

A BLUEPRINT FOR HUMANITY

SIAH ARMAJANI



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Richard Holledge speaks with Siah Armajani – an artist who has, for over five decades, sought to functionalise sculpture in the name of intellectually engaging with the public.

For a man who has said that he does not like people, Siah Armajani is remarkably welcoming and positively effusive. It is true that he is shy, shunning publicity and self-promotion, but when he discovers that the phone call to his home in Minneapolis, USA, is from London, England, he seems genuinely delighted. “Wonderful,” he says. “Anything you want to talk about, I agree.”

Where to start? He is acclaimed for the original thinking he brings to public art, operating at a point where the methods of the artist and the architect coalesce. But there is more. He is a philosopher and lover of poetry, a self-proclaimed anarchist and a social reformer. In his 50-year career, he has done much to change the way we think about public art, or rather, art in public spaces, which is why his life and work is currently being celebrated at London’s Parasol unit in the exhibition *Siah Armajani – An Ingenious World*. With works held in institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum, the Guggenheim and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in 2010, Armajani was awarded the Chevalier de L’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government.

Now 74, the Iranian-born artist is widely recognised for his reading rooms, lecture halls and sheds, which all feature quotations from intellectuals whom he holds in high esteem, such as Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Dewey. Two works that Armajani is perhaps best known for are his design of the structure which held the Olympic flame at the 1996 Atlanta Games and the



Opening spread:
9/11, 2001. Pencil on
 mylar. 91.45 x 69.2 cm.

This page:
Fallujah, 2004–05. Glass,
 laminated maple,
 mattress, plywood, mirror,
 coat, hat and cane.
 304.8 x 335.3 x 640 cm.
 Collection of the Walker
 Art Center, Minneapolis.

Facing page:
Tomb for Neema, 2012.
 Concrete wood shingle.
 122 x 427 x 152.4 cm



“Public art should have a social agenda. That is the genesis of that statement of me being disappointed.”

Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge that he created in 1988 to span a 16-lane highway and connect two parks in his adopted city. The latter is one of the largest of his ‘useful’ public art projects, which include gazebos, reading spaces and gardens. All of these combine the functional with the aesthetic, invariably made of wood and metal in a way that is spare, simple and effective. Many are dedicated to anarchists such as Ferdinando Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti who were accused of treachery in the USA of the 1920s and radical thinkers as evinced in *Room for Noam Chomsky: The Last Anarchist* (1998). Armajani’s works are often inscribed with the words of the poets and philosophers he admires, like the 19th-century American essayist, philosopher and poet Emerson who wrote: ‘Beauty must come back to the useful arts, and the distinction between fine and useful arts be forgotten.’

THE ART OF DEMOCRACY

As the show’s curator, Parasol unit director Ziba Ardan, says: “Siah was 40 years ahead of his time. At the core of his work is the issue of democracy when art is open to people and the audience creates the sculpture.” It was a hard and often lonely path for Armajani to take. For a while in the 1980s and 1990s, he became disillusioned with the kind of self-referential and undemocratic public art that was being created and which halted his own efforts.



This page:
Installation view of *Gazebo for Four Anarchists*: Mary Nardini, Irma Sanchini, William James Sidis and Carlo Valdinocci at Loring Park, Minneapolis, 1993. Painted steel and wood. Variable dimensions. © Barbara Economon. Image courtesy Parasol unit, London.

Facing page:
Above: *Tomb for Walt Whitman*. 2012. Concrete, wood, acrylic and fabric 182.9 x 274.32 x 274.32 cm. Private Collection.
Below: *Tomb for Walt Whitman*. 2012. Felt pen on graph paper. 70 x 91.4 cm. Private Collection.

“Do you mind if I give you a very short history?” he asks. “Sixty years after the American Revolution, Emerson gave a speech in which he asked what would constitute American culture – what is its music, its art, its architecture, its dance – everything. He realised that there should be common culture – not a high culture but a low culture. The poet Walt Whitman was a strong spokesman for public art and later the education reformer, Dewey believed that learning was the most important part of any democracy. Those were the influences that led me to decide to make a lot of readings rooms and reading gardens.”

In the 1960s, Armajani worked with likeminded artists such as Richard Fleischer, Mary Miss and Scott Burton, with whom he collaborated on the plaza in Battery Park, New York, where a metal railing has a quotation from Whitman, which signals his perception that democracy is indeed at the core of his work. It starts: ‘City of the world, for all races are here...’ “At that time, public art was something you could talk about and you could do something about it. Society was ready for it but by the middle of the late 1980s, corruption set in. Mediocre artists with a lack of conviction entered this arena of public art so it

lost its voice, its strength,” he explains. “The artists became more interested in self-expression, self-exploration and not about the need of others or relating to what was around them. So, by the late 1990s my colleagues and I withdrew. I felt a cultural depression at what public art had become.” Is he talking about the kind of large-scale sculptures as exemplified by Richard Serra, Henry Moore and Alexander Calder? “Exactly. Exactly. Exactly,” he laughs uproariously before continuing: “Public art should have a social agenda. That is the genesis of that statement of me being disappointed.”

