
AT LAST GLANCE INSIGHTS ON ART

Cook-Romero, Elizabeth. **The Santa Fe New Mexican**

21 Sep 2007: PA-24.

The view from a glass house

The destroyed home depicted in Siah Armajani's sculpture *Fallujah*, installed at the Santa Fe Art Institute, projects the classic coolness of a 1960s glass-and-steel office tower. The rocking horse, overturned furniture, smashed mattresses, and Persian rug inside its transparent walls provide few details about the individuals who might have lived there.

A stylized light fixture, an obvious reference to a similar fixture in Picasso's 1937 painting *Guernica*, dominates the scene. Its power comes not from its relationship to that earlier artwork, but because it echoes the shape of a human eye. It alone, among the details Armajani includes, projects warmth and the presence of real people.

In *Guernica*, Picasso painted gray triangles to represent artificial light; Armajani has reinterpreted those triangular rays in day-glow orange, making them impossible to miss. By including that light fixture and its sickly orange light, Armajani draws a parallel between *Guernica*, the Spanish city bombed by German planes in April 1937, and *Fallujah*, the Iraqi "city of mosques," which has suffered massive civilian casualties during the current war in Iraq.

Fallujah wasn't spared, either, in the 1990-1991 Gulf War. Back then, bombs that were dropped in an attempt to destroy a bridge missed their mark and landed in *Fallujah*'s markets, killing hundreds. During the present war, images of *Fallujah*'s injured and dying women and children have been widely published in the Muslim world. Some Americans have seen those images on the Internet. But I suspect that, when imagining *Fallujah*, the majority of Americans recall the pictures of the angry crowd surrounding the mutilated bodies of four employees of the private security firm Blackwater. Photographs of that mob, which hung two of the bodies on a bridge crossing the Euphrates River in March 2004, flashed across millions of American television screens and ran in many U.S. newspapers.

Armajani is an Iranian artist who lives in the United States. His visual quoting of Picasso seems to ask if Westerners are willing to see images of the Iraqi and U.S.-led coalition dead and mourn both equally. His work insists that all mankind is one -- that Muslims also love, mourn, suffer, and die -- and makes a visceral connection to a European tragedy, challenging us to see all we consider civilized, good, and human in our own culture reflected in the dust, mud, and bones of *Fallujah*.

But, unlike the description of the bombing of Dresden in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Goya's *The Disasters of War*, or thousands of images created by the best photojournalists, Armajani's sculpture does not communicate war's terror and chaos. Few paintings or sculpture do -- including, in my opinion, *Guernica*.

In *Fallujah*, only the title suggests that this home was destroyed by bombs. Without it, the work could be about any number of crises that shatter families. Like *Guernica*, *Fallujah* feels distant. It is first and foremost a work of art made by a man conscious of the history of art, a knowledge that seems to drive Armajani's work. He appears to have created *Fallujah* with the intention that it become an important icon, and for me, that palpable ambition is the work's major flaw.

Armajani is an artist in residence at the Santa Fe Art Institute, 1600 St. Michael's Drive. *Fallujah* remains on view through Oct. 22.

The view from a shed

In the days after I saw Armajani's sculpture, I found myself thinking about a show of John Nava's tapestries I saw in August at Shack Obscura, an annex of Klaudia Marr Gallery that occupies a shed behind the main building at 668 Canyon Road. Shack Obscura was filled with fewer than a dozen 9-by-6-foot tapestries. They hung floor to ceiling and touched at the sides. Each depicts a casually dressed, healthy American youth. Each wears a T-shirt with a different slogan. A blond adolescent has "America tortures" written across her chest. A younger girl sports a shirt that reads "One nation under surveillance."

T-shirt slogans are not going to convince anyone of anything. But these larger-than-life-size children wearing garments decorated with words that acknowledge the kind of future they are inheriting stopped me in my tracks. They obviously enjoy the ease that is the birthright of every human. Their shirts are a reminder that the secure and wealthy lives that some children enjoy come at a terrible price -- and that this privileged lifestyle cannot last.

Nava's art, like Armajani's, reflects his deep knowledge of art history. His young models often have the classical beauty of Italian Renaissance Madonnas. But Nava's consciousness of art history was not a barrier between me and the work. Although I felt the artist was implying that he is part of the continuum of Western culture, he makes that assertion softly.

Perhaps I found Nava's tapestries more engaging than Armajani's sculpture partly because I found his Western-centered viewpoint easier to understand. Most of the power of the tapestries comes from the fact that these slogan-wearing children seem specific, real, and familiar. Their clothing alludes to gross injustices, yet their youthful stares are neither accusing nor angry. They didn't make me want to contemplate the history of culture; they made me want to do something to help make the future better.