friction, bad-mouthing, praising and admiring. That was the whole of life in the city.

I wrote them all down. I covered the whole 18 feet.

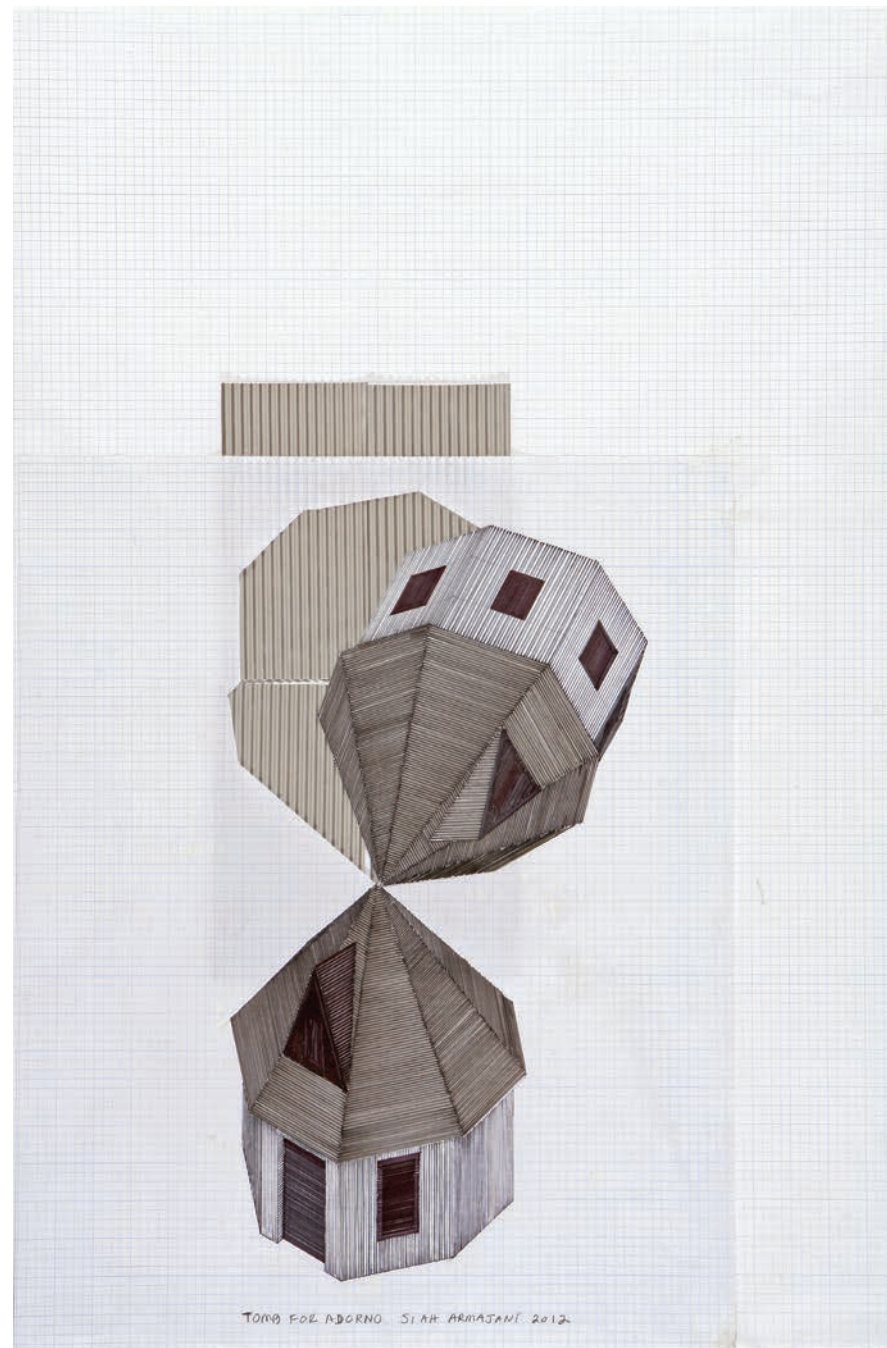
Siah Armajani, Minneapolis, July 26, 2014



