

ART/ARCHITECTURE

ART/ARCHITECTURE; Designed to Bridge Two Cultures, Two Arts

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THE twilight zones today between art forms that were once quite distinct -- painting and photography, architecture and sculpture -- have been the locus of the most intriguing art produced in recent decades. And no one has mined the creative potential in these blurred boundaries more avidly than the Tehran-born, Minneapolis-based artist Siah Armajani.

Unquestionably American in his outlook and interests, Mr. Armajani, 63, nonetheless remains indebted to the rich culture of his native land. He is a builder of bridges, real and metaphoric, during a time that has distanced the two regions of the world he considers his spiritual homes.

Mr. Armajani's latest New York exhibition, of eight architecturally inspired sculptures, is at the Senior & Shopmaker Gallery on Madison Square Park, and it extends his exploration of quintessential American forms and attitudes, which he pursues more patiently than many native-born American artists. As he quoted Ralph Waldo Emerson in the epigraph for his retrospective at the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid three years ago, "I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low; give me insight into today and you may have the antique and the future worlds."

An Iranian Christian who emigrated to the United States to study philosophy at Macalester College in St. Paul, Mr. Armajani had been immersed in American thought since his teens. "When I was in high school in Iran," he recalled recently while setting up his show, "one of my teachers was very familiar with American philosophers. Especially Emerson, who had translated Hafez, the great Persian Sufi poet, from German into English, which earned him a special place in Persian literature. That teacher knew a lot about Jefferson and Adams, and instilled in me a passion for democracy."

That mentor also introduced Mr. Armajani to pragmatism, and not just the philosophy of John Dewey, a high priest of that school of thought and another of the artist's seminal influences. Like a number of earlier modern artists, from Le Corbusier to Charles Sheeler, Mr. Armajani was mesmerized by the logical purity and physical power of America's geometrically absolute and structurally straightforward farm buildings, grain silos and covered bridges. Those qualities have informed his work ever since. In the current exhibition, it is easy to appreciate his admiration for American vernacular construction.

"You can walk around a barn and into it and see exactly how it's put together and how it's supposed to function," he said, standing next to one of his similarly forthright sculptures. "There's no concealment. And that is what art should be."

Formalizing his admiration for American culture, Mr. Armajani became a United States citizen 35 years ago, rejecting both the last shah's repressive rule as well as the Islamic nationalism that would engulf Iran with the Khomeini regime a decade afterward. "I was for the revolution," he admitted, "but it promised democracy and delivered theocracy. I thought paradise would come, so it was a great disillusionment."

Mr. Armajani's contempt for political extremes has kept him from returning to Iran since

1960, and though he has embraced his adopted country, he still considers himself an exile, though reconciled to being one. He tells of a sanctuary he has made for himself in the Minneapolis house he shares with his wife, Barbara: "I have a small book room with books on Persian miniatures and architecture, and from time to time I look at them. It's sentimental, actually. But Persian poetry has tempered and conditioned my general feelings about everything. So I look at the universe poetically."

The artist's poetic pragmatism is evident in several new pieces expanding on ideas he first set forth in a mid-1970's series called "Dictionary for Building," a lexicon of familiar architectural elements including miniature doors, windows, dormers, a closet, fireplace and garage rendered in corrugated cardboard and wood. Here several of those archetypal fragments are enlarged, refined and executed in painted steel, aluminum, glass and Plexiglas, giving them a highly finished presence quite different from their rough-hewn origins.

The most ambitious work in the exhibition is a painted steel structure of two adjoining, cagelike cubes, one eight feet square, floored in glass tiles and punctuated by a large wheel, the other six feet square and shrouded by black curtains. Titled "Glass Room for an Exile" and completed this year, it is Mr. Armajani's typically cryptic but affecting homage to those who, like himself, are compelled to abandon their native lands. As he points out, "Most exiles never go back, because there is no place to return to, intellectually or emotionally."

Though meant to honor all displaced persons, "Glass Room for an Exile" resonates with topical references. Among them is the work of the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, whom the artist lately discovered and who wrote: "We travel like other people, but we return nowhere. We have a country of words."

Like his colleagues who also came of creative age during the 1970's and disdained the collectible artifact as a bourgeois commodity, Mr. Armajani focused instead on site-specific public art. But the presence in this show of pieces that do not require a grant to build or a plaza to exhibit is no sign of his having sold out to a commercial gallery system that demands domestic-scale merchandise. "All along I have always done these smaller pieces," he explained. "Because the pauses between public art projects are so elongated, you have to do other things. But my fundamental belief in the nobility of public art has not changed."

Best known for his lyrical pedestrian bridges (the most recent, in Nashville and Strasbourg, France, will open next year), Mr. Armajani has tried to make his work both accessible to a general audience and rigorous in artistic integrity. He deplores what he sees as a disturbing participatory trend: "In the last few years there is a new group of emerging public artists who look upon it as a panacea, a fiction, physical therapy, an ice cream social. It has lost its force, its essence. The language of public art is a hybrid language -- the social sciences, architecture and sculpture put together.

"We are all indebted to the writings of Robert Morris, Donald Judd, Robert Smithson, who moved from sculpture toward architecture, and Tony Smith and John Hejduk, who moved from architecture toward sculpture. They enriched the language of public art and brought about a syntax with which you could explain it in terms of its spatial, metaphysical and psychological aspects."

"But the idea of going to the community for approval of a project because the public is always right is social work," he continued. "Science has a foundation, theology has a foundation, and art has to have a foundation, too. It cannot become everything and anything that everybody wants. There is a core to the concept of art, and the longer you live, the more you realize that those foundations are not negotiable."

Siah Armajani

Senior & Shopmaker Gallery, 21 East 26th Street.

Through Jan. 18.

Photos: The Iranian-born sculptor Siah Armajani's recently completed "Glass Room for an Exile," above, and "Cellar" (2001), left. (Photographs by Senior & Shopmaker Gallery)