

ART IN REVIEW

Siah Armajani: 1957-1964

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Published: September 29, 2011

Meulenstein

511 West 22nd Street, Chelsea

Through Oct. 8

Siah Armajani was born in Tehran, Iran, in 1939, and in 1960 he moved to the United States and stayed. He left Iran at a politically hazardous time. In 1953 the country's democratically elected government had been overthrown in a military coup that placed Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, at the head of a restored monarchy. Pro-democracy dissidents, including Mr. Armajani, were under constant threat of arrest and forced into isolation within Tehran itself.

Over the last five decades in the United States, Mr. Armajani has produced an impressive body of architecturally scaled sculpture inspired by literary and political themes, mostly American, often utopian. In the last few years, however, he has repeatedly taken Iran as his subject in scathingly polemical responses to conditions of violence and repression there that are similar to those he experienced in his youth.

In 2009 at the Max Protetch Gallery, now the Meulenstein, he exhibited a large sculpture, "Murder in Tehran," designed as a memorial to the young activist Neda Agha-Soltan, who was shot and killed during protests that greeted the disputed re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad that year. The ink and watercolor work in his current Meulenstein show also bring him back to his home city, but this time through art that he made there as a student more than half a century ago.

This early fascinating material, like so much of what he has done, is based on language, in this case his native language, Farsi, written in passages of calligraphic script inspired, the artist has said, both by watching professional scribes writing letters and charms in the streets of Tehran, and by hand-produced propaganda leaflets known as night letters that circulated through the political underground in the 1950s.

In some pieces, the calligraphy is contained within carefully measured compartments, like those found on classic Persian manuscript pages, to which the artist has added colored paintings of angels and pieces of fruit, as well as stamped ink seals. And in a 1958 piece that is distinctive in format, writing spills across the surface of a full-size man's shirt and vest, as if covering the clothing with protective prayers or political thoughts dangerous to expose to public view.

This early work, most of it still owned by the artist, and looking fragile and time-darkened, is touching to see because of its topical suggestiveness, but also because it brings an artist now in late career back to his beginnings, reminding us how thoroughly his better-known art, which can feel cool and cerebral, is grounded in urgent, lived experience.