

Submitted by Kay Miller, October 2012

***Mississippi Delta, Siah Armajani, 2005-2006, #2010.100a-c***



**Wall label:** In 1960 Siah Armajani left his native Iran to study at Macalester College in St. Paul, where he majored in philosophy, but dreamed of being an artist. Today, he is a world-renowned sculptor and architect whose work articulates both his lifelong passion for art and ideas, and his engagement with American culture, politics and geography. *Mississippi Delta* focuses on the environment and humanity's effect on the landscape of the Mississippi River, presenting it as a carrier of history and a force of nature. Armajani's imagery – an overturned car, a partially submerged house, a stranded bed floating on the surface of the flooded river – is drawn from the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. Rendered schematically in the exacting tradition of an architectural draftsman, as well as of Persian painting, this large-scale work is at once an abstracted landscape, and poignant expression of everyday life decimated by climatic events.

**Questions:**

1. Standing at a distance, what about this work first captures your attention? Quickly tick off words you would use to describe it. As you move closer, what details and symbols appear? How do these change your impression of the work?
2. The artist, Siah Armajani is known for bringing events of daily life into his art and telling stories. What story is he telling here? What messages might he be trying to convey?
3. In portraying the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, Armajani used a few very evocative figures in three large panels called a triptych. Does this economy of symbols make it more or less powerful? If you were the artist, what symbols would you have added or left out?
4. Armanjani often laces his sculptures and other art works with ideas about democracy and our obligation to others in need. What do you think Armajani is suggesting about our individual responsibility toward victims of Hurricane Katrina?
5. Seventy countries pledged monetary donations to aid recover from Katrina, with Kuwait making the largest single contribution, \$500 million. The United States is used to being a

donor nation, not a recipient. What does this work suggest about the United States' role in a globally connected world?

6. Armajani often embeds his art with his own experiences as an immigrant exile, quoting philosopher Theodor Adorno: "It is part of morality not to be at home in one's home." How might the idea of the exile be at work in this piece?
7. Do you see any signs of hope in all the devastation?
8. The triptych form is often used in altar pieces and other religious works of art. Do you consider this as a religious or spiritual piece? How so?
9. To create this piece, Armajani drew with colored pencil on sheets of Mylar, often used for helium balloons. What effects does he achieve using this media combination? Why do you think he chose it? What do you think those orange squares represent?

### **The work: "Mississippi Delta":**

- Made in response to Hurricane Katrina. Memorial to lives & property lost.
- Depicts loss and hopelessness.
- Arrestingly beautiful abstract landscape in green & blue tones, juxtaposed with devastatingly personal objects and figures adrift in a flooded city.
- Multiple perspectives. One is helicopter overview, reflecting frequent images of flooded cities [see photo below]. Another a panoramic perspective. Recalls Persian miniature paintings, an architectural drawing and 19th c. American landscapes done by Precisionist artists such as Charles Sheeler, Georgia O'Keefe and Ralston Crawford.
- From the left, the straight progression of a road is punctuated by repetitive rows of trees, a trestle bridge and what appears to be a scarecrow of the body of a man. In the central portion of the work, the road veers off on a diagonal followed by rows of houses, an overturned car, a partially submerged house and stranded bed floating on the surface of the flooded river. In the right-hand section, crows perch in a tree to the left of a white mill building. All emotional artifacts of tragedy.
- Horizontal & vertical lines frame nightmarish all-compassing presence of water. Orange squares sprinkled throughout.
- Media: Color pencil on Mylar. Triptych form, often used in religious art works.

