

Siah Armajani

Senior & Shopmaker Gallery

21 East 26th Street, Chelsea

Through Jan. 18

Siah Armajani is justly celebrated for public artworks that combine architectural utility, playful style and references to American poetry and history. In the cloistered space of the gallery, where he doesn't have the public realm to play off, his sculpture is less surprising. Two recent works built mainly of structural steel and glass would make interesting bus stop shelters or park gazebos; in the gallery they're metaphorically intriguing but formally bland.

"Glass Room for an Exile" consists of two large, adjoining glass-walled cubes. One, measuring six feet on a side, has a black curtain lining all four walls. The other has transparent 8-by-8-foot walls and contains a simple glass and steel chair and a four-foot metal wheel that protrudes half way through one wall. The conjunction of metaphysical obscurity and utilitarian transparency speaks to something in the divided American soul that harks all the way back to the Puritans. It's a great theme, but the installation's overly precious formality does it less justice than it deserves.

The other sculpture, "Niche," is a phone booth-like alcove where an old dictionary rests on a glass and steel lectern. The dictionary is a work from 1968 in which Mr. Armajani has blacked-out all definitions, suggesting the slippery, mutable relationship between words and meanings. The newly built shelter adds a vaguely religious dimension, but that is mitigated by the anonymous corporate design.

KEN JOHNSON