
ARCHITECTURE AND SCULPTURE COMBINE IN NEW ICA SHOW

Sozanski, Edward J. **Philadelphia Inquirer**

03 Nov 1985: L.18.

REVIEW

This distinction between high and popular art is relatively recent, and generally confined to the European tradition. The high art of the Renaissance was also its popular art; in the Near East and Asia such a distinction has yet to develop to any significant degree.

It was the Russian avant-garde that tried to reinvigorate high art for the masses. Vladimir Tatlin's proposal to build a heroic Monument to the Third International exemplified the constructivist ideal - that art could, and should, offer a more utilitarian function.

Today's architectural sculpture, which we tend to regard as a pure variant of postmodernism, is actually a revival of the principles espoused by Tatlin and the constructivists 65 years ago. Constructivism had a socio-political component that many of us tend to view with skepticism, especially after the Bolsheviks decreed that art's purpose was to illustrate the Marxist-Leninist catechism.

Yet the idea that art can be democratic without attenuating its aesthetic integrity has been kept alive by contemporary architectural sculptors like Siah Armajani and Richard Fleischner. Armajani in particular has tried to embody traditional American virtues in his work. While his sculpture and installations are persistently metaphorical and symbolic, they are neither arcane nor elitist.

Of all the architectural sculptors, Armajani is the most democratic and the most political, the most concerned with establishing a modus vivendi between high art and daily existence. In fact, he seems determined to eliminate the distinction between high and popular art; he tries to make all art part of an overall design for living.

Armajani is also the most distinctive of the architectural sculptors. His pieces, which are informed by history, philosophy and poetry, subsume sculpture, architecture, structural engineering, cabinetmaking and carpentry. Under his hand, all these disciplines become equal partners in a collaboration.

Armajani speaks a language that most of us learned subliminally as children. Its vocabulary derives from American vernacular architecture - cellar doors, attic stairways, shuttered windows, gables and trusses. But he isn't an architect; in fact, his work isn't about architecture per se but about political and intellectual values.

This becomes reasonably apparent after one spends a little time in the Armajani exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA). The exhibition, described as a mid-career summary, examines the 46-year-old artist's work over the last 16 years through a collection of models and full scale works such as Back Porch With Picnic Table, a large construction built especially for the exhibition.

It was organized by ICA director Janet Kardon with financial support from the Dietrich Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the city of Philadelphia and, for the catalogue, the J. Paul Getty Trust.

Armajani's pieces look simple, for the most part like rather eccentric constructions built by an astigmatic carpenter, but they are eloquently and intricately layered with meaning. They embody declamations on language and on the ethos of physical structures. They decode whole structures like houses and bridges and extrapolate parts of them, like roofs and foundations, into improbable configurations.

Armajani's sculptures, which are built of wood, preserve and extend 19th century American values. One of those is high craftsmanship; Armajani is a superb builder who reveres the sanctity of the building process, and whose pieces are fitted and joined with the precision of a Chippendale sideboard.

Some of the works are inscribed with quotations from poets and philosophers, and by his choice of sources - Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson - he suggests the spiritual framework on which these works hang.

Middle American homilies are hardly what one might expect from an Iranian immigrant who lived the first 21 years of his life in that country. Armajani came to the United States in 1960 to attend Macalaster College in St. Paul, Minn., and he has remained in that city, obviously because he draws spiritual and emotional sustenance from the place.

Certainly one couldn't imagine a piece like Back Porch With Picnic Table, which invokes a summer cabin by one of Minnesota's sparkling blue lakes, coming out of a loft in SoHo.

The works in the exhibition illustrate Armajani's principal series - bridges, houses, indoor and outdoor communal spaces and a series of free standing constructions that collectively are known as a "Dictionary for Building." (Armajani has built one communal space in Philadelphia, the Louis Kahn Lecture Room at the Fleisher Art Memorial on Catharine Street.)

In the bridges and houses - which aren't houses in the traditional sense of domiciles, but house-like structures - Armajani focuses on skeletal features like angle braces and trusses and on metaphorical allusions like the act of passing over a bridge or the nature of enclosure.

In the communal spaces like the Kahn Lecture Room and in his "reading gardens," which are outdoor spaces dedicated to learning and contemplation, Armajani is more concerned with drawing the viewer into a participatory role. Nevertheless, the communal spaces are not primarily utilitarian; the Kahn Lecture Room, for example, functions only by implication, not in practice.

The constructions from the "Dictionary for Building" are more purely sculptural, but they're also intended to stimulate reflection on the nature of their components, which are things, like windows and doors, that we tend to take for granted. In the "Dictionary" pieces Armajani also introduces color as a vital element in the composition.

The Armajani exhibition will run through Dec. 1 in Meyerson Hall at the **University of Pennsylvania**, Walnut and 34th Streets. For the remainder of the run, the ICA will be open Mondays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. in addition to its regular schedule - Tuesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Wednesdays to 7 p.m.

Credit: Edward J. Sozanski, Inquirer Art Critic

Illustration

Caption: PHOTO (1)

1. Visitors find a practical use for 'Back Porch With Picnic Table,' which was built for the exhibit (The Philadelphia Inquirer / MYRNA LUDWIG)