

AN INGENIOUS WORLD SIAH ARMAJANI

REVIEWS BY SUSAN GIBB FROM MAR/APR 2014

The survey of Iranian-born, Minneapolis-based artist Siah Armajani, held at London's Parasol Unit in late 2013, cleverly represented his sizable oeuvre despite the constraints of a modest gallery space. With a practice that spans more than five decades, and includes many substantial public works, this was a challenging curatorial task. To this end, "An Ingenious World" utilized a concise selection of works that provided gallery-goers with an entrée into the diversity, developments and persistent concerns that have defined Armajani's career. Also included was a slide projection of his public art commissions. While less intriguing as a viewing experience, this served as an invaluable catalog in understanding the idiosyncratic, artistic language of Armajani's practice and the social contexts in which it operates.

Drawing on Armajani's youth in Tehran, his interest in Western literature and poetry, and his love of American vernacular architecture, the ground floor of Parasol Unit offered works in which the artist merged these inspirations with rigorously refined and applied style. Comprising a playful arrangement of medium- to large-scale works, which included room installations, a freestanding mirror and vibrant color-pencil drawings, the display showcased the artist's bold use of color and strong, geometric shapes. Seen en masse, the works also highlighted a certain standardization of form and finish that typifies Armajani's oeuvre. The paint he uses often looks domestic or industrial, the wood proportions appear prefabricated rather than artisanal, and the structures are robust and practical with minimal decoration. It is a slightly heavy aesthetic, but one that teases out a heightened cognitive engagement from the viewer; for, despite the utilitarian appearance of his works, there is something never completely comfortable about their proportions—form doesn't quite follow function.

The exhibition continued upstairs, where examples of Armajani's earlier artistic projects were shown. Pieces such as the hanging textile *Shirt #2* (1960) and the painting *Prayer* (1962) referenced his Iranian background through their use of Persian script, which covers the surface of both works. Also on this floor was the highlight of the exhibition, a collection of 68 architectural models created from 1970 to 2007, which were shown across a series of long tables. The display enticed the viewer to step closer and delight in each model's detail. The models formed a moving mise-en-scène of Armajani's thought processes, highlighting his radical move from fine art to architecture, and the sincerity of the architectural style that he has since developed in his work.



SIAH ARMAJANI. *Shirt #2.* 1960. Ink, paint, gesso on canvas, 85 × 82 cm. Photo by Stephen White. Courtesy the artist and Parasol Unit, London.

Back downstairs, a commissioned work entitled *Alfred Whitehead Reading Room* (2013), which was presented outside on the gallery's patio, provided an opportunity to interact with Armajani's work as though it were a public art commission. Inspired by British philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead, the blue, stable-like installation houses copies of Whitehead's books, as well as pencils and paper, encouraging viewers to actively engage with and contemplate his work. A pile of fliers nearby cited a quote from Whitehead's essay "The Aims of Education" (1916): "Theoretical ideas should always find important applications within the pupil's curriculum . . . This is not an easy doctrine to apply, but a very hard one. It contains within itself the problem of keeping knowledge alive, of preventing it from becoming inert, which is the central problem of all education." The quote resonates with Armajani's own artistic endeavor, which seeks to discern how theoretical ideas can be applied in and enlivened through art.

Nearby, as a counterpoint to the "reading room," was *Edgar Allan Poe's Study* (2007–08). Of similar scale and structure, this black-and-white installation includes homely elements—a bed and desk—but is enclosed in walls of glass, sealing off entry. Shown together, these two installations embodied a certain tension—between utopian, communal pursuits, the efficacy of the artwork, and the subjective, creative experience of an artist. This beautiful and melancholic tension encapsulates Armajani's practice, and provided a glimpse into the world that he has dedicated himself to constructing over a lifetime.