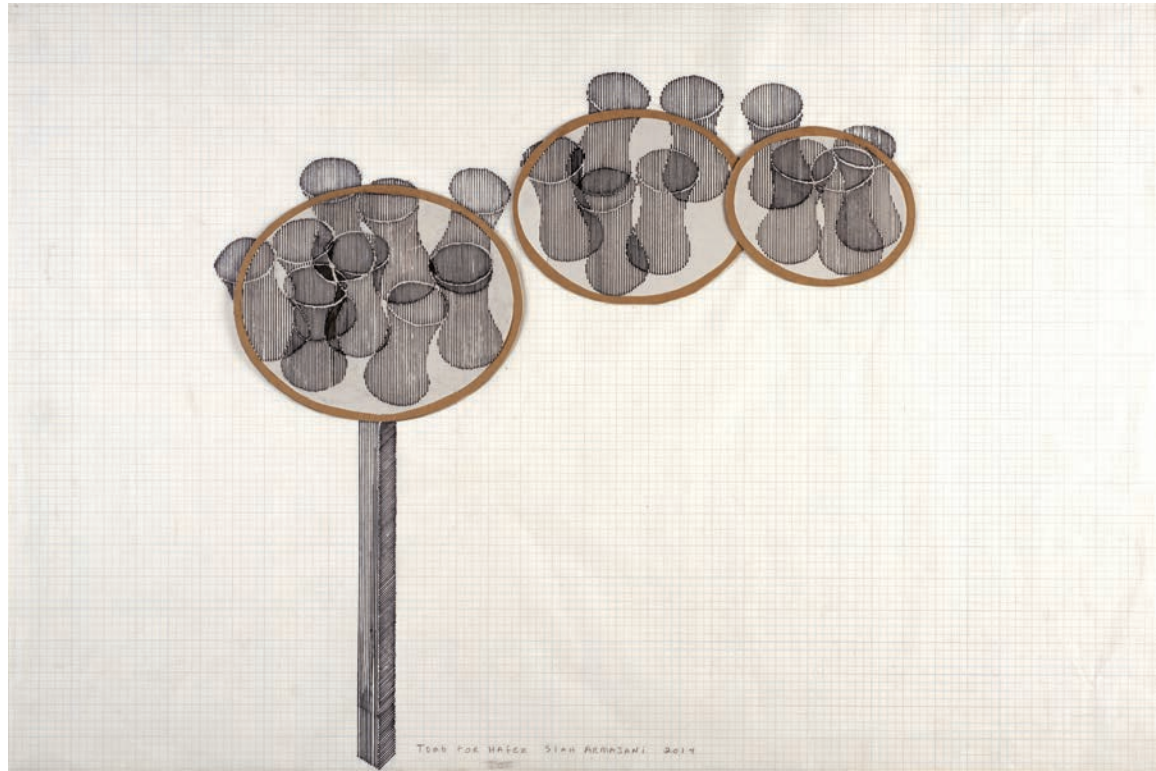
*Tomb for Neema, 2012*



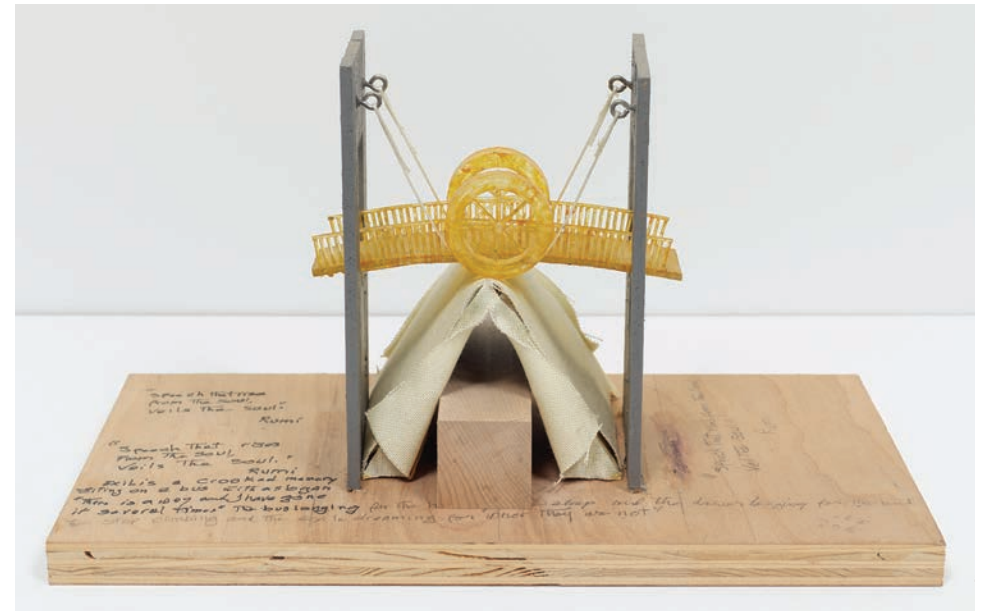
Tomb for John Berryman, 2014



