

Catriona Jeffries

Abbas Akhavan

curtain call, variations on a folly
Chisenhale Gallery, London

August 14–October 17, 2021

Vancouver

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curtain call, variations on a folly, 2021, barley straw, subsoil, lightweight leca, sharp sand, puddle clay, wood, Chromakey green 1080 paint, Genelec 8020C active monitor, pink noise. Installation view, *curtain call, variations on a folly*, Chisenhale Gallery, London, 2021



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CAT'S PAW, 2021, white temporary graffiti paint. Aerial view, *curtain call*, *variations on a folly*, Chisenhale Gallery, London, 2021



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The Observer
Art and design



Laura Cumming

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Abbas Akhavan review – a poetic monument to folly

★★★★☆



▲ Curtain Call, Variations on a Folly, 2021 by Abbas Akhavan at Chisenhale Gallery. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Andy Keate

Chisenhale Gallery, London

The Isis-destroyed ancient ruins of Palmyra rise again in precarious straw and London clay, shaped by the hands of this deeply allusive Iranian artist

The scent reaches you before the sight – an exhilarating combination of evergreen and fresh sap emitting from the gallery entrance. It seems to presage woods in deep summer. And sure enough, the spectacle inside is like a glade of high trees, their dark trunks rising to crowns of leaves, scatterings of soil on the floor. But at exactly the same moment, what you are looking at is also something quite else, immediately distinct and recognisable – the colonnade of a magnificent classical temple.

The trees are both trunks and columns; the leaves might be acanthus on a Corinthian capital. The whole structure is formed out of what seems to be organic matter, possibly straw-strewn black earth.

That is the one-two surprise on arrival: what you see is entirely archaeological – a Greco-Roman colonnade – and at the same time wholly botanical, even arboreal. How can it be both at once? That is the opening wonder.

Each column is in fact a sculpture, formed by the hands of Abbas Akhavan. Born in Tehran in 1977, Akhavan moved to Canada with his family during the Iran-Iraq war and is now based in Montreal. He is an extremely subtle thinker. Anyone who saw his Delfina exhibition in 2013 (he has scarcely shown here since then, alas) may remember the way he brought the outside indoors, letting nature take over a townhouse with high hedges, leaking waterfalls and sprouting floors. With his unhurried cast of mind, Akhavan is constantly pondering our place on earth as contemporary beings living among old buildings, quite often ruins, and the strange relations between people, archaeology and nature.



▲ A detail view of *Curtain Call, Variations on a Folly*. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Andy Keate

It is possible, for instance, that you may recognise the shape of this colonnade: the original lead up to the monumental Arch of Palmyra, the 2,000-year-old ruined city in Syria, so much of which was destroyed by Isis in 2015. What is thought to be the body of Khaled al-Asaad, the Syrian archaeologist who tried to defend Palmyra was only recently found in the rubble, beheaded. At the very least, Akhavan's sculptural installation is its own kind of monument to this tragic history - to these ancient buildings and perhaps to that man, all vanished away. Earth to earth, dust into dust.

Syrian citizens have tried to recreate Palmyra in miniature in their own devastated homes. And it is said that Syria has signed a contract with Russia to reconstruct the ancient buildings on the site. But there already exists a facsimile of the legendary arch, through which travellers processed more than two millennia. It is based on the aggregate data of innumerable photographs, transformed through 3D printing into a cut-down version in Egyptian marble. This is the work of the Institute for Digital Archaeology, a joint project between professors at Harvard and Oxford, partnered by, among others (and you may ask yourself why), the Dubai Futures Foundation and the UAE.

The repro arch was first unveiled in Trafalgar Square in 2016 by Boris Johnson, then mayor of London, with a speech of posturing defiance in which he raises two digits - ho ho - to the barbarians. It then went on a European tour. There is no doubt that Akhavan is alluding to this curious circus, and the illusion that we are actually seeing or encountering the arch. His installation stands upon a sardonic landscape, in the form of a sweeping chroma key green screen, as used in film and television to isolate a subject from its background and transport it elsewhere. His colonnade is, as it were, neither here nor there.

And the absurdity of both the marble prop and its ceremonial unveiling is the subject of another work in this show. An image of the scene where the gleaming white sheet covered the 3D facsimile before unveiling is itself printed on another gleaming white sheet, roughly the size of a magician's silk handkerchief. Now you see it, now you don't.

A vast painting across the gallery roof is more inscrutable, not least because it can only be seen from surrounding tower blocks and the birds in the air. It involves the phrase "cat's paw", from the fable by La Fontaine, in which a monkey flatters a cat into burning its paws on a fire to supply him with roasted chestnuts. Nowadays it refers to people who become the dupes or tools of others.





▲ An aerial view of Cat's Paw, 2021 by Abbas Akhavan.
Photograph: Ali Sadeghian

My sense is that this may have something to do with institutions, including galleries and museums, which continue to follow the bidding of politicians and patrons. We can manufacture versions of ancient Syrian architecture but block the asylum of Syrian refugees; we can display hallowed artefacts in our museums without responsibility to the societies that made them or the civilians who tried to defend them. We can perform for the sponsors but sidestep restitution.

What is so marvellous about Akhavan's central installation is its dense poetry of idea and allusion. The sculptures come from the earth itself - in this case that old organic building material, cob, mixed with London clay. We are here, after all, even while imagining Palmyra. And as the classical columns recede from the eye, so they cease to represent columns, reverting to composting nature itself. The uprights are columns, then disintegrating trunks, then bodies, falling away. Yet the idea remains, and the vision of humanity stands.

● [Abbas Akhavan](#) is at the Chisenhale Gallery, London E3, until 17 October

Abbas Akhavan: Curtain Call, Variations on a Folly

Art  **Chisenhale Gallery**, Bow  Wednesday September 8 2021 - Sunday October 17 2021

FREE



curtain call, variations on a folly (2021). Installation view, Chisenhale Gallery, London, 2021. Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery, London. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Andy Keate

Time Out says

The destruction of culture isn't the most horrifying outcome of war, but it is a powerful symbol. Whether it's the defacing of idols, the burning of paintings, or the demolition of architecture, culture has been one of the victims of war for as long as war has existed.

ISIS, for example, destroyed much of the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria in 2015. It wasn't a one-off moment of wild violence, but the culmination of years of geopolitical instability, of invasion, manipulation, western interference, greed, excess, imperialism and power vacuums.

Now, the colonnade from that ancient city has been recreated in the Chisenhale Gallery by the artist Abbas Akhavan. It stands on a huge chromakey green screen, its columns made of cob, an ancient building material of mud and hay. The gallery is warm, a low throbbing hum pulses out of speakers somewhere in the wall. You stand in front of this mess of mud in the shape of lost cultural legacy, sweat building up; it's hot, oppressive, a little suffocating.

The green screen here is never used for filming, it just acts as a way of saying that this structure can be anywhere, can be moved and manipulated. Akhavan's installation is a recreation of ruins, it's history and culture as movable film set, as digestible commodity.

The work on the roof lets the show down, but fortunately it can only be seen by birds, so you're just left with the bulk of the exhibition, which is powerful, challenging and interesting.

It's also incredibly timely, and almost too damn on the nose, because just as the show opened, the Taliban was streaming into Kabul. Images of fleeing Afghanis, unrepