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Art Capsule '08

by Dana Self

Siah Armajani: Dialogue With Democracy One of this nation's most important public-art figures, Siah Armajani was born in Iran in 1939 but is now a naturalized U.S. citizen. In commissioned work all over the country, he typically suggests the ideals of a society that encourage open dialogue among its citizenry. His sculptures emerge from a love for the language of architecture: Houses, gazebos, doors and windows become sites of convergence that underline his devotion to democratic ideals. Often described as neighborly, his work allows the interplay of humans by walking across a bridge or by gathering within a structure or a site (such as the plaza in New York City's Battery Park). From the Atlanta Olympics Torch to a lighthouse and bridge on Staten Island, Armajani's works are connective tissue linking us physically and metaphorically. This exhibition from the Nelson's permanent collection — photos, hand-built maquettes and a couple of large-scale sculptures — gives viewers an excellent opportunity to place Armajani's work in context. "Backdoor — Frontdoor," for example, is a redwood structure whose access and egress — or lack thereof, because there are no handles or knobs, and nothing moves — introduces broader ideas about who has access to certain rights and who doesn't. This politically effective exhibition confirms that enthusiasm for Jeffersonian democracy isn't always homegrown. Through Sept. 21 at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 4545 Oak, 816-751-1278.

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