

## CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: ABBAS AKHAVAN

*Ellen Greig: Your new commission, titled curtain call, variations on a folly comprises a large stage with an infinity wall, painted in chroma key green, and a sculptural installation made out of cob, an ancient building material made of subsoil, water and straw. Tell me about your interest in these two ways of working?*

**Abbas Akhavan:** While I show works on ‘display’ in conventional gallery spaces – for example, I am thinking of my previous works *Study for a Monument* (2013) and *Variations on Ghost* (2017) – I often find the presumptions of the white cube hard to digest. Given that much of my work has been specific to or responsive to a site, I am now trying to find ways to negotiate the gallery space. So, in the case of more recent works like *cast for a folly* (2019), *spill* (2021), and this exhibition, I am trying to produce parallel spaces in the gallery, like a stage within a stage.

I need to clarify that I only use the chroma key green as an analogue device. I do not use it to create digital visual effects. The green backdrop offers an imaginary space to ‘key us out’ of the gallery and make a space that removes or separates the objects from their physical context. This staging is to make the sculptures more self-conscious about themselves and their context. It is like a curtain. It sets up an illusionary space, a backdrop, where we agree that these objects, like actors, are performing in a scene. However, unlike a theatre backdrop, the green screen offers an undefined space; we are anywhere but here. We can project them and us into anywhere, say Iraq, Syria, someone’s backyard, or any background that suits the sculptures. The reference point is left open, like a fourth wall, a potential.

As for cob, I have been interested in this ancient material for quite some time. While my biography is of little relevance to my work, I have many memories of cob from my childhood. My grandparents lived in a small village that was made almost entirely of cob. I remember running and scraping up against a farm wall and learning quickly how bad the rough cob can scratch the skin. So, the memory of cob is more about the feel of the material than the location in which I first experienced it. More importantly, cob has wonderful qualities with a lot of potential, hence its recent popular comeback as a sustainable building material. Clay, an essential component of cob, is often nutrient-rich with minerals like calcium, potassium and magnesium. While building, those minerals can be absorbed through the skin. It has a richness to it, yet it is cheap, with much structural and visual value. It is generous in its malleability as it dries quickly, does not shrink, it is non-toxic and is biodegradable. The material feels suggestive, as in it can connote form with very little information and effort, a quality that I value in sculpture. I don’t conceal it. It is just cob. Old as dirt.

*EG: This new commission builds upon previous works that also use these two opposing material processes to reproduce architecture and spaces. What interests you in bringing these two materials together?*

**AA:** Yes, I think our show is closely linked to the exhibition *cast for a folly* (2019) at the California College of the Arts (CCA) Wattis Institute, curated by Kim Nguyen. At the Wattis I worked with green screen and cob, among other materials, to recreate the lobby of the national museum of Iraq after it was looted in 2003. The installation, entirely based on a photograph taken by Corine Wegener, was created like a theatre set. My aim was to remain not obedient but rather loyal to the image – a method that also resonates with how I have developed this commission at Chisenhale.

So based on perspective lines and image quality, parts of the installation at Wattis had more information than the photograph offered, and parts offered less. In the middle of the actual museum lobby, there was a very large stone sculpture of a lion which was most likely too heavy and awkward to loot or break into pieces. So, despite the damage to the museum, the lion, fully intact, holds centre stage in the picture. I decided to replicate the large lion to scale out of cob. I wanted to age the figure, as in shift it from a stone carving to a more ancient material, something with equal richness and weight, yet poorer and more precarious. In the photograph, directly behind the lion, there is a doorway with a dark green velvet curtain. This doorway, from what I have read, is where the lobby had been broken into. I had been looking at this image for many years, waiting for the right time to produce the installation. While much of the materials were developed through production on-site, I always knew that the curtain behind the lion would be a green

screen as it suggested a kind of portal, a fourth wall, a breakdown. Once the lion was complete, and we painted the doorway behind it green, the cob in relation to the chroma key felt charged, almost vibrant.

