



Untitled Garden (2008/2017)
If the first metaphor was animal (2017)

Abbas Akhavan in Conversation with Verena Hein

In Abbas Akhavan's artistic practice, the obscuring of interior and exterior space is a negotiation of hospitality and hostility, a highlighting of boundaries between outside and inside, guest and host (and ghost). This shifting border is rendered palpable by the large hedge in the exhibition space, by the mirrored fountain in the courtyard and the painting on the ceiling depicting trails of smoke that are the residues from an exterior fire. A large mound of soil sits in the middle of the museum floor; closer inspection reveals that it resembles a lion's claws, perhaps those belonging to Lamassu, an Assyrian deity.

Shortly before the opening Verena Hein, the curator of the exhibition, talked to Abbas Akhavan about his work and the concepts behind the exhibition.

Verena Hein Some works in your exhibition like *Untitled Garden* (ill. p. 14), the hedge of *Thuja occidentalis* "Brabant," confronts the visitors with a feeling of exclusion. Usually visitors are warmly welcomed when entering an exhibition, in your show they are confronted with a wall made out of plants, they have to go a long way round. I know that you are dealing with the antipodes guest and hosts, what does it mean for you to deal with walls and borders?

Abbas Akhavan For quite some time I have felt uncertain about the ways that artworks are obliged to receive the audience with open arms—always with proper lighting, centrally located for uninterrupted sight-lines, big panels with texts and plenty of information to help interpret the work. I understand and appreciate that some clarity is needed as museums and galleries are catering to a broad public. But I think mystery, even confusion and an embodied approach is also important. These are some of the qualities that can produce levels of self-consciousness and curiosity in the viewer. I think it is important not to underestimate the intelligence of the viewer.

So for the audience to maneuver the exhibition space with greater self-awareness and some physical engagement, at times it's necessary to withhold information—for example *Fatigues* (ill. p. 96) is always shown in areas of the gallery that

don't cater well to sight lines. They are poorly lit, they sit in corners and peripheries and lack labels. At the Wellcome Collection in London, this work was exhibited without any acknowledgement of my involvement or any information about the work. This is one method of giving them some agency. They seem more like fugitives in the gallery and less like objects on display. Some works, like *Untitled Garden*, completely block paths or redirect people into different galleries. Upon entrance visitors might feel a little displaced, in need to retrace their memory of the floor plan or even feel like a trespasser. Or an unwanted guest, one who has to negotiate some boundaries in a space that is not so accommodating

The artwork should have some trappings, if possible be generous so as to not completely alienate the viewer. Some textual information can provide fruitful context, but I think the current modes of information distribution tend to limit the audience's reading and subsequently stifle the potential of the work to expand beyond the provided information. I have watched many people as they approach a work and they quickly seek the assistance of didactic labels—almost as if afraid of drowning in their own thoughts, they reach for answers, the label is used like a buoyant life ring. I think works need time. People should linger and make connections outside and within the artist's intentions. There has to be some room to breathe, explore and get lost.

Verena Hein There are several works that you call "variations" or "studies." What do you want to say with these kind of add-ons? Are these possibilities of an appearance, of a process-oriented artistic language?

Abbas Akhavan My intentions with these kinds of titles is not that complicated. It's a little bit like the above answer. Giving an artwork a title is a way to guide the reading of the piece. But titles can also limit and over determine one perspective. So "studies" and "variations" are attempts at making more room. It gives the title and the work a more speculative open-ended reading. This is also a way to free the work from absolute completion. Even though most of what I have titled "study" is work that I am done with, the title

allows for future corrections, variations, and better developments.

Verena Hein In your oeuvre, you often use material from the outside, the exterior, like plants or animals. Further, you use the four elementary elements, fire, water, air and earth. These are more than ephemeral materials, they have an elementary meaning, and you transform them from the outside to the inside of the galleries. On the other hand, you use traditional, old techniques, like wall painting or bronze. Which layers of meaning do the technique, the material have for you?

Abbas Akhavan There are several reasons for how I have arrived at these materials. One is the consequence of not having a studio-based practice. This happened partially because after graduating from my MFA, like most recent graduates, I had no money and very few resources for producing work, so I began applying for residencies. I did not have a reliable space to experiment, to pile up a mess of materials and let it sit around and rest and mature into sculptures. So I had to work with things that were easy to access, often common, ephemeral or perishable materials. Everyday things that could be sourced on site, used in situ, incorporated into the space and then redistributed as raw materials, like trees, laundry, soil, fabric, and so on.