Tomb for Adorno, 2012



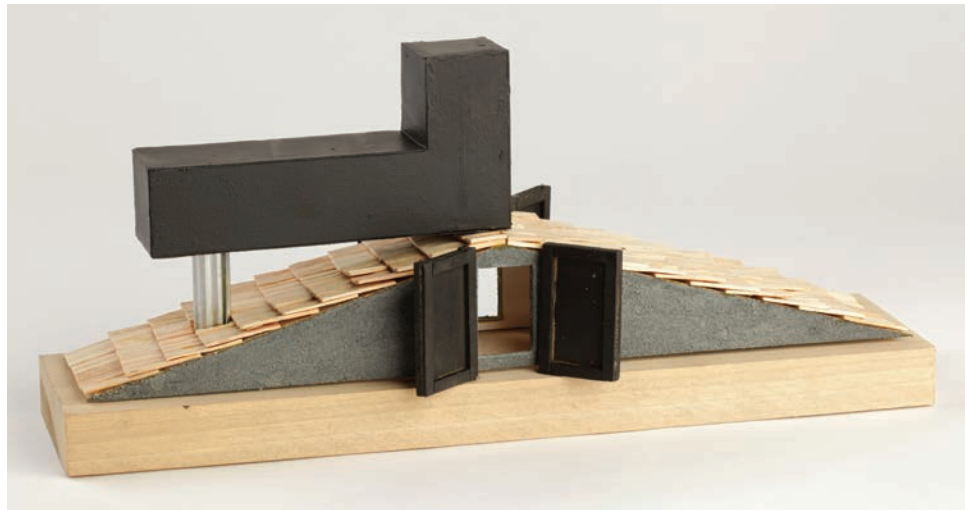
Tomb for Hafez, 2014



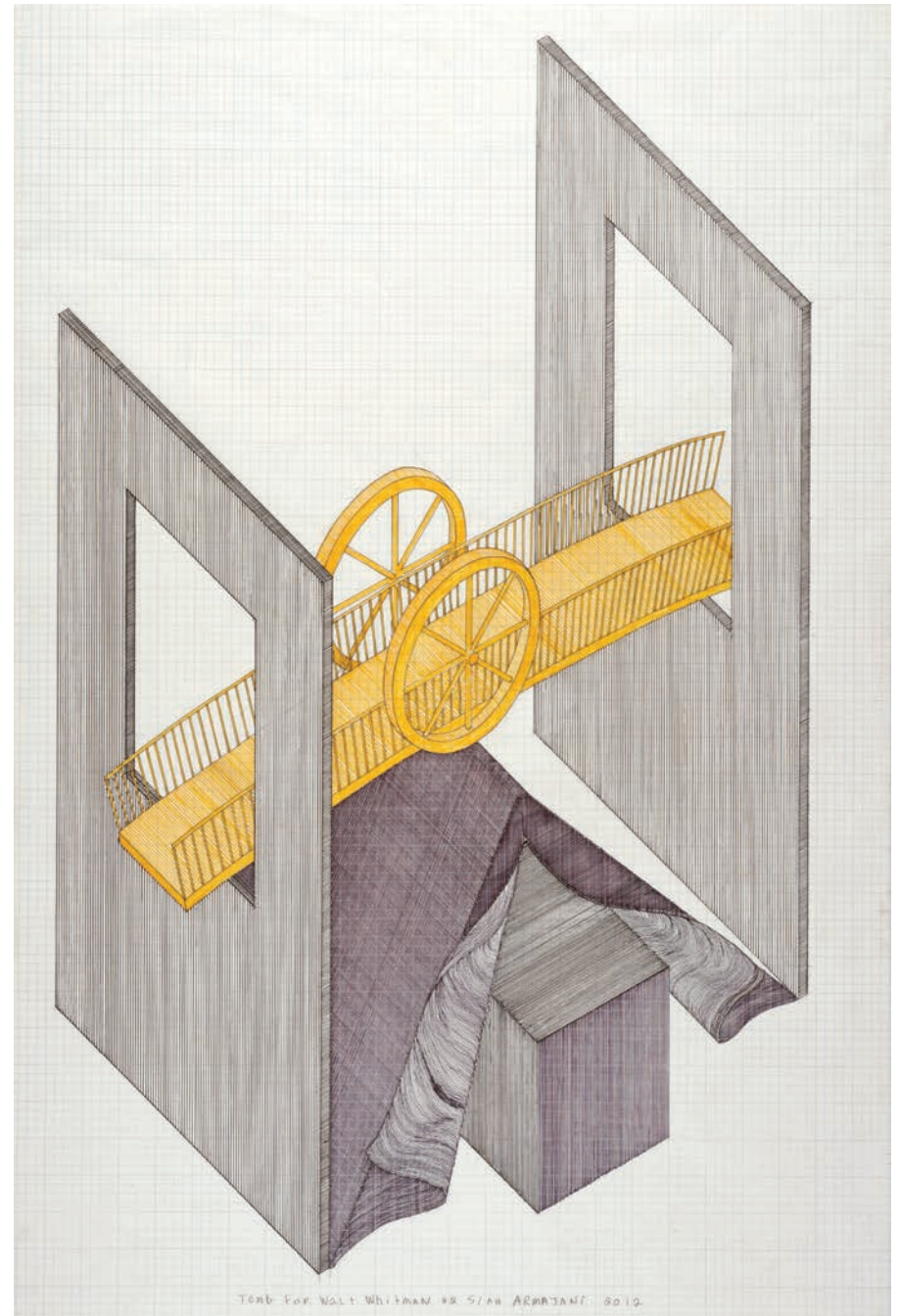
Tomb for Walt Whitman, 2010

