

SIAH ARMAJANI

THE TOMB SERIES

Opposite page

SUSAN TE KAHURANGI KING

Untitled
c. 1978
Graphite and colored pencil on paper, 18.4 x 29.2 cm.
Courtesy Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York.

This page

SIAH ARMAJANI

Written Minneapolis (The Last Tomb)
2014
Felt pen on mylar, 91.4 x 563.9 cm.
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Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

The tomb is an uneasy vortex in which notions of monument and intimacy collide. It recounts, and yet recoils—at once a flourish of identity and a vanishing point of mournful contemplation. If tombs tell stories, then Iranian-born, Minneapolis-based artist Siah Armajani makes them speak volumes. His beguiling sepulchers—dedicated to the thinkers, poets and philosophers who have shaped his own intellectual identity—comprise an acute tension between a functional, public-sculpture-like outward posture and a profoundly hermetic bent. This tension seems to rack Armajani himself: in the catalog essay to his recent show, “The Tomb Series,” at Alexander Gray Associates, he writes, “My work, which since 1968 had been public, functional, neighborly and open, [has now] turned personal and melancholic.”

The works in his “Tomb Series” (1972–2014) are the confluence of three important biographical threads. First is Armajani’s lifelong devotion to building large-scale public structures, including gazebos, lounges, reading rooms and bridges. Second is his experience of being nourished, from a very early age, by a steady stream of poetry and philosophy (including populist, pro-democratic thought), and comporting with the tension between logical precision and linguistic exuberance. And last is the city of Minneapolis—the Midwestern American perch from which he has scrutinized the world since 1960.

While the urge is to read each tomb as some kind of complex portrait of the person “buried” within, Armajani’s works function more like elegiac enigmas—threading together elements of a life lived, while folding them into a wider monumental whorl. *Tomb for John Berryman* (1972–2012), for example, is a long table with a street-like path running horizontally across its center. The “street” is lined with hollow, black-painted models of 19th-century warehouses, banks, hotels and a water tower from an area of Minneapolis where Berryman, an American poet who committed suicide in 1972, wished to be laid to rest. This area, incidentally, is also home to Armajani’s studio. As if overseeing the granting of Berryman’s personal wish, the artist has sculpted a piece that is both rich and contemplative.

Tomb for Sacco and Vanzetti (2009), a brick cube from which protrude the extremities of two pine boxes, is accessible by a ramp made of sloping,

shingle-like steps that lead to a door on which is hammered a wooden “X.” Entry is rendered impossible, however, by the impracticable ramp and the fortified, handle-less door. The work is heavy and mute; yet the coffin-like protrusions poking through the weighty, brick cell seem to suggest that Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti—two American anarchists wrongly accused of robbery and murder and, with their final appeal rejected, sentenced to death in a now-infamous 1927 trial—are somehow bigger than the system that tried to quell them. This reading is particularly stirring considering the current moment of rising distrust toward immigrants, and an ever-interfering, increasingly paranoid State. Armajani has explored the anarchist figure extensively, from the cage-like *Gazebo for Two Anarchists: Gabriella Antolini and Alberto Antolini* (1992) to four different *Sacco and Vanzetti Reading Rooms* (1987–94), examining the limits of personal liberty within American democracy.

There is an elegant erudition in Armajani’s use of vernacular American architecture. A bridge spans his *Tomb for Walt Whitman* (2014), in which is nestled a black casket-like shape hovering over an open, black tent, referencing perhaps the humanist poet’s stint as a volunteer nurse during the American Civil War (1861–65). In the Constructivist-like *Tomb for Neema* (2012), a low, shingled roof angles into an L-shaped box in homage to the 20th-century poet Nima Yooshij, whose reworking of classical Persian rhyme, rhythm and diction brought poetry into popular Iranian culture.

While most of the tombs are poised in stately silence, one piece—Armajani’s own proposed tomb—stands out for its space-filling language. The cacophonous *Written Minneapolis (The Last Tomb)* (2014) is a 5.6-meter-long, felt-pen drawing of Minneapolis made of Persian script. The minutely detailed work is like a crossroad at which the urban environment of Armajani’s adult life confronts his Iranian childhood of Persian miniatures and poetry; here, language substantiates space. While the wall-hung, scroll-like *Written Minneapolis* is unlike any other work in the “Tomb Series,” its vibrancy hints at an eerie animism that inhabits all of the other sculptural pieces. Far from the expected inertia of sepulchral monuments, Armajani’s tombs are alive.

KEVIN JONES

