

Collateral Damage



Siah Armajani's Fallujah employs some of his signature architectural vocabulary in a new, darkly pessimistic tone.

BY KIM BRADLEY

Siah Armajani, the Iranian-American artist well known for his public-art projects and sculptures of sociopolitical import, moved to the U.S. in 1960, at the age of 21. Since that time, the central recurring message and intended social function of his work has been to reflect upon and celebrate American democratic ideals. With his informed references to rural and vernacular architecture and his numerous tributes to the country's leading poets, philosophers and thinkers, his art has always been infused with optimism about American democracy, even when recalling its fragility. One example of such a work is his *Sacco and Vanzetti Reading Room*, a memorial to the two Italian-American anarchists whose wrongful executions rendered them martyrs of the Red Scare hysteria that swept the U.S. during the 1920s. By honoring Sacco and Vanzetti, and by devoting a reading room to them, Armajani expresses a faith in the socially restorative powers of historical memory and open education, clearly two resources that a healthy democracy must provide.

Armajani's monumental-scale sculpture *Fallujah* (2004-05; glass, wood and found objects) was recently exhibited at two museums in Spain—where its debut coincided with the 70th anniversary of the bombing of Guernica, the atrocity immortalized by Picasso in his painting of the same name¹—and was subsequently shown at two venues in the United States. *Fallujah* represents a departure from Armajani's prior work in that its portrait of the future of American democracy is darkly pessimistic.² Its subject, the destruction in 2004 of the ancient Iraqi city of Fallujah by U.S.-led coalition forces, has inspired one of his most powerful pieces to date, in clarity of form and challenging concept. Drawing from a number of sources, it graphically suggests the destruction of a home and family through the "collapse" of a vertical rectangular structure into a room-scale cube.

From the onset of the war in March 2003, Fallujah, a Sunni stronghold situated about 25 miles west of Baghdad in Al Anbar province, became notorious for its armed resistance to the U.S. occupation. In a particularly grisly incident there on Mar. 31, 2004, four American security guards employed by Blackwater U.S.A. were murdered, and images of their mutilated corpses, defiled to the cheers of jubilant crowds, were seen on news broadcasts around the world. A week later, the U.S. military hit Fallujah hard and fast with Operation Vigilant Resolve, five days of intense fighting that was abruptly halted due to protests by the Iraqi government. Local hospitals reported 600 dead, more than half of them women and children, and more than 1,250

injured. But that was nothing compared to the Second Battle of Fallujah, a.k.a. Operation Phantom Fury, launched in November after months of preparation and considered in military circles as a model for "a new kind of war."³ Some 15,000 troops (mostly U.S. Marines, but also including American army, air force and navy, plus British and Iraqi units) were deployed in a 12-day siege conceived to "destroy the city to save the city" from suspected insurgents.⁴ Nearly three-quarters of Fallujah's 50,000 houses and over 50 of its approximately 200 mosques were demolished.

Thousands of civilians fled their homes, becoming refugees, when the U.S. military warned the populace of the impending operation via informative pamphlets. Officials claimed that only about 1,500 of Fallujah's 250,000 inhabitants remained at the time of siege. Even so, the toll was high. Accounts differ as to the number of casualties, but it is widely acknowledged that Operation Phantom Fury involved the bloodiest urban fighting since the Battle of Hue City in Vietnam during the 1968 Tet Offensive.⁵

Outraged observers, including some of the war's most articulate critics, called the Fallujah assault a modern-day equivalent to the bombing of Guernica.⁶ Inspired in part by that very analogy, Armajani's *Fallujah* depicts a devastating scenario of what might have happened to one Iraqi family, and it incorporates visual allusions to Picasso's iconic work.

One of the most striking characteristics of *Fallujah* is its drawinglike quality. Its main components, two very large, interpenetrating glass structures, are framed in thick black lumber that resembles steel but also suggests bold charcoal lines. Its glass walls are not solid sheets but are made up of transparent beveled planks; their edges recall fine pencil lines. *Study for Fallujah*, a mixed-medium drawing done by Armajani on a photo in a newspaper clipping, served as the basis for his piece (but in fact, the two-story, single-family dwelling pictured in the *New York Times*—no date visible—is not in Fallujah; it shows a Palestinian family in Ramallah trying to pick up their belongings after Israeli police had partly demolished their home in a search for alleged terrorists). The angled verticality of the upper segment of the structure draws the eye to a stylized representation of flames at the top. The flames and a few other elements, such as the square windows, are easily recognizable as adapted from *Guernica*. A hanging lamp—a key element in Picasso's composition (also considered to be an eye and the sun)—is here represented by a painted cutout shape.

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This spread, three views of Siah Armajani's Fallujah, 2004-2005, glass, wood, paint, mattresses and mixed mediums, approx. 17 by 11 by 13 feet. Lannan Foundation, Santa Fe. Photos George Caswell.



Armajani

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According to the artist's description of his piece in the Spanish exhibition catalogue,⁷ *Fallujah* represents a house, the top floor of which has collapsed into the room below. The sculpture is a meticulously distilled abstraction of a home, its intimate living spaces and its objects. Inside, Armajani scattered worn leather shoes, an old school desk and a wooden office chair, mattresses and pillows (scaled for adults and children), a Persian rug, a rocking chair. These elements characterize a refuge, a place to sleep, play, study and live together as a family, a private environment that the glass walls allow us to visually invade (uncomfortably so). The main door to the house is flung open as if inviting us to experience the chaos within.