*Tomb for Sacco and Vanzetti, 2009*





*Tomb for Neema, 2011*



*Tomb for Walt Whitman, 2012*





*Written Minneapolis (The Last Tomb)*, 2014  
Below: Detail

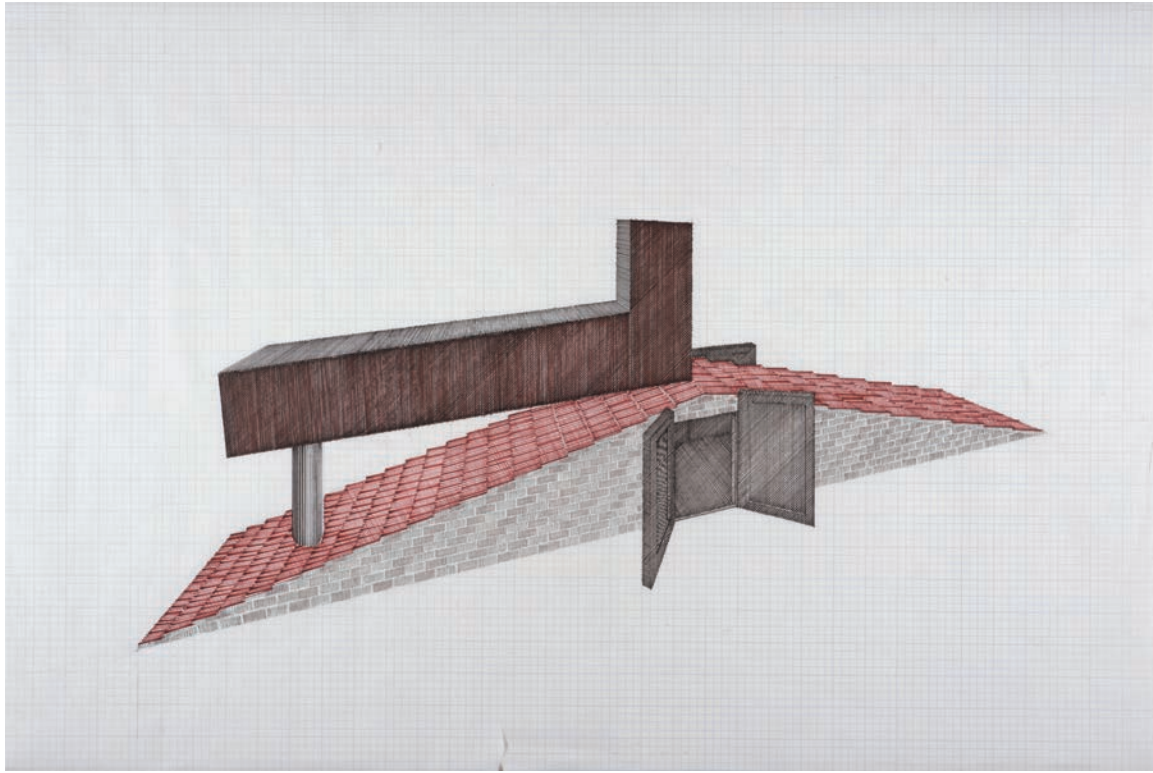


*Written Minneapolis (The Last Tomb)*, detail, 2014

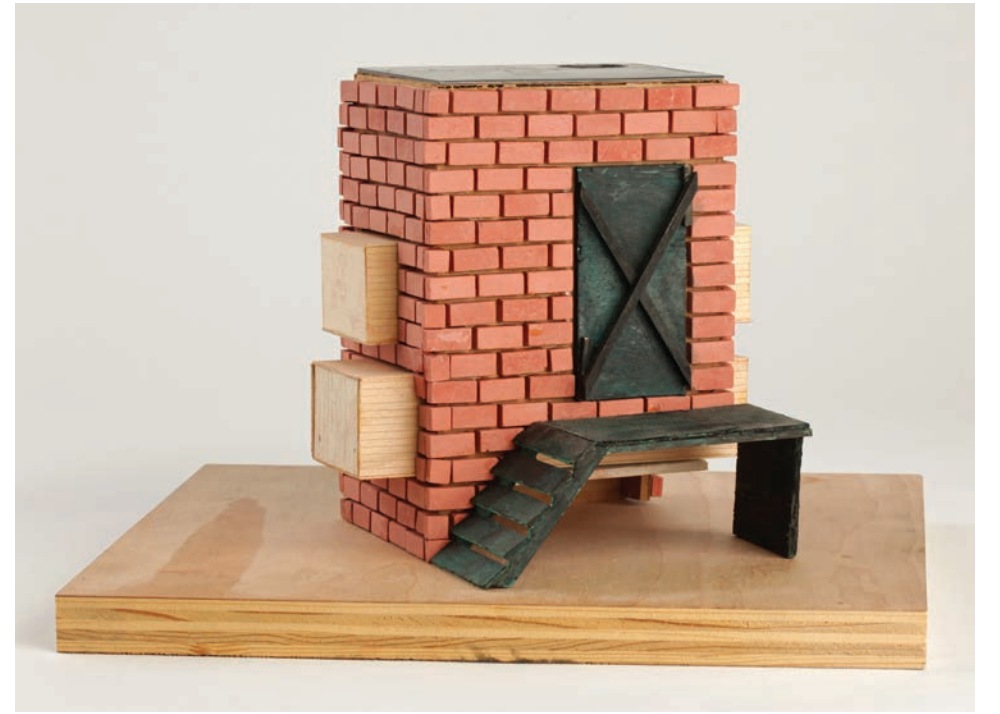