Cob is nothing short of plant roots that entangle clay with loose aggregate of rocks, gravel and sand in the ground. So, one can imagine that when dug out for shelter, it is easy to repurpose its ingredients for building and expanding upwards, to make vertical structures, walls, platforms and so on. Green screen, a very common way of compositing images or video streams based on colour hues, is a technique used in fields like newscasting and the motion picture industry as a way to remove and replace backgrounds from subjects. These methods of gouging and building information and creating form through layering and compressing, run through both materials. Their proximity to each other feels like a set of brackets, sitting at opposite ends of the material spectrum.

**EG:** *The cob installation in this exhibition is influenced by the colonnade that once surrounded the Arch of Triumph, a 2,000-year-old Syrian landmark in the ancient city of Palmyra. The arch is believed to have been destroyed by Islamic State militants in 2015. What interests you about this site, and in particular the colonnade?*

**AA:** I think working through ideas is less of a linear strategy and more like a compost pile - things accumulate and break down, interlocking, and then we comb through and find unexpected germinations. My main interest is exploring sculpture and learning from materials. In my exploration of sculpture, I've been looking at follies for a while now. Follies are often ornamental architectural sculptures that are built-in gardens. England is full of them! I think of follies as self-conscious structures. For example, a folly in a landscape might look like a house, but it knows it's not a house. From my interest in follies, I started looking at ruins and then to columns; it's just a kind of an inevitable trajectory. Columns to colonnades and arches, and finally, I see this image of the then Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, unveiling a replica of the arch from Palmyra in Trafalgar Square in 2016.

**EG:** *Yes, I remember when you first sent me the image of the replica of the Arch of Triumph being unveiled by Johnson. The replica was constructed and funded by the UK- and US-based Institute of Digital Archaeology (IDA) using 3D imaging technology. After it was first revealed in London, the replica arch toured to Switzerland, USA and Dubai. In some ways, the IDA's replica is a counter act to your work in the gallery space - the arch is absent in the gallery, but we are reproducing its surroundings.*

**AA:** Yes. The installation we've made here at Chisenhale, as you mentioned, is made in the image of the existing colonnade that led up to the now destroyed arch. While I am interested in ruins, the objective is not nostalgia for the Iraq Museum or Palmyra Arch, but rather the ways these sites become charged and disturbed as images in the collective imagination. How do these artefacts circulate through other economies and narratives about re-mapping history, nation-building and museum collecting?

This exhibition is about the *transportation* of the arch from Syria to a notoriously imperial site in London. When you search the internet for the Monumental Arch of Palmyra, images of the marble copy at Trafalgar Square show up. When I first saw this image of Johnson and the IDA unveiling the replica, I thought it was really strange that the arch was out of context. Through digital technology, they teleported it out of Syria and now in people's imagination it is part of London. So, then I thought we need to create the rest of it.

I want to emphasise that this work starts with my interest in materials and sculpture. Chroma key and cob have their weight and history. When made in the image of a colonnade as a film set, they, like found objects, gain connotations beyond their immediate materials, aligning and calibrating with concerns outside the gallery, extending to recent socio-political events, and in this case shifting ancient ruins out of place and out of time.

Having been a first-hand witness to war, and then later in life seeing the footage from the Iraq invasion of 2003 and the more recent devastations in Syria, one can't help but wonder who inherits the ruins of war? While not site-specific, similar to the exhibition at the Wattis Institute in the United States, this show at Chisenhale is meant to be first shown

in England. Creating a lobby at the Wattis as an entry point into the Iraq Museum is one way of returning the wreckage of Iraq back to the United States. Here, in London, the situation is obviously different. But perhaps a film set for a colonnade that leads to a ruin in Syria is one way to address the absurdity of making marble props out of ancient ruins. What does it mean to make trophies for the 'civilized us' versus the 'barbaric them'? We need to talk about the kinds of instabilities that have given way to so much destruction. What responsibilities do museums have to history, heritage, artefacts and more importantly, to the civilians that have produced and cultured these sites? For example, Syrian refugees are being kept out of the rest of the world, but their artefacts are getting asylum, either in reproduction or in real life.

