

ART & DESIGN

Siah Armajani: 'The Tomb Series'

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Art in Review

By **HOLLAND COTTER**

Siah Armajani was born in Iran in 1939 and came to the United States in 1960 to attend Macalester College in Minnesota. He settled in Minnesota and has lived there ever since, becoming an American artist of a kind we rarely find anymore: one steeped in America's pro-democracy literary and philosophical traditions. Much of his work has taken the form of sculptural monuments, some realized on an architectural scale, celebrating historical figures he admires, from Whitman and Thoreau, to John Dewey and Frank O'Hara.

The new pieces at Alexander Gray are also monuments, but of a different kind: tombs. There's one for Whitman; a joint mausoleum for Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti; and a carefully personalized design for the poet John Berryman, who lived in Minneapolis until his suicide there in 1972. Mr. Berryman had expressed a desire to be buried in a 19th-century part of the city, where Mr. Armajani has his studio. And the artist symbolically places him there in a black-painted tabletop piece composed of miniature versions of the area's old buildings.

Much of the new work is oddly stark, raw and hermetic. A tomb for the 20th-century Persian poet Nima Yooshiji is little more than a low-shingled roof coming out of the ground. And in "Written Minneapolis (The

Last Tomb),” Mr. Armajani leaves sculpture behind in a scroll-like drawing filled with rough sketches of the American city he knows so well, surrounded by lines of Persian poetry he learned as a child in Iran.

In a slender exhibition catalog, Mr. Armajani writes: “In the year 2000 my work, which since 1968 had been public, functional, neighborly and open, turned personal and melancholic. I have tried for years to fight against and hide this, but failed. Now my work is peculiar and closed.” And let me add that it has never looked more humane or felt more moving.

SIAH ARMAJANI

‘The Tomb Series’

Alexander Gray Associates

510 West 26th Street, Chelsea

Through Oct. 18



“Tomb for Neema” (2012), of concrete, wood, shingles and paint, is part of Siah Armajani’s “The Tomb Series” in Chelsea.

Credit 2014 Siah Armajani/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Alexander Gray Associates, New York