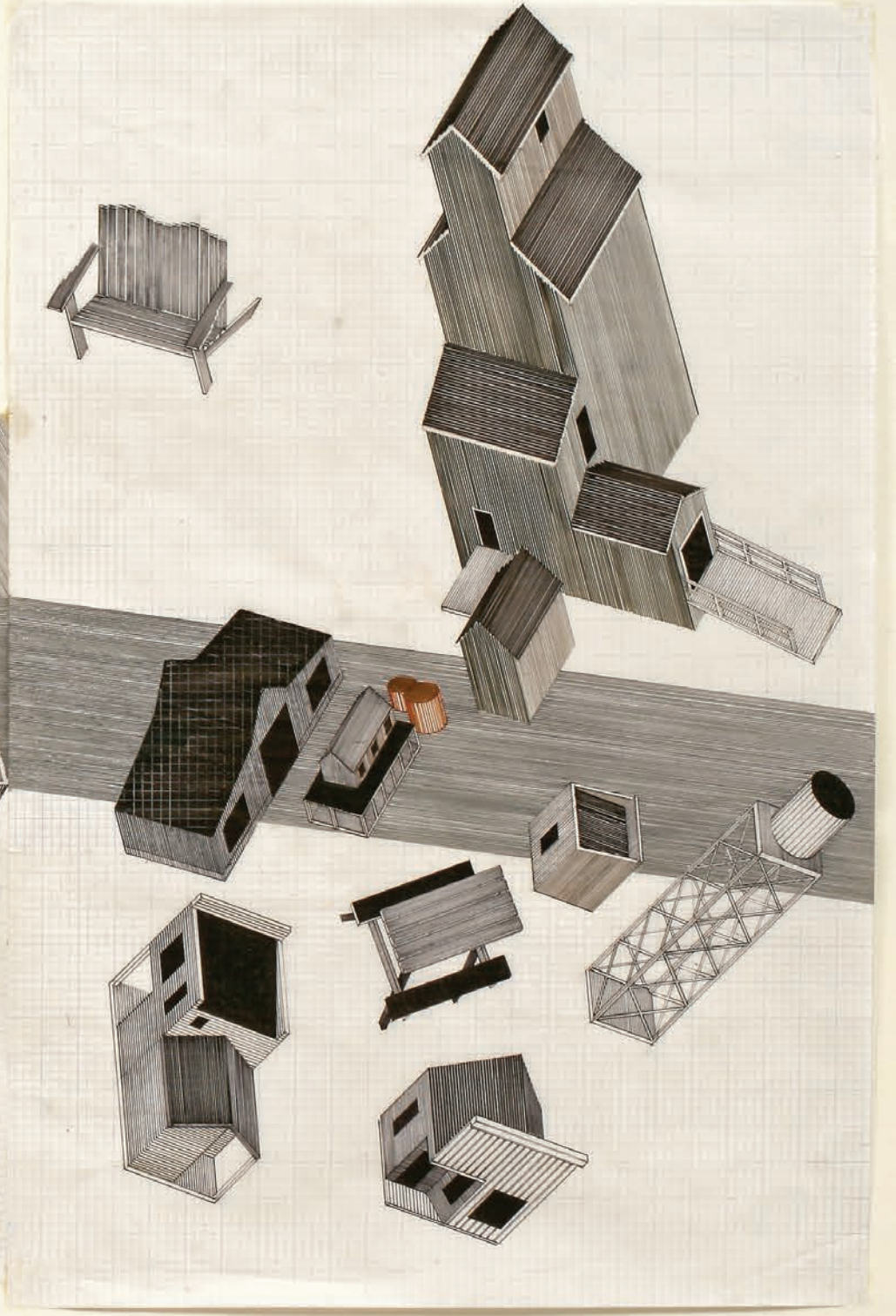
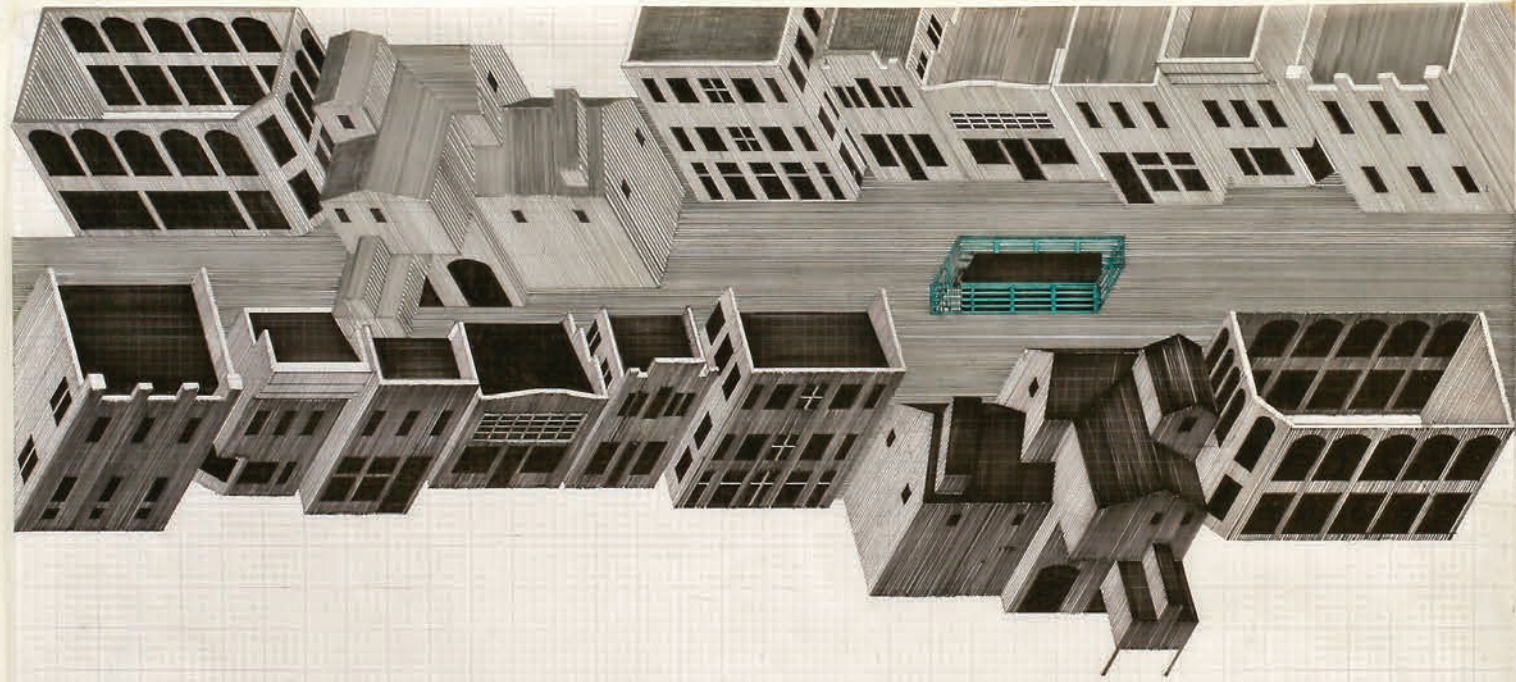
*Tomb for John Berryman, 1972–2012*  
Previous: Detail