A long time ago I watched an interview with Robert Ryman, and he talked about the worth of art materials. I am paraphrasing or maybe even misquoting him, but I remember him saying something along the lines of how art materials are burdened, they are expensive and induce in artists an anxiety of ruining these goods..., and he goes on to explain that fear is unproductive and one should not fear destroying these materials. Maybe in my case, the fear did not subside and so it led me astray from art stores. I still bought some materials, but I found myself more often in hardware stores, greenhouses, fabric shops and so on.

Over the years, I have maintained a modest desk-based routine of drawings with ink on paper, more like exercises. In parallel with that kind of exercise, works made of soil, water, plants, cotton sheets and even metals like gold seem relevant. Their vicinity to the body is so constant and

therefore so significant. That vicinity makes the materials very accessible and at times even intimate. In the case of taxidermy, I think fur, feathers and horns register their presence on the viewer on a much more urgent level as they render us as prey or predators. I think all of these materials have a certain charge—for lack of better words, they are elemental and vibrant. But I am being reductive here as plenty of great materials are available and used by many artists. Maybe I'm just slow.

Lately, I've been looking into textiles and working extensively with bronze and clay. My attraction to these materials, aside from the reasons mentioned above, is in their history. They were so critical in human evolution and survival, whether for daily sustenance like shelter, clothing and vessels or as weaponry for protection and hunting. Their history of making and remaking and perfecting is almost alchemical. So much time has been spent with hands forming and being formed by clay, centuries of metal slowly corroded, heated and hammered and of course the same goes for textiles. The relationship of our bodies with these materials are symbiotic—as if, in forming them, our bodies were in return informed, given access and ease through shelter, security and comfort. I know my observations might be obvious, but I am inclined to think that we have inherited those skills. That they are still somehow deep within us, that we crave them. I am thinking of all the beneficial minerals one absorbs when sculpting with clay—all the recent scientific research shedding light on bacterium in soil that can trigger the release of serotonin, elevating one's mood, reducing anxiety, the list goes on.

Verena Hein You mentioned to me that you like Mona Hatoum a lot and that you appreciate the artistic practice of Danh Vo and Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Especially, Hatoum and Vo combine domestic objects with a more general view on society. The relationship in his own family is very present in Dan Vho's work. Yet you are creating almost archetypical works of art without giving a personal hint. I think the most personal work in the show is the film *August 2006* (ill. p. 95) that you made during your graduate studies at the Univer-

sity of British Columbia. You filmed the fireworks for the festival *Celebration of Light* in Vancouver. The viewer realizes this only after a while and after thinking that you, as the cameraman, had probably had to flee because of the bombardments. May I ask you to tell me something about these influences, like your own experiences and persons/artists that are important for you?

Abbas Akhavan I feel ambivalent about this, because while in the case of those three artists I can appreciate the intimate context that some biography can produce, I am also suspicious of some more recent cases where younger artists do heavy mythology building in order to justify their work. In the case of the video piece *August 2006*, I initially experienced the fireworks festival while walking down Davie Street in Vancouver. At that time, unaware of what was happening, I felt a sudden sense of panic as the bombastic sound of fireworks, which I have always hated, was combined with the sight of crowds running down hill. With the noise and frenzy, their drunken enthusiasm sounded like people screaming in distress. During August of 2006, Lebanon, Gaza, Iraq and Afghanistan were being heavily bombed and all the news on TV was flooded with war footage. The parallel realities did not phase me, but the sounds were also reminiscent of my own childhood when I witnessed my neighborhood being bombed several times during the Iran and Iraq war. So when I realized that the festival was a week long, I went back the next night and did one night of recording. And that's the work. The video has nothing scripted in it. It is just me walking down a hill and recording people. It has very few cuts in it. I kept it very true to experience.

My biography is not a secret. I share stories when relevant, but I want to think that the work is of me and not about me. The aim is to arrange and elevate personal experiences and personal investments into larger contexts and narratives that might shed light on issues related to greater sociopolitical systems of power that affect not just me, but many people during different times in different places. And ideally those objectives translate into visual language in an intuitive and empathic way. This is ideally realized through some formal qualities that can communicate be-

yond statistics. That beauty and poetry and some other things I don't have names for, can formulate a way of rendering something dormant or urgent more palpable while still leaving room for breathing. I don't think that artworks should dictate a position to their audiences—there has to be room for agency.