Of his spare and thoughtfully quoted *Guernica* elements, Armajani transforms only one, the recoiling horse. He has Americanized it into a cute wooden rocking horse, painted black and white and inscribed with the phrase, "Johnny Be Good," recalling Chuck Berry's rock 'n' roll classic, *Johnny B. Goode*. A viewer wondering whether it represents a loss of innocence or a relic of the artist's faith in American idealism may turn to Armajani's catalogue essay. He quotes the song, but ends the lyrics with the damning line, "Johnny B. Goode is dead in Fallujah."⁸

For all its directness—indeed, the piece is literally transparent—*Fallujah* is an ironically bloodless representation of the home where, Armajani's catalogue essay tells us, three civilians (mother, father and daughter) have been killed and an infant



Study for *Fallujah*, 2004, mixed mediums on printed image, 24½ by 19½ inches.

Memorial in the Pyrenees

Armajani's *Fallujah* was preceded by a little-known permanent outdoor piece also devoted to the memory of the victims of war. Commissioned by the Centro de Arte y Naturaleza (CDAN)/Fundación Beulas in Huesca, capital of the scenic province of the same name and the second of the two venues in Spain that exhibited *Fallujah*, the *Picnic Table for Huesca* was conceived in 1998 and realized in 2000. It is tucked away in a remote camping ground at the base of the snow-capped Pyrenees, which mark the Spanish-French border. In keeping with his other public works, here Armajani weds a utilitarian function to a tribute to the human spirit. The work's specific location recalls that area's history as a border crossing for resistance fighters and war refugees: the Spanish Republicans who fled during the Spanish Civil War and, later, during World War II, innumerable refugees trying to escape occupied France.

Armajani's beautifully simple design features an enormous, 23-by-23-foot wood table, out-fitted with a floor and an 11½-foot-high sloping roof, to allow for multiple uses. Mountaineers seeking shelter can use the table as a dry, elevated surface to sleep on; it can also be used as a children's stage. Poems by Federico García Lorca, selected by local children, are mounted in Plexiglas cases attached to the posts that support the roof.

Picnic Table for Huesca forms part of a small but growing collection of commissioned outdoor works, including examples by Richard Long, David Nash and Ulrich Rückriem, owned by the CDAN/Fundación Beulas. CDAN occupies a soon-to-be-enlarged building designed by Spanish architect Rafael Moneo.



Picnic Table for Huesca, 2000, Iroko wood; at the Centro de Arte y Naturaleza (CDAN), Huesca.

orphaned (in the sculpture, one tiny bed, tucked underneath a staircase, remains unscathed). This bloodlessness is perhaps a fitting reference to the absence of war's bloody reality in the American media; the artist is asking viewers to imagine it. Armajani's *Fallujah* offers a present-day antiwar parable that the viewer has an ethical responsibility to complete. □

1. Picasso's *Guernica* takes as its title the Spanish-language version of that village's name. Today, it is referred to as "Gernika," in its Basque spelling. But to avoid confusing the reader, I will use the Spanish spelling for both the town and the painting.
2. Billed in Artium's press releases as a modern version of Pablo Picasso's denouncement of the suffering of the civil population in wars, *Fallujah* was praised by Artium director Javier González de Durana as an "attempt to prove that Picasso's work is not finished."
3. Patricia Slayden Hollis, interview with Lt. Gen. John F. Sattler, "Second Battle of Fallujah: Urban Operations in a New Kind of War," *Field Artillery*, March-April 2006, pp. 4-9.
4. Scott Peterson, in his "Under Fire, U.S. Marines Hand Off Battered Fallujah," *Christian Science Monitor* (Web edition), Nov. 24, 2006, uses the phrase recalling the Vietnam-era assertion of having to "destroy a village to save it."
5. Hollis.
6. For additional information, see Saul Landau, "Where's the New Picasso?: Fallujah, the 21st Century Guernica," *CounterPunch* (Web edition), Weekend Edition, Nov. 27/28, 2004; Pepe Escobar, "From Guernica to Fallujah," *Asia Times Online*, Dec. 2, 2004; Jonathan Steele and Dahr Jamail, "Fallujah is our Guernica," *Guardian* (Web edition), Apr. 27, 2005; Scott Johnson, "Picasso's Guernica," *International Socialist Review*, issue 52 (Web edition), March-April 2007; Dore Ashton, "Notes on Fallujah," *Brooklyn Rail*, May 2007; Tom Engelhardt, "From Guernica to Iraq," *The Nation* (Web edition), Feb. 25, 2008.
7. *Fallujah*, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Bassarai, 2007, Spanish-English edition, p. 77. Other texts are by Fernando Gómez Aguilera, Javier González de Durana and María Dolores Jiménez-Blanco.
8. *Ibid.*

Siah Armajani's sculpture Fallujah was presented in Spain at Artium, Vitoria-Gasteiz [Apr. 26-June 3, 2007], and the Centro de Arte y Naturaleza/Fundación Beulas, Huesca [June 21-July 15, 2007]. It was seen in the U.S. at the Santa Fe Art Institute [Sept. 10-Oct. 22, 2007] and as part of "Artists and War" at the North Dakota Museum of Art, Grand Forks [Feb. 10-Mar. 30, 2008].

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