

Siah Armajani: The Tomb Series

September 4 – October 18, 2014

The "Tomb Series" (1972–2014) pays tribute to twenty-five philosophers, activists, poets, and critical writers who have been foundational voices to Armajani's art and ideology, among them Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John Dewey, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman. The Series embodies the humanist, democratic, and populist ideals that have defined Armajani's multi-faceted vision for over forty years, culminating with the creation of his own tomb.

As a student in Tehran, and later a graduate of philosophy from Macalester College, Armajani was drawn to Western philosophers, writers and Persian poetry. Throughout his career, Armajani has built public sculptures dedicated to cultural figures, at times embedding quotes of writers and poets into his work. With the "Tomb Series," as the artist explains, "there is no semiology, no quotations, no study of history nor biography." The series of sculptures, drawings, and models represents a self-reflexive moment in Armajani's practice. Paradoxically, the tombs invite, yet inhibit the viewer from entering each sculpture. Contrary to previous series that emphasized public and communal activities, the "Tomb Series" holds a more introspective nature while maintaining Armajani's desire to distance his biography from the meaning behind his work.

Usually, Armajani begins the conceptualization of each Tomb with a small scale model, often made of cardboard, balsa wood and glue. These models are later used as references to create the full-scale Tomb sculptures as well as the Tomb models, which exist as individual artworks. While most Tomb models are almost exact representations of the sculptures, the *Tomb for John Berryman* is an exception as Armajani created the model after the the large sculpture to conceptually represent the city scape of Lake Street (Minneapolis, MN) using toy furniture painted all in black. The drawings from the "Tomb Series" are the final conceptualization of each Tomb. Armajani creates them after both the sculpture and model have been completed. When there are no corresponding sculptures or models, such as with *Tomb for Hafez* and *Tomb for Rumi*, the drawings exist as the Tomb.

Tomb for Sacco and Vanzetti, 2009

Tomb for Sacco and Vanzetti (model), 2008



In 1920, Nicola Sacco (1891–1927) and Bartolomeo Vanzetti (1888–1927), two Italian immigrants and anarchists, became embroiled in one of the most controversial trials in American history. Initially arrested and charged for murder based on circumstantial evidence, Sacco and Vanzetti are widely considered to be victims of the general anti-immigrant and anti-communist sentiment that existed in the United States during the 1920s. For Armajani, who has engaged with subjects such as civil liberty, freedom of thought, and democratic ideals throughout his career, Sacco and Vanzetti represent the failure of the American dream. *Tomb for Sacco and Vanzetti*, an homage to these two figures, appears as a habitable dwelling with a window, entrance, and staircase. However, the tomb is entirely closed-off and is impossible to enter, while Sacco and Vanzetti's symbolic pine wood coffins are visible on the two sides of the brick structure. Their pine material references Sacco and Vanzetti's humble occupations in the United States as a shoemaker and a fisherman.

Tomb for Adorno, 2012



Theodor Adorno (1903–69), was a German philosopher, sociologist, musicologist, and critical theorist. Widely regarded as one of the leading philosophers of the twentieth century, Adorno wrote on a variety of subjects. Running through his work, however, is the fundamental concern of human suffering. Closely associated with the Institute for Social Research in the Frankfurt School, Adorno was forced to flee Nazi Germany in 1934, and spent many years in exile in England and the United States. After his return to Germany, Adorno published his most seminal texts that broached the topics of the Enlightenment, the Culture Industry, the Holocaust, and modern music, among many others. Most influential on Armajani has been Adorno's moral philosophy, which critiques how modern society has undermined morality by placing it in the realm of subjective, rather than objective, thought. Armajani also deeply admires Adorno's *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music: Fragments and Texts* (published posthumously in 1998). Adorno's text had a great impact on Armajani perception and understanding of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

Tomb for John Berryman, 1972 – 2012

Tomb for John Berryman (model), 2014

Tomb for John Berryman (drawing), 1972 – 2012



John Berryman (1914–72), an accomplished scholar and Pulitzer Prize winning poet who created deeply personal and idiosyncratic poetry, and taught at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis and St. Paul, committed suicide in 1972. After this event Armajani began the sculpture *Tomb for John Berryman*. This work depicts Lake Street, a site in Minneapolis that runs around the edge of the city and is known for its immigrant-run shops. Berryman wished to be buried underneath the pavement of Lake Street, but due to building ordinances and city restrictions this wish was never fulfilled. Although Armajani did not personally know Berryman, he created a symbolic portrayal of Berryman's desired final resting place, positioning Berryman's coffin in the sculpture's central street. Predating Armajani's philosophical investigation of tombs as subject matter, he revisited and finished the sculpture in 2012, and conceptually integrated it into his "Tomb Series."