Verena Hein As I just stressed, your works have the appearance of elementary structures. The bronze sticks *Study for a Garden* (ill. p. 75) look like the symbol of violence and of vulnerability at the same time. You often talk about sculptures that should work like "traps." Should these objects stress broader, superordinate topics, like capital, war or even museums unexpectedly or effortlessly? Is that what you mean when you use the work "trap"?

Abbas Akhavan The sticks are really simple. It is a pile of sharpened branches that have been cast in bronze. It's a direct one-to-one burn-out cast. There is no patina on them. The white is the residue of the casting technique. I wanted to make a rudimentary weapon, a makeshift object that predates the bronze age. But I wanted it done through the sophisticated technology of casting. And I wanted the result to look like a hand-carved, crude, almost desperate spear. The title *Study for a Garden* is one way to give them greater connotations. They look like petrified wood and aside from spears they can be posts for a garden fence. They are also a pile of faggots—a bundle of sticks bound together as fuel—however, this bundle has been crafted through fire, made of bronze; they are resilient. These faggots fight back.

"Trap" is a word I have used to describe not just my own work but artworks in general. Some works such as *Study for a Curtain* were made based on actual traps, in particular a pit trap; a dug-out hole that is covered with a grid-like pattern of sticks topped with random shrubbery and leaves. The aim is to have a prey or trespassers trip into the deep pit, unable to escape. *Study for a Curtain*, though not decipherable, had no dug-out pit. It was just the lid of the trap sitting on the gallery floor. It is the part of the trap that you are not supposed to see as it is meant to camouflage into the forest floor. The cover I make looks lush,

almost like an arrangement of tropical flowers and foliage. It looks more like a space of ritual, a carpet, a grave... a trap.

My reference to the trap is fairly literal—I think of art as a kind of opening, a window, a placeholder, or even a narrowing or closure toward a variety of different aims. Those aims can include generating ideas, facilitating affect and empathy. The list goes on, as art can also provide therapy and momentum, in order to process and even propel change and resistance. These objectives need a host, a larger framework that include formal, aesthetic, innovative, what have you, qualities. These qualities are luring devices. In my case it is a literal arrangement of foliage on a pit trap. Examples of temptation or bating is present in many works such as the sweetness of a pile of candy in the case of Felix Gonzalez-Torres or the heat emitted from Mona Hatoum's *The Light At The End*. This process is an intricate engagement of concepts with materials. And I think that it is through the recalibration and transformation of materials that one can facilitate the potential for the transformation of ideas—making ways to understand another perspective, learn of another ideology, and so on.

I sometimes see works that are only illustrations of someone else's theory or a demonstration of research, a complex network of "things" from history laid out in the gallery. That feels like homework and not artwork. I am partial to works that demand reception beyond language. I am taken by material intelligence, by works that are almost innovative instead of illustrative. The stuff you stand in front of and just get stuck on.

Verena Hein The wall painting *Study for a Painting* (ill. p. 64) that you have created for the show at Villa Stuck shows the traces of smoke caused by a huge fire that is outside the building. Again, you put elements from the outside in the inside, in the museum's space. Further, you asked us to turn down the climate control system (AC), not to use artificial lightning, to open the windows in order to bring in natural light and air. These are the standards for museums to guarantee the best conditions for the presentation of fragile works. What do you think of the role of the museum,

especially when you show flowers in fridges in *Variations on a Glasshouse* (ill. p. 90) and sandbags in museum's vitrines *Untitled* (ill. p. 40)?

Abbas Akhavan I sometimes make work that is conventional in material, like bronze or plaster, clay, etc., but much of what I make is fragile enough to become garbage or common enough to be replaced or simply not fancy enough to require temperature control. I recall certain sayings (I think of them more like sentiments from art history classes), where we were told that an artwork should stand the test of time. But I am not that interested in making work that "stands the test of time." I think it would be great to stand the test of this time, the exhibition time, our time, times relevant to now. But to answer your question, museums can serve multiple roles, I don't decide what they should do, I simply try to negotiate how I occupy that space in a way that best suits my relationship to art and my own work in particular.

