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Populist creates art that 'speaks to American democracy'

BYLINE: By Catherine Fox VISUAL ARTS CRITIC

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In the way that perhaps only an immigrant can be, Siah Armajani is head over heels in love with the United States of America.

"I don't want to get overly emotional about this," the artist, 55, tells the crowd at a recent lecture, "but America is the hope of the universe."

Walt Whitman, one of his heroes, couldn't have waxed more fervently about Las Vegas, Ralph Kramden, Walt Disney, truck stops or cheap paneling stained to look like mahogany.

"In this country, everyone can have mahogany," he exclaims.

But what Armajani, whose design for the Olympic caldron was unveiled Thursday, cherishes most of all are the principles on which his adopted country was founded. He has faith, for instance, in America's belief in the individual.

"I grew up in Iran, and every year they would tell us we had 6,000 years of history. It was horrible. We were crippled by the weight of the past. In America, there is no past. Everything is over in a year," he says slyly.

An abiding interest in literature

Armajani is a committed populist. Indeed, you might call this compact man with a cropped beard and a penchant for speaking in manifestoes a citizen-artist. He is among the vanguard of artists who turned their attention to the public realm during the 1970s. The bridges, parks, plazas and reading rooms he has designed are about creating common space for the common man.

"I make art that speaks to American democracy," says the St. Paul, Minn.-based artist. "Public sculpture should be a table that we all sit around."

Armajani likes to quote American philosopher and educator John Dewey, who wanted to restore continuity between art and everyday events. And he wants his art to express what he calls "the nobility of usefulness," a concept he first encountered while growing up in Tehran, reading Ralph Waldo Emerson in Persian.

His interest in Emerson and things American was rekindled in 1960 when he attended Macalester College in St. Paul, where his uncle taught history. The populist politics of Minnesota Democrat Hubert Humphrey reinforced his budding philosophy.

"Hearing Armajani talk reminds me what I miss about Minnesota," says former Minnesotan Carrie Przybilla, associate

curator of modern and contemporary art at the High Museum of Art. "It's very public-minded."

Dismissive of the "private language" of high art, Armajani's vocabulary is as straightforward as his mission: familiar forms, materials, a manipulation of simple geometries.

Armajani, who made a study of architectural elements early in his career, has a similarly abiding interest in literature. The words of John O'Hara animate the railings at Battery Park in New York; Wallace Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar" is incised onto the chairs in the Poetry Garden at the Lannan Foundation in Los Angeles.

"The only unifying force in America today is language," he says. "The text is the first gesture to try and embrace people."

'Ultimately, it's for the people'

Lisa Lyons, the Lannan Foundation's director of visual arts, lauds Armajani not only for his ability to find common ground but also his understanding of how people use space. The Poetry Garden is designed to offer both a sense of assembly and a sense of privacy, she says.

Przybilla, who has visited many of the artist's projects here and abroad, says the didactic impulse distinguishes his work from that of most architects. "He directs the visitor to what he wants them to think about," she says. "I've visited several of his reading rooms. When you walk in, you understand that this is about reading and ideas."

Even color can be symbolic. In painting the Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge, which stretches over a 16-lane highway in Minneapolis, baby blue and yellow, he honors Thomas Jefferson. The colors come from Jefferson's Monticello, designed so that all parts have equal weight - a metaphor for American democracy.

Armajani is equal parts idealist and cheerleader.

"Siah can be fierce and unyielding when his beliefs are challenged," Lyons says. "But he is also exuberant and generous. His favorite expression is 'fantastic!' "

And how would he describe the caldron commission?

"I feel like it's a baptism, as though I've become a fully American citizen," he says. "Ultimately, it's for the people."

GRAPHIC: Color Photo: Mug shot of Siah Armajani Chart: Siah Armajani profile - Age: 55. Born in Tehran, Iran, in 1939. - Education: Bachelor of arts in philosophy, Macalester College, St. Paul, Minn., 1963. - Citizenship: He became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1967. - Personal: He lives in St. Paul. He is married to Barbara Armajani. - Career: He has numerous public art projects in Europe and the United States.