Tomb for Walt Whitman, 2014

Tomb for Walt Whitman (model), 2010

Tomb for Walt Whitman (drawing), 2012



Walt Whitman (1819–92) has been an influential figure for Armajani throughout his career. Considered to be one of the most important American poets of the nineteenth century, Whitman's now-canonical collection of poems *Leaves of Grass* (first published 1855) celebrated friendship, love, nature, and democracy. Armajani admires Whitman's commitment to public art and education reform. Whitman's work was highly significant in Armajani's decision to create his series of Reading Rooms and Gardens. In *Tomb for Walt Whitman*, Armajani places Whitman's symbolic coffin on an archetypal bridge structure, which has been a strong visual motif throughout his artistic practice. Many of the elements in the sculpture have a particular meaning to Armajani, which he keeps as personal references that should not inform the interpretation of the work. For the artist, this and all of the works within the "Tomb Series" are open-ended, allowing for viewers to experience the works based on their own knowledge of the figures' life and work.

Written Minneapolis (The Last Tomb), 2014

Armajani created *Written Minneapolis (The Last Tomb)* for himself, inspired by the Constructivist artist Kasimir Malevich who designed his own tomb in 1935. Armajani sees himself as following this art historical precedent. In the drawing, Armajani creates a cityscape of Minneapolis (where he has lived since 1960) from calligraphic writings in Farsi of the Persian poetry he memorized as a child, including verses of Hafez and Rumi, and translated French Symbolist poetry, as well as description of his own relationship to his neighborhood. The architecture of Minneapolis and its surrounding areas has greatly influenced Armajani's work, and similar buildings to the ones depicted can be found on the same street as the artist's studio. In line with his belief that his art should not be about self-expression, Armajani maintains that the Tomb is a portrait of Minneapolis rather than of himself. Throughout his practice, Armajani has tried to harness his ego, which speaks to the introspective nature *Written Minneapolis*.



Tomb for Neema, 2012

Tomb for Neema (model), 2011

Nima Yushij (1896–1960), for whom Armajani made *Tomb for Neema*, was an Iranian poet who is considered by many to have established the paradigm for modern Persian poetry. Yushij sought to create a radical new poetic form through symbolism, free verse, and the incorporation of vernacular words from local Persian dialects into the standardized Farsi that was historically used as the language for poetry. Yushij's formal innovations and use of colloquial language brought Persian poetry away from its courtly associations and into the realm of the everyday. He also utilized symbolism to create political critiques of the dictatorial regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, whom Armajani actively demonstrated against as a young man in Iran. The sculpture combines elements of both vernacular and modernist architecture. Its base resembles an archetypal gable rooftop. Armajani created Yushij's symbolic coffin as a combined L-structure that references both the horizontal Christian coffer as well as the Sunni Muslim tradition of burying their dead sitting upright.



Tomb for Hafez, 2014

Hafez (c. 1320-1389) is one of Iran's most celebrated and influential poets. Although little factual evidence exists about his life, which has been imbued with legend since his death, it is known that he served as a court poet for successive shahs and taught at a religious college. Well-known during his lifetime, his poetry expressed love, spirituality, and protest against hypocrisy. His poems unfold many levels of meaning, fusing mysticism and lyricism, and utilizing extended metaphors and punning. Today, Hafez's words has become woven into the fabric of the everyday lives of Iranians, and many of his verses have become proverbs and sayings. His tomb is a destination for many Iranians, some of whom discreetly pour wine on his tomb—a tradition within Persian culture. Armajani's own connection to Hafez stems from his memorization of his poetry as part of his childhood education in Iran. In *Tomb for Hafez*, Armajani depicts tea glasses, inspired by a dance performance in Shiraz, Iran.