ART FOR THE PEOPLE

For Armajani, his cultural depression was swept away by the 2012 American Presidential elections, which sent Barack Obama back to the White House for a second term. “For the first time in American history, young people, women, minorities, the middle class and the workers unified and supported Obama. He made a distinction between the promise of democracy and what democracy could achieve. I have always





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“I have always been a political person.”

believed that public art needed political force behind it so now I have become reinvigorated and excited about its possibilities.” He pauses. “I am sorry for my long answer.”

What the exhibition at Parasol unit does demonstrate, however, is how Armajani’s work has evolved from his earliest pieces, the paintings of the 1960s, with examples such as *Wall* (1958) which combines references to Persian art with an architectural nod to the Safavid dynasty of the 16th and 17th centuries. “When I was 21, my father sent me to Minnesota to Macalester College in St Paul, where my uncle taught history. He thought I would be safer there because I was involved in protests against the Shah,” explains Armajani. “With the Vietnam War, in about 1964, and with all those social changes and pressures, I could not feel at peace with myself doing Persian stuff on a canvas. I needed a larger arena, so I became a sculptor and that way I found salvation and resolution.”

His sculptures, such as *Elements 18*, with its angularity and contrasting curve, on show at the exhibition, evolved into functional art/architecture works such as *The Louis Kahn Lecture Room* (1982) and his series of bridges, particularly *Bridge Over A Tree* (1970), which is a 26-metre-long walkway that arched over a tree in a field. “The bridge is not a metaphor, it is not a simile. It is a bridge for its own sake. The English philosopher Alfred Whitehead said the bridge is an actual entity and that you have to make everything around

it neighbourly,” explains Armajani. “You have to have a road leading to it, you should be able to cross it and go about your business; it brings together the art with what is below, above, before and what is after.” By now, he was looking at architecture as the paradigm for his work, one that also had the linguistic property that art alone could not provide. “I needed a language, so I borrowed from architecture and social science to make art more social, more acceptable,” he says. “I felt like an old missionary trying to convince people about the legitimacy of public art in society.”

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

“In the 1980s when we talked to neighbourhoods and social workers, most of them were people who had never gone to museums and were not educated in the formal aspect of art, we had to make one thing very clear: that we needed them to articulate their needs, not their tastes,” explains Armajani. “We were reacting to the people around us, not saying this is what we, the artists, want.” His recent work seems to have departed from the ‘nobility of usefulness’ to the emotional and the outspokenly political. Is this a change in direction? “No. I have always been a political person,” he insists. “I read a report about Fallujah, the Iraqi town bombarded by the Americans in 2004, which compared the attack to the Nazi massacre of Guernica in 1937. That profoundly registered



Previous spread:
Installation view of *Glass
Bridge* at Cheekwood
Botanical Garden &
Museum of Art, Nashville,
Tennessee. 2003. Mixed
media. Variable dimensions.
Photography by Shannon
Clark. Image courtesy
Parasol unit, London.

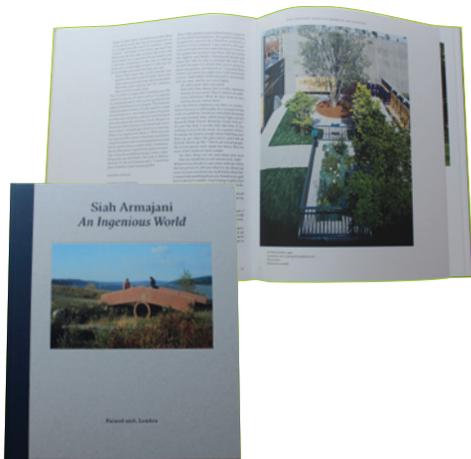
This page:
*The Irene Hixon Whitney
Bridge* in Minneapolis,
Minnesota. 1938.
Variable dimensions.

Facing page:
*Alfred Whitehead Reading
Room*. 2013. Wood,
Plexiglas, brass and glass.
244 x 366 x 483 cm.
Photography by Larry
Marcus. Image courtesy
Parasol unit, London

*All images courtesy the artist
and Beam Contemporary
Art, London/New York
unless otherwise specified.*

with me and I immediately worked on it. To be honest, I looked at Picasso's portrayal of *Guernica* very, very carefully. I had a huge picture of it in my studio. I went step by step, translating what I saw and inserting it in my piece." The result, *Fallujah*, is a combination of 'boxes' in glass and wood with steps leading nowhere – to oblivion? It captures the chaos of a bombed house and has several references to Picasso – the stylised flames, the hanging naked light bulb and the blazing eye. Then, in 2009, appalled by the murder of the young Iranian protester Neda Agha-Soltan during Iran's presidential elections, he made an even more impassioned piece – *Murder in Tehran*, a 3.3 metre-tall cage-like box with a hooded, blood-stained figure leaning over. Dismembered hands lie on the floor. "My anger was so much that it is not a very good piece but I had to do it," he says. Armajani's latest enterprise is to create a series of 24 tombs and says that his studio is "consumed by the odour of death". The tombs, he adds, are tributes to the anarchists, "to Whitman and other poets, to St Augustine, who is my favourite."

