

Reflections on Works by Siah Armajani in the Grey Gallery's Collection

Shiva Balaghi, December 2008

A textured black background merges into two abstract spheres—one layered in cold hues of blue and white, the other in warm hues of ochre and brown—evoking a night sky that contains within it the celestial bodies. Closer inspection of the surface of Siah Armajani's painting *Prayer for the Sun* (1962) reveals barely legible Persian letters and numbers etched onto the image of the sun and the moon. The contemplative work quietly references the mystical astrology of Sufism. "All Persian art, all Persian poetry," Armajani has said, "comes out of Sufism, which is not a sect but an alternative human strategy. It is a civilizing and humanizing influence that works very quietly and without calling attention to itself."⁽¹⁾



Siah Armajani, *Prayer for the Sun*, 1962
oil on canvas, 48 1/4 x 32 inches (122.6 x 81.3 cm)
Grey Art Gallery, New York University Art Collection
Gift of Abby Weed Grey, G1975.81

Works by Siah Armajani featured in the Grey Art Gallery's collection date from the first decade of his artistic career, some created while he was still a college student in Minneapolis. It was there that Abby Grey met the artist and collected half a dozen works that reveal the early intellectual and artistic experimentation of Armajani, now recognized as one of the leading public artists in the United States.

Armajani was born and raised in Tehran. His father, Agha Khan Armajani, a successful merchant who imported European textiles, sent his children to a Presbyterian missionary school and provided them a comfortable, book-filled home. (2) At school, Armajani learned about both Perso-Islamic culture and Western philosophy. Every evening, his father read Persian poetry to his children. At nineteen, Armajani was sent to Minnesota to study at Macalester College, where his uncle Yahya taught history. Armajani had known since childhood that he wanted to be an artist; in college, he majored in philosophy while he painted in a studio in the warehouse section of Minneapolis. There he began a series of Poetry Paintings, examples of which Abby Grey collected.

String and sealing wax connect lines of painted calligraphy in *Sealed Letter* (1964). The first line is the *bismallah*, "In the name of God, most gracious, most compassionate," an easily discernable Quranic quotation.



Siah Armajani, *Sealed Letter*, 1964
acrylic, ink, string and sealing wax
10 1/4 x 13 inches (26.0 x 33.0 cm)
frame: 13 3/4 x 16 3/4 x 1 1/2 inches
(34.9 x 42.5 x 3.8 cm)
Grey Art Gallery, New York University Art Collection
Gift of Abby Weed Grey, G1975.1

In Armajani's *Calligraphy* (1964), undulating stanzas of calligraphic Persian script cover the canvas with a dense network of lines flowing in different directions. The eye chases traces left by the calligrapher's pen in a vain attempt to read the painted poetry. This work reflects Armajani's appreciation for calligraphy even as it subverts

the careful, orderly rules of the calligraphic tradition. The painting thus underlines the importance of poetry, while it transforms words into an illegible, dizzying confluence of images and forms. It also reveals Armajani's intimate knowledge of Perso-Islamic manuscript art, calligraphy, and poetry. And still, in a playful gesture, *Calligraphy* tips the balance and the codified order tumbles into disarray—beautiful yet abstract, reverent yet defiant, using the past but moving ahead. “There are always two historical patterns at work,” Armajani has said of historical reference in his art, “the past that once was present, and the past that still conditions the present. Folk art versus the vernacular. By deconstructing, we suppress the priority of the past.”(3)



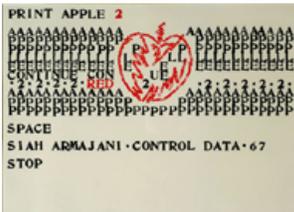
Siah Armajani, *Calligraphy*, 1964
ink on canvas, 60 x 41 1/2 inches (152.4 x 105.4 cm)
Grey Art Gallery, New York University Art Collection
Gift of Abby Weed Grey, G1975.82

The impulse to deconstruct the past, to question the very basis of the historical record, is reflected in another work by Armajani in the Grey's collection, *Warren Report* (1965). Here he traces over parts of the printed pages of the Warren Report—the official U.S. government report on the assassination of President Kennedy. Melted sealing wax that mimics blood stains dots the report's spine, alluding to the questionable nature of both the commission and the report it produced.



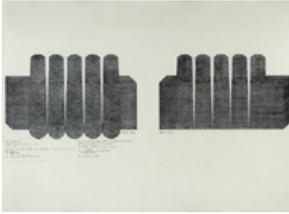
Siah Armajani, *Warren Report*, 1965
books, ribbon and wax set in wood
44 3/4 x 16 1/2 x 4 1/2 inches (113.7 x 41.9 x 11.4 cm)
Grey Art Gallery, New York University Art Collection
Gift of Abby Weed Grey, G1975.84

In other works, Armajani combines his interest in textuality with interests in numbers and computers. As a student, Armajani minored in math and spent time in the University of Minnesota's computer lab. *Print Apple 2* (1967) employs computerized text, but the repetitive impulse, a tendency to push language to the bounds of obscurity and render words into images, remains.



Siah Armajani, *Print Apple 2*, 1967
computerized print, 9 1/2 x 13 inches (24.1 x 33.0 cm)
frame: 17 x 20 3/8 x 1 1/2 inches (43.2 x 51.8 x 3.8 cm)
Grey Art Gallery, New York University Art Collection
Gift of Abby Weed Grey, G1975.83

Sound Tower (1972) reflects Armajani's turn to architecture. “The relationship between architecture and my work exists,” he writes, “because both contribute to the creation of public places.... During the mid-sixties, I, as well as other artists, was searching for a new form for content. I turned to the social sciences as a model for a compatible methodology that could incorporate political, social, and economic considerations. It became evident that the possibilities in art were many and that some decisions were necessary on my part. One of my first decisions was to cast my lot with architecture because architecture by its very nature is social. It is a mass culture and could and should manifest a social system that is fair and just.”(4)



Siah Armajani, *Sound Tower*, 1972
lithograph on paper, sheet: 30 x 40 inches (76.2 x 101.6 cm)
frame: 33 3/16 x 43 5/16 inches (84.3 x 110.0 cm)
Grey Art Gallery, New York University Art Collection
Gift of Abby Weed Grey, G1975.85

The impulse to create public spaces and make art useful underlies Armajani's art. "Kantian philosophers," he said, "believed that art was good because it was useless. We believe that art is good because it is useful."⁵ Perhaps it is this desire to make art useful that has made Armajani one of the leading practitioners and theorists of public art in the U.S. "Public art's basic aim," he explained, "is to de-mystify the concept of creativity. Our intention is to become citizens again."⁶ The early works by Armajani in the Grey Art Gallery's collection of modern Iranian art help illuminate his fundamental contributions to public art: in these works, his interests in poetry, historical memory, humanistic Sufism, populism, and democracy resonate.

ENDNOTES

1 Siah Armajani, quoted in Calvin Tomkin, "Profiles: Siah Armajani," *The New Yorker* (March 19, 1990), p. 50.

2 Lisa Lyons, "The Poetry Garden," *Design Quarterly* (1994): 8-30.

3 Armajani quoted in Tomkin, p. 59.

4 Siah Armajani, et al., "The Exuvia of Visions: Architecture as a Subject of Art," *Perspecta* (1982), p. 70.

5 Armajani quoted in Dinitia Smith, "Building a Beacon for a Kingdom by the Sea," *The New York Times*, July 28, 1996.

6 Armajani quoted in Jean-Christophe Ammann, "Introduction," *Siah Armajani*, ed. Ammann, et al., exhibition catalogue (Kunsthalle and Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1987).