In 2008, I made a piece for a show at the Vancouver Art Gallery called *Landscape for the Birds*. It is a multi-channel sound piece consisting of eight speakers installed in the two tall Cypress trees that stand guard at the entrance of the gallery. The building used to be a provincial courthouse with jail cells for those awaiting prison sentences. The tweeter horn speakers installed in the trees played at different intervals melodic mating calls and at times very territorial calls of about eighty non-native and invasive bird species that were introduced into North America after colonization. On the top floor of the gallery, I cut out a previously boarded up window. A set of stairs built to the edge of the very large window provided a clear view onto the two trees outside. Keep in mind that Vancouver is a city that is heavily photographed by many photo-conceptual artists—both in museum collections and in the popular imagination, the image of the city and its surrounding landscape is rendered extensively through light boxes and large format photographs. In this context, the window was read through a similar lens. Exposing the pre-existing window made a remarkable change in the gallery as Vancouver Art Gallery felt confined, so removed from outside. So the prospect of removing a wall to expose natural light felt so liberating. I have

since then cut out quite a few gallery walls. They don't always lead to sunlight, but I keep trying.

In the case of Villa Stuck one can see from outside that the gallery has these tall beautiful windows that have been boarded up for a long time. I am so pleased that you've agreed to let me cut out windows and even doors to balconies never before exposed. Furthermore, we not only get light but in this show there is a constant breeze and moisture as the balcony and windows are left wide open for the duration of the exhibition. I don't need to overthink this work. It feels instinctual or just common sense. Museums serve a wonderful purpose of conserving and archiving. But that space of preservation can also deteriorate, render irrelevant... almost mummify. I want the space to feel more porous, urgent, transitional, vulnerable, connected, in flux. It feels so different in there now that the windows are open. And that difference, that porosity is so much more palpable given that, with the exception of the four full-spectrum light bulbs used for the hedges, the exhibition has no additional lighting. Therefore as the day and the season changes, the gallery's brightness and temperature alters accordingly; humid on rainy days and dark at night.

Verena Hein During the preparation of the show, you have shared with me some images you have researched online. Besides research material for the wall drawing, you have shown me pictures of the Assyrian deity Lamassu that you have built now in the exhibition using the technique "earth ramming." The work is titled *Variations on Ghost* (ill. p. 66). I want to ask you about the iconoclastic act. You once said in an interview: "I have an iconoclastic relationship to making work. I don't like to create new images or figuration." However, with these pieces you preserve an image that is widely-used in digital/social media, the fragment of the lion's claw is a symbol for destruction. You told me that you want to create "a vulnerable/present/organic piece." Can you tell us more about this work that is very important to the show? Abbas Akhavan The lion's claw sitting on the top floor is one representative of many animals in the show. The claws, highly stylized, are a fragment from a larger figure—so it is uncertain what the

rest of its body would look like. Placed near the window, the space behind the claws is a tall and long expansive space. It is left empty to potentially host the rest of the missing figure, to conjure in our imagination, the complete form in the space. It could be reminiscent of a lion or Lamassu.

I have worked with the image of the lion before. The lion has connotations of wisdom, security, power and so on. It feels reliable, doesn't it? Hence why it is used so extensively as a symbol of national pride, one that is frequently depicted on flags and monuments. But I only use it in fragments as I did in works such as *Like a Bat Afraid of Its Own Shadow* and *Mortar*, from the exhibition *Beacon* at the Darling Foundry, in Montreal. I am interested in the animal in its moment of transition into dust. Those works, like *Variations on Ghost*, represent the lion as a symbol at a shift in connotation, not as cohesive or as grand as often imagined. I made *Like a Bat Afraid of Its Own Shadow* out of stacked sandbags. It is to represent one of the two lions originally made for the gates of the city Hamadan in Iran. Of the two original lions, one of them has long been destroyed and the other I reproduced out of mortar covered in olive oil and honey. It is a close replica of the existing lion but like the original, as time and many wars have deteriorated it, it now looks more like a boulder.

Like the honey and the sandbags used in the other works, I wanted the lion at Villa Stuck to be made of something less permanent and in this case something regenerative. So rammed earth, an old technique for building walls and houses seems like a strong but delicate and organic way to reimagine the creature. I wanted to make the destroyed figures out of something impermanent, something that does not simply mimic or replicate the exact original. The six-tonne soil sculpture is made on site and then destroyed and given away as rich, fertile garden soil.