## Siah Armajani:

- **World-renowned sculptor-architect** whose work reflects his life-long engagement with writers/thinkers worldwide.
  - He was a **hybrid** before that word became fashionable. Original amalgam of ancient & modern; Western & Eastern; global & local; public & private.
  - Balances startling physical beauty with political engagement.
- Most important internationally known artist in Minnesota, where he has lived and worked for 50 years.
  - Recipient of McKnight Foundation's 2010 Distinguished Artist \$50,000 award.
  - Known for hybrid bridges, plazas, benches, gazebos & reading rooms – neighborhood spaces – that honor his intellectual heroes.
  - Started as a painter & conceptual artist. Later, moved to bridges & public sculpture. In last decade, moved to inward-looking pieces that meditate on democracy, war, iconic thinkers & mortality. The "last phase" of his work consists of "tombs" for his intellectual heroes and for himself.
  - Among his best known public works: the sky-blue-and-Jeffersonian-soft-yellow Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge, linking the Walker Sculpture Garden & Loring Park.
  - Frequently incorporates texts of American thinkers/philosophers in his sculptures. Commissioned poetry of author-critic John Ashberry for the Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge to run the inside length of the bridge.
- His works are never flashy. They are intellectual, rigorous, unflinching. They speak to viewers and spark dialogue.
- His life-long experience of **feeling like an exile** - one who lives in a culture not his own - permeates his art. Yet, he has deep, joyous passion for his adopted country and believes in the ideals of American democracy.
  - Often quotes German philosopher Theodor Adorno: ***"It is part of morality not to be at home in one's home."***
  - Insists that none of what we have in this affluent society can be taken for granted. There is always more work to be done. Our democratic vision demands that we investigate the present and enact a better future for all.
  - Believes in the responsibility of individual actions in the public realm.
  - Private person; hates to be photographed.
- Born 1939, in Teheran, Iran, to affluent, intellectual family in a large house filled with 10,000 books.
  - Family was part of Iran's Christian minority. Armajani attended the Presbyterian missionary school in Teheran.
  - His father read Persian poems to his four children every night. In Iran, educated people – regardless of religion - consider themselves Sufis. The roots of Persian

art & poetry lie in Sufism, which is not a sect but an alternative strategy. It is a civilizing and humanizing influence that works very quietly, without calling attention to itself. [New Yorker profile]

- Knew from a very young age that he wanted to be an artist. Studied with master painter & calligrapher who told his businessman father that Armajani “had no talent whatsoever.” As soon as they got to the sidewalk, Armajani’s father said, “He’s old and of a different school. Don’t listen to him.”
  - At the Presbyterian school, he was fascinated with a course on Western philosophers from Socrates to the German school of Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger. Their ideas, combined with Sufism, created in him a lifelong sense of idealism and obligation to others.
- Summer of 1960, Armajani returned from an afternoon of writing, “Yankee Go Home” on building walls (as part of anti-Shah protests), to be told by his father that he was sending him to Macalester in the fall. His father wanted to protect him from Shah’s puppet government. Armajani’s Uncle Yahya taught history at Macalester for 30 years.
- At Macalester, Armajani studied mathematics and philosophy, seeking a framework for his social & political areas.
  - Minnesota’s populism immediately appealed to him. He was drawn to ideas of American thinkers: Thomas Paine, Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Melville, William James and John Dewey. And to simple American architectural forms – covered bridges, barns, rail trestles and skyways.
  - Failed European art history course six times. Couldn’t pass tests in which slides of paintings were shown on a screen and students had to identify artists. Finally passed the course after convincing instructors to let him substitute a written paper on Russian Constructivists, who consider artists & citizens equally qualified to forge a better future.
  - Met future wife, Barbara Bauer, of Scandinavian/German heritage, at Macalester.
- Through college, Armajani fully intended to become an artist. Immediately after graduating in 1963, he took a studio in downtown Minneapolis.
- Only surviving art works of his from Macalester days are a few large black-and-white calligraphic paintings made by inscribing lines of Persian poetry on every inch of the canvas, lines going in all directions and sometimes on top of other lines, impossible to read except in fragments. The Walker has one entitled, “Prayer” [image below].
- In his public phase (1968-2000), Armajani created public sculptures that were open, available and function. He tried to conceal his emotions & angst.
- In his “Dictionary for Building,” Armajani created a treasury of three-dimensional architectural forms in many sizes. The Walker has a number of these works.
- In his private phase, from 2000 on, he stopped doing public work, freeing him to express his personal views & emotions. He began making “set-like” glass-and-steel pieces, such as the MIA’s “An Exile Dreaming of Saint Andorno” [2010.22], the last in

the series and based in part on Giacometti's "Palace at 4 a.m." You couldn't enter them, but the glass enabled a global view of its figures & symbols.

- "Glass Room for an Exile" and "Fallujah" reflect Armajani's immigrant story, turbulence in his homeland and the anxieties of age.
- Received rock star welcome – limousines, TV coverage, official dinners and cheering crowds - when he visited Tehran in 2005, as guest of the government. But when a young woman, Neda Agha-Soltan, was killed during riots protesting the rigged 2009 re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Armajani showed his contempt for the regime with the sculpture, "Murder in Tehran." It is a cage-like box of glass and wood holding casts of severed hands and topped by a hooded and blood-stained figure representing Neda.
- If he were to travel to Teheran now, he would be arrested & imprisoned.
  - "Murder in Tehran" and "Fallujah," alluding to one of the thousands of houses destroyed during the siege of the Iraqi city of Fallujah by North American troops in 2004 and the death of the family that once lived there. The two had a similar message: A failure of democracy is a failure of modernity. True evil – modernity silenced – is as possible in America, as in the Middle East. Fallujah quotes elements (notably the fire) from Picasso's 1937 anti-war painting "Guernica," suggesting parallels in the atrocities committed in both cities.
  - U.S. history and founding documents don't protect us. Civic engagement does.