*Tomb for Neema, 2014*



*Tomb for Sacco and Vanzetti, 2008*



Right: *Tomb for Walt Whitman*, 2014  
Previous: *Tomb for John Berryman*, 1972–2012





Installation views, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2014







Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2014



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2014

Siah Armajani (b.1939) was born in Iran and moved to the United States in 1960 to attend Macalester College in Minnesota, where he continues to live and work. His sculptures and public works, informed by his democratic and populist ideals, exist between the boundaries of art and architecture. With nearly one hundred projects realized internationally since the 1960s, Armajani is recognized as a leading figure in conceptualizing the role and function of public art.

As a student in Tehran, Armajani was drawn to American philosophers and writers, and later studied American populist thought as a philosophy major in the U.S. These early theoretical interests continue to catalyze his work, taking form in objects and architectural spaces designed in homage to literary, philosophical, and political figures including John Dewey, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodor Adorno, Ahmad Shamlou, and Luigi Galleani, among others. American vernacular architecture has been a consistent visual motif in Armajani's practice, and is embodied in his public works, including bridges, gardens, and outdoor rooms. Armajani's *Tombs*, his most recent sculpture series, are uninhabitable glass and wood structures that reference both American modernist and vernacular architecture. These works pay tribute to Walt Whitman, John Berryman, Nicola Sacco, and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, among others.