Verena Hein Besides *Variations on Ghost*, there are other animals or their representatives in the show. What is the role of the animal, or—as you say—the "mediated" animal? And can you tell us about the role of the pigeon on the new sculpture *For the Birds* (ill. p. 6) that you made especially of the show, for Franz von Stuck's artist's garden?

Abbas Akhavan Yes, the show has quite a few animals in it. All the animals in the show are somehow mediated. By that I mean they are the result of human intervention or interference. The sculpture, *If the first animal was metaphor* (ill. p. 19), is a to-scale replica of the plaster bandaging put on the face of a poached rhino. This mask encompasses the two types of human interventions I am thinking of: the killing of the animal for the “medicinal” qualities of its horn, and the desperate conservation work done in order to save these animals after injury. So it carries a kind of new face, more like a defaced animal that has been impacted by humans.

I think that “nature” does not exist when exposed to humanity. Maybe there are some indigenous communities that have managed to create a symbiotic and healthy relationship with some form of nature. But certainly it is not a common relationship. I think once exposed to humans, nature ceases to exist. This is something evident in our ongoing relationships with animals and plants and the rest of the planet. It is alarming and at the same time almost redundant to talk about the age of anthropocene or the stats on mass extinction and climate change. Our negotiations with animals and plants and all types of various ecologies are incredibly human-centric. Aside from destruction, we domesticate nature in order to comprehend it. We almost always fail to see it outside of our benefit—from resource extraction to therapy to property and so on. Sadly somewhere between the false entitlement given to us by religious texts and the forces of capitalism, everything has fallen to the servitude of humanity. It feels as though we are alien to this place. I say this because I can’t think of any other creature that is as ill-informed, ill-adjusted and incapable of living on this planet.

Part of what I hope to pursue is to look at extinction as a kind of folly, something almost akin to sentiments people associate with architectural ruins. I think the piece *If the first metaphor was animal* comes close to this, but not quite. It is still unresolved. Nonetheless, as the majority of us are complicit in what is happening to the planet, we resign ourselves to guilt as a way to alleviate responsibility. And the guilt is a kind of romance—

it is more for self-help. So we experience extinction like some kind of fictitious or nostalgic ruin. Something we come upon and perceive through self-serving lenses; one that justifies our inaction and helps us overlook our footprint. So we wander through websites, nature shows, or as a first person witness ... stumbling upon relentless photos and facts about the bleaching of the coral reefs, the extinction of black rhinos, or the endless, almost pornographic-like images of the Arctic ice cracking. And we deal with this incomprehensible moment through sentiment instead of action. I am no different. But, as the world is shifting, we have to adjust and change accordingly. And I think our responsibilities are becoming less and less negotiable. Every generation, every age has had their share of urgencies, and we are experiencing ours and the nostalgia of past no longer applies to this reality.

Verena Hein The pigeon is a symbol for hope and peace. During the preparation of the show we have discussed that “a room for hope” is missing, in the words of your partner. How can you solve this, how can you bring a balance in the theme of the show?

Abbas Akhavan I don’t think I can answer this question adequately. It is a thoughtful inquiry that I need to consider for every work I make. Any reply will fall short, because the idea of hope functions not as a sentiment depicted through an object, but a potential, a momentum that might be felt or deciphered through gestures outside of language and representation. I am short of words. Ascribing hope to one object is burdensome. The dove, the white concrete pigeon, the protagonist sitting on a human head, is commonly a symbol of peace and hope. But that is yet another mediated symbol imposed onto an animal.

I think art, and without sounding too presumptuous, hopefully my work, should function within and outside of (visual) language. I think we’ve been overschooled and very mannered in how we make and perceive art. And that kind of domestication of creativity troubles me. I am not advocating against education or for naivety. I am thinking about how inspiration and intuition have been channeled and stifled. I am not sure

how to explain this, but I am curious about works that carry a different frequency. We need to think back to the origins of expression and how to conjure ideas—be it magic, superstition, ritual, spirituality, transgression, ... etc. I am curious about charged materials and how we respond to them in ways that are outside of predetermined understandings of contemporary art. I am looking for works that feel vibrant. More alchemy and less trickery.