

SIAH ARMAJANI

Opposite page

SONG DONG

Mirror Hall

2016–17

Mirrors, old wooden window frames and mirror boards, dimensions variable. Installation view of the exhibition “I Don’t Know the Mandate of Heaven” at Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, 2017. Courtesy Rockbund Art Museum.

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SIAH ARMAJANI

Bridge Over a Tree

1970

Mixed media, 20.6 x 86.4 x 24.8 cm. Courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi, Hong Kong/London.

Six days—that is the longest Siah Armajani has been away from his studio in Minneapolis, where he has resided since immigrating to the United States in the early 1960s. The Tehran-born, 78-year-old polymath spent those six days in Hong Kong last February to prepare a mini-retrospective of his six-decade practice and give public talks.

For the architectural portion of the show, Armajani presented maquettes of his designs for bridges and gazebos, created between the 1970s and 2016. Some have already been realized as public art projects, such as *Bridge Over a Tree* (1970), a delicate, mixed-media model of wood and glue that features an acute climb and descent to preserve a tree’s natural occupation of space; the bridge was temporarily erected in the field that is now the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden.

These models are what the artist calls his “dictionary of buildings.” They are amalgamations of architectural elements that he has observed in real life, albeit assembled in absurd, unrealistic compositions at times: in *The Art of Bridge Making 3* (1974), we find two bridge surfaces at different heights, connected solely via three stairs in the center of the arrangement. In practice, why wouldn’t the entire bridge be built as one body, with an even surface? Armajani’s mark lies in the fusion of public engagement and functionality; his bridges, in particular, operate as both overpasses and public sculptures. Though the artist prefers not to comment on his work, leaving the viewer to scry for meaning, he has suggested that “a bridge is a table” and “public art is mediation.”

Aside from Armajani’s architectural designs, also on show were blueprints and an installation of memorial structures from his “Tomb Series” (1972–2014), and early works created by the artist before he fled Iran. Born into an affluent and highly cultured Christian family, the artist was educated in both Persian and Western traditions. He wanted to become an artist, so his father arranged for a tutor to school him in the ways of painting and calligraphy. *Dictionary of Numbers* (1957) is the artist’s record of such practice. In a painted frame

that takes up half a sheet of paper, Armajani copies Persian numerals, but they spill over the frame’s edge and the ruling lines become steeper and steeper as the artist traces these numbers.

Father Has a Pear (1958) and *Father Has an Apple* (1958) are works of watercolor and ink on cloth, in which the artist repeatedly transcribed the titular phrases in the manner of children practicing their handwriting in copybooks. In these works, we see motifs commonly found in Persian miniature paintings—fruits and human figures—roughly rendered by the artist like playful doodles or unfinished marginalia found in a student’s notebook, but instead placed prominently in the works’ compositions. These are his lighthearted interpretations of traditional Persian visual culture. We are privy to the works of a budding artist whose entire practice will embark on a severe turn two years later, when he was uprooted from his native land as a result of anti-monarchy activities that he participated in, as a member of the National Front of Iran, the largest pro-democracy group operating within the country. He would later only return for a three-day visit in 2005.

Armajani has come a long way since his days as a political activist. As an artist, he has rejected requests to design and construct public art projects, but he never turns down the opportunity to build bridges. He sees bridges as constructions that always blend into the environment, no matter where or how they are built. Bridges connect places and people, which Armajani has aimed to do at a large scale, even though the artist said that he divorced himself from public art 15 years ago. When the artist gave a talk in Hong Kong, he was asked about how he would respond justly to the rise of Donald J. Trump, whose political platform includes fervent anti-immigration sentiment. Ever outspoken, Armajani said, succinctly and without hesitation, that he would build a bridge to Mexico.

BRADY NG

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