Armajani's most celebrated public art works are bridges, walkways, and gardens, including the *Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge*, Minneapolis, MN; the World Financial Center's promenade (in collaboration with Scott Burton and Cesar Pelli), Battery Park City, New York; *Gazebo for Two Anarchists* at Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, NY; *Floating Poetry Room*, Ijburg, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; *Bridge for Iowa City*, University of Iowa; and numerous gardens at Villa Arson Museum, Nice, France. Armajani was commissioned to design the Cauldron for the 1996 Centennial Olympic Celebration in Atlanta, GA. Solo exhibitions, including surveys and retrospectives at Parasol Unit, London (2013); Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO (2008); Musee d'art Moderne et Contemporain, Geneva, Switzerland (2007); Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Raina Sofia, Madrid (1999); Villa Arson, Nice, France (1994); Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, PA (1985); Minneapolis Institute of Arts, MN (2011); among others.

Armajani's work is in numerous public collections, including the Art Institute of Chicago, IL; British Museum, London; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; Museum fur Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, Germany; National Gallery, Washington, DC; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Musée d'Art Contemporain, Geneva, Switzerland; Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Germany; and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN.

## Checklist

### Sculptures

*Tomb for John Berryman, 1972–2012*  
Aluminum, plastic, balsa wood, paint  
12h x 128w x 53.75d in (30.48h x 325.12w x 136.53d cm)

*Tomb for Sacco and Vanzetti, 2009*  
Brick, wood, paint  
82h x 76.75w x 63d in (208.28h x 194.95w x 160.02d cm)

*Tomb for Neema, 2012*  
Concrete, wood, shingles, paint  
55h x 168w x 60d in (139.7h x 426.72w x 152.4d cm)

*Tomb for Walt Whitman, 2014*  
Concrete, wood, fabric, paint  
80h x 76w x 48d in (203.2h x 193.04w x 121.92d cm)

### Models

*Tomb for Sacco and Vanzetti, 2008*  
Wood, terra cotta, balsa wood, plastic, paint  
7h x 10.75w x 9.125d in (17.78h x 27.31w x 23.19d cm)

*Tomb for Walt Whitman, 2010*  
Wood, plastic, cardboard, canvas, eye bolts, string, paint  
7.75h x 14w x 8d in (19.68h x 35.56w x 20.23d cm)

*Tomb for Neema, 2011*  
Wood, foam core, balsa wood, plastic, paint  
6.5h x 15w x 5d in (16.51h x 38.1w x 12.7d cm)

*Tomb for John Berryman, 2014*  
Plywood, plastic, balsa wood, tape, paint  
6.75h x 14.25w x 34.75d in (17.15h x 36.2w x 88.27d cm)

### Drawings

*Tomb for John Berryman, 1972–2012*  
Felt pen on graph paper  
36h x 60 in (91.44h x 152.4w cm)

*Tomb for Walt Whitman, 2012*  
Felt pen on graph paper  
36h x 24w in (91.44h x 60.96w cm)

*Tomb for Adorno, 2012*  
Mixed media on paper  
36h x 24w in (91.44h x 60.96w cm)

*Tomb for Neema, 2014*  
Felt pen on graph paper  
24h x 36w in (60.96h x 91.44w cm)

*Tomb for Hafez, 2014*  
Felt pen on graph paper  
24h x 36w in (60.96h x 91.44w cm)

*Written Minneapolis (The Last Tomb), 2014*  
Felt pen on Mylar  
36h x 222w in (91.44h x 563.88w cm)

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

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Cover image: *Written Minneapolis (The Last Tomb)*, detail, 2014, felt pen on mylar  
36h x 222w in (91.44h x 563.88w cm)

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Alexander Gray Associates is a contemporary art gallery in New York. Through exhibitions, research, and artist representation, the Gallery spotlights artistic movements and artists who emerged in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Influential in political, social and cultural spheres, these artists are notable for creating work that crosses geographic borders, generational contexts and artistic disciplines. Alexander Gray Associates is a member of the Art Dealers Association of America.

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