*EG: Your work has engaged with the impossibility of faithful reproduction for some time. Tell me about your interest in the act of replicating objects or sites?*

**AA:** When I learned that, for security reasons, many museums display replicas of their collection and that the 'real' objects are not always accessible to the public, I felt a sense of permission in making placeholders. They are placeholders because the works have no claims to authenticity. They are in reference to another. They are stand-ins, understudies. So copying is not the objective. Instead, the work has to have an altered relationship to the original, be it through materiality, temporality, context, etc.

When we see good actors perform a character, we know that they are performing, and yet we don't perceive their behaviour as fake. It's in this act of 'stepping in place of' -- in this agreement between the spectator and stage -- that we suspend our belief and even become attached to the joy or suffering of the character. There is a long history of artists that have very elegantly and rigorously negotiated these relations. I am thinking of works by artists like Sherrie Levine, Michael Rakowitz, and Rachel Whiteread, to name a few.

In the case of my work, I try to heighten these qualities through the site, or stage them in self-conscious spaces, or use ephemeral materials. The cob works are made of poor elementary biodegradable materials that are composted after the shows. Once the show is over, the seven or so tons of soil will be donated to local gardeners, cob builders or just a compost pile.

*EG: You've also produced an audio element that plays throughout the gallery.*

**AA:** The sound piece is intended to act as a sonic curtain, mirroring the infinity wall behind the columns. Working with a combination of some really high frequencies, some low bass drone sounds and pink noise, another colour suggested in the space that complements the green, the audio is a consistent hum that feels like it is either coming from the building or inside the ear. The frequencies follow the audience throughout the space, creating moments of sonic intensity and, at times, complete silence.

*EG: The audio element also highlights how the installation plays with the perception of space. Can you talk about the placement of the columns and their scale?*

**AA:** The columns on the stage form a one-point perspective. As one walks around the installation, it becomes evident that the composition is a forced perspective, columns shrink in diameter, and the sculptures become less ornamental. I think the economy of their construction becomes more interesting as they progressively have less and less decorative details and more texture and information reflective of the material they are made of. It is also a cinematic convention - what's close to the camera is the star of the show, and further back are the extras.

*EG: We have painted a text on the roof of Chisenhale Gallery and Chisenhale Studios. Visible only in documentation, or from the windows and rooftops of taller neighbouring buildings, the painted text reads: 'CAT'S PAW'. Why 'cat's paw'?*

**AA:** The text hangs over the gallery like a canopy. Like a distant roof for the stage. It cannot be physically accessed by the audience. It is visible to birds, aeroplanes, drones or seen in documentation online. It builds on numerous works I have done with text paintings on rooftops. I also like to work with animal fables. The idiom, 'cat's paw', is based on a fable titled *The Monkey and The Cat* by Jean de La Fontaine. It is a story about a cat and a monkey in a domestic setting. The cat is asleep, and the monkey wants to eat the chestnuts that are roasting in the nearby fireplace. So, the monkey uses the sleeping cat's paw to scoop out all the chestnuts. When caught by the owners, the cat's burnt paws assume him guilty of having eaten all the chestnuts. So, the text is about somebody using someone against their will. The dictionary defines it as: "one used by another as a tool." Another meaning for 'cat's paw' is "a light air that ruffles the surface of the water in irregular patches during a calm." This is a nice coincidence as the expansive irregular roof of the gallery tends to accumulate large, stagnant puddles of water that linger after it rains.

The image of the rooftop painting will only be available on the website. It's never shown physically in the gallery space. I like the idea of people coming into the gallery space and imagining something urgent or poetic above them, sending messages further than them.

*Interviewed by Ellen Greig, Senior Curator, Chisenhale Gallery, on Friday 13 August 2021*