**Siah Armajani, March 1994, Kimberly Smith**

***"Since 1968, my work had been public, useful and open. And in 2000, it turned personal and melancholy. I had tried for years to hide it and fight against it, but I failed, so now the work is closed."***

## **Hurricane Katrina:**



**Flooding in Venice, Louisiana. Helicopter overview has similar feel to Armajani's "Mississippi Delta."**

**Hurricane Katrina** was the deadliest, most destructive Atlantic hurricane of the 2005 Atlantic hurricane season. It was the costliest natural disaster, as well as the second deadliest hurricane, in U.S. history.

**Date:** August 23, 2005–August 30, 2005

**Total fatalities:** 1,836 people died.

**Highest winds:** 174 mph. Category 5 Hurricane

**Affected area:** 90,000 square miles of Mississippi, Louisiana, Bahamas, South Florida, Cuba and Alabama.

**Flooded:** 80 percent of New Orleans was under water, up to 20 feet deep in places.

**Economic impact:** \$200 billion in Louisiana and Mississippi. Costliest hurricane in U.S. history.

**Private insurer losses:** \$40-60 billion for damaged, destroyed or flooded homes & businesses, and for damaged, lost or sunk offshore oil & gas platforms.

**Housing losses:** Four of every 10 houses suffered major damage. More than 44,200 New Orleans housing units remained uninhabitable five years after Katrina.

**Jobs lost:** 92,500 jobs lost 10 months after Katrina.

**Lost wages:** \$2.9 billion (76 percent, \$2.2 billion from the private sector) in tourism, port operations and educational services (including the many colleges in the area).

**Worst civil engineering disaster in U.S. history:** Following lawsuits against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and designers/builders of New Orleans' levee system, U.S. District Court Judge Standwood Duval ruled that the levee failures and resulting flooding were the fault of the Army Corps. However, the federal agency couldn't be held financially liable because of sovereign immunity. An investigation of the federal, state & local response led to the resignations of FEMA Director Michael D. Brown and New Orleans Police Dept. Superintendent Eddie Compass.

**Looting:** Looting, violence and other criminal activity became serious problems following the storm. By Aug. 30, looting spread throughout New Orleans, often in broad daylight and in the presence of police officers.

**New Orleans' identity:** Office documents were destroyed. Years of photographs were ruined. The city's ability to know itself was lost. Answers to such basic questions as how many people lived there, where they lived and who they were couldn't be answered.

**Population loss:** Five years after Katrina virtually emptied New Orleans, the city had 343,829 residents, making it 29 percent smaller than it had been a decade before. But in the 15 months following the 2010 Census, New Orleans' population had risen to 360,740, making it the fastest growing city in the nation.

**Documentaries:** Hurricane Katrina was the centerpiece of several documentaries, including Spike Lee's "When the Levees Broke," documenting vast personal suffering.

**International relief:** The U.S. became a recipient nation, with 70 countries pledging monetary donations or assistance. Kuwait made the single largest pledge: \$500 million. Other very large donations came from Qatar, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.



**"Prayer," Siah Armajani, 1962, Walker Art Center. One of Armajani's earliest works, done while a student at Macalester**



**"Dictionary for Building: The Garden Gate," 1982-83, Walker Art Center**



***Notation on Gazebos (X),* Siah Armajani, 1991, Walker Art Center**



***Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge, Siah Armajani, 1985, Minneapolis***



***Murder in Tehran, Siah Armajani, 2009, laminated maple, glass, felt, cloth, cast body parts, meat cleaver, and paint, 132 × 72 × 72 inches / 335.3 × 182.9 × 182.9 cm .***



***Fallujah, 2006. Glass, wood, table and chairs, Persian rug, light bulb, rocking horse, shoes, mattresses, and pillow.***



***Working Model for Fallujah, Siah Armajani, 2004, Walker Art Center***



***"An Exile Dreaming of Saint Adorno," Siah Armajani, 2009, MIA***

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