"You won't find any sign ascribed to any one of them that says this piece looks like this so it must be, say, Whitman. There is no semiology, no quotations, just representations of my total feelings and impressions that I got from them by reading their poetry or philosophy." There is a tomb on show at the exhibition – that of the 20th century Persian poet Neema – and a special commission – *Reading Room for Alfred Whitehead* in wood, brass and glass, cheerfully decked out in brown, orange and yellow. A selection of models in cardboard, putty and wood, including a balsa wood bridge from 1968, will demonstrate how he conceived the building of his full-size works. As Armajani puts it with his typical modesty: "Just knick knacks, here and there."



Siah Armajani: An Ingenious World

Edited by Ziba Ardalan. Published by Parasol Unit.

This comprehensive hardback was published to coincide with the Iranian sculptor's major retrospective at Parasol Unit in London, which opened in September. The publication is an extensive overview of Armajani's illustrious career and comprises works from 1957 to the present day. It includes texts by curators, art historians and critics including Venetia Porter, Patricia C Phillips, Valérie Mavridorakis, Janet Kardon, Ian Bourland and Calvin Tomkins.

The 190-page book is illustrated with 150 reproductions of Armajani's works on paper, as well as with photographs of models, bridges, sculptures and gazebos he has created – some of which were previously unpublished.

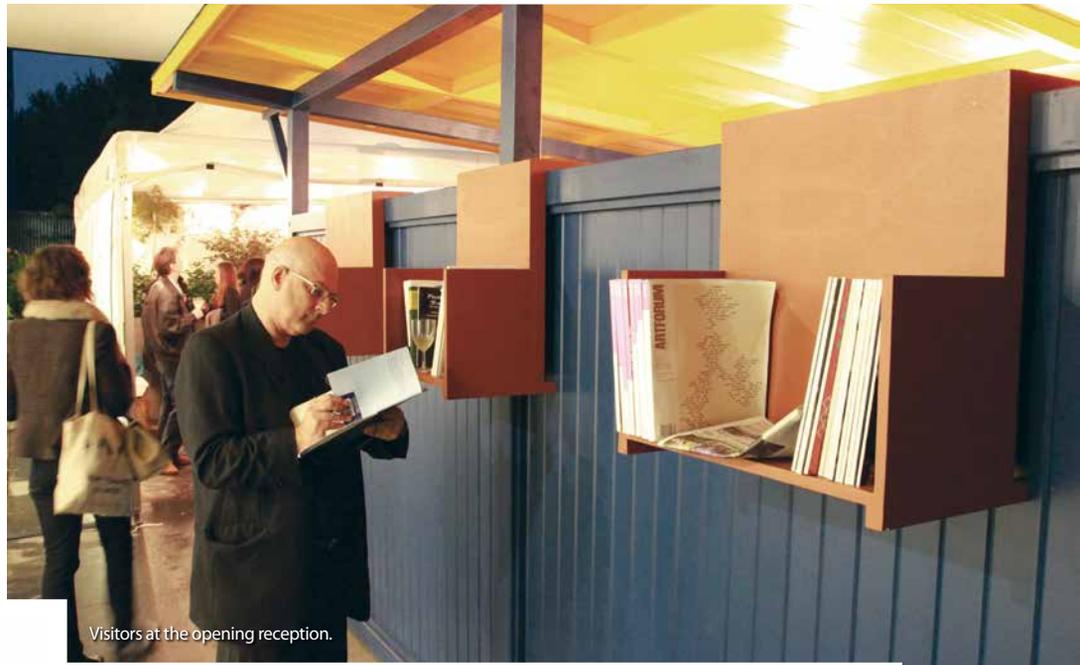
Dr Yvonne Winkler of the Parasol circle.



Siah Armajani with Director of Parasol unit Ziba Ardalan.

SIAH ARMAJANI AT PARASOL UNIT

Parasol unit celebrated the opening of the first major UK survey of Iranian-American artist Siah Armajani's practice on 18 September. *An Ingenious World*, curated by the director of Parasol unit Ziba Ardalan, presents the artist's earlier and most recent works, including some specifically created for the show. The exhibition programme also includes educational events, workshops, lectures and artist talks and runs until 15 December.



Visitors at the opening reception.



The British Museum's Venetia Porter with Beam Contemporary Art's Kristi Jernigan.



Guests view some of Armajani's models.