

ANN PIBAL & SIAH ARMAJANI

by Charles Schultz

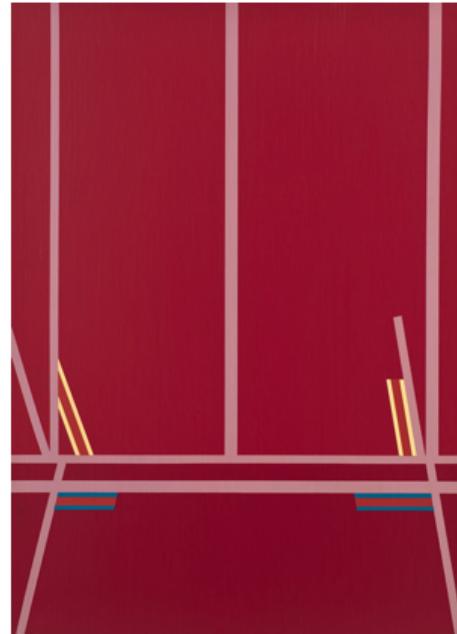
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Both Ann Pibal and Siah Armajani are well-established artists with track records of producing structurally rigorous and conceptually astute works. They also share the Midwest—specifically Minnesota—as part of their cultural heritage. Armajani emigrated there from Tehran in 1960 and has stayed ever since. Pibal, who was born in '69, resided in the North Star state long enough to earn a college degree. Their concurrent solo exhibitions at Meulensteen Gallery make for a fascinating pair, bookending these artists' time in middle America. Fifteen new paintings by Pibal hang in the main space and a dozen of Armajani's earliest pieces, many created in the years leading up to his arrival in America, occupy the adjacent room dedicated to projects.

Pibal's exhibition, *DRMN'*, continues her ongoing exploration of geometric abstraction as a process-based, improvisational practice. Rather than canvas, Pibal paints on thin sheets of aluminum cut in a rectangular shape that hang snugly on the wall. Most are not much bigger than an open textbook, a modest scale that lends each piece an air of intimacy. Her compositions, crisp slivers of colored lines against alternately flat and brushy backgrounds, have a highly focused, meditative quality. They are sleek, with all the grace of modernist refinement.

Pibal is also a consummate colorist, extending the legacy of Josef Albers in ways the old maestro might not have imagined. Perhaps surprisingly, she does so in acrylics, which have long been considered sumptuously inferior to oils—something any painter visiting this exhibition will have to reconsider. What makes Pibal's paintings so strong, color-wise, is her combined ability to create exceedingly subtle hues and her skill for balancing them on a single surface. More than that, Pibal doesn't blow out her color capabilities with subject matter. Just the opposite, the linear structures activate her cast of rich pigments.

There are no curves in Pibal's compositions. Sharply delineated angles, both acute and obtuse, dominate the picture plane. It is tempting to see in some the airplane perspectives of squared-off fields and long straight



Ann Pibal, "RTOF," 2011. Acrylic on aluminum. 17 3/4 x 12 3/4".

highways that make up much of the midwestern topography. Such an analogy quickly breaks down, however, when Pibal's lines are split and truncated, creating a sense of objects rising and falling, receding and advancing. "HNGRS" (2011) exemplifies this optical cunning. Three whitish bars pass parallel and horizontal against a ground of greening yellow. Extending off the center bar, which is also the thickest, five skinny white bands shoot diagonally to the top and bottom edge of the canvas, giving the appearance that the center bar is dropped back in space. Little rod-like clusters of color hang from these diagonals like stalactites, convincingly adding an illusion of gravity.

Pibal has talked about her painting as a way of thinking. Her decision to improvise rather than plan suggests openness, a broad sense of searching, rather than any kind of conclusive idea. This is where Armajani's early work resonates most strikingly with Pibal's paintings. It reveals the trappings of a young Persian mind seeking a means of understanding his place in a social and political reality rife with conflict.

These early pieces, made between 1957 and 1962, have never been exhibited in the United States. This is a curious fact, considering how thoroughly the international (especially the American) art establishment has embraced Armajani over the last 40 years. Be that as it may, these works are impressively composed. Many employ ink or watercolor on cloth or paper, which has yellowed with age. Armajani's mature work often incorporates text, especially poetry, and these pieces show that the artist was already bringing writing into his work at a nascent stage. Here, however, the text is calligraphic, and it shares space with archetypal images like a key, a horseback rider, a pear, an apple—many of which reflect Armajani's interest in folk tales and miniature painting.

Armajani's father is a recurring figure in the works made between '58 and '59. He never paints a likeness of his father; instead the artist incorporates him into the titles of his pieces, "Father has a Pear," "Father has an Apple," "Father has a Pomegranate," "Father has Water." These may be referring to the artist's flesh-and-blood dad, but it's just as possible that they refer to a metaphysical parent, one who possesses the bounty of the earth. Alternately, "Shirt" (1958) is an explicit reference to Armajani's biological father; it was his shirt. Using pencil and ink, Armajani completely covered the garment in neat Persian script. The piece calls to mind the work of another Iranian-born, American-based artist, Shirin Neshat. Neshat, two decades younger than Armajani, has made a number of photographic self-portraits upon which she's shrouded herself in equally elegant calligraphic Persian script.

Both Neshat and Armajani are deeply philosophical and politically engaged artists who share an affinity for quoting poetry in their work. For Neshat, veiling bare female skin in calligraphy metaphorically challenges the censorship of women oppressed by traditional ideological laws. Armajani's "Shirt" (presaging Neshat's highly acclaimed photography series by 40 years) might be understood through similar symbolic logic. It's a functional, utilitarian garment transformed into an aesthetic object through the act of writing. This



Siah Armajani, "Shirt," 1958. Cloth, pencil, and ink on cloth. 31 3/4 x 29 7/8 x 3/4".

is what Armajani's father likely wore in public, and perhaps the writing—if taken as a symbol of tradition and religion—can be seen as another form of public dress code, strictly adhered to in society, less so in the privacy of one's home. If so, "Shirt" would certainly have upset the State's authorities, and may have put the artist's father in an uncomfortable, even dangerous, position. The artist was 19 years old then, two years away from leaving the conservative culture of Tehran for the hippie wave of liberation and revolution in America.

It is probably coincidence that both Pibal and Armajani moved to the Midwest to attend college, but those are formative years regardless of what circumstances enabled them. Might the broad expanse of the topography have been influential for both on some unconscious level? I am unfamiliar with Pibal's work prior to her painting practice grounded in open-ended propositions and compositional experimentation, but we know that Armajani went on to have a tremendous career making large sculpture, often for public spaces. In that regard, the mature work of both artists encourages a sense of openness and asks viewers to think critically about the nature of the structures they encounter, be they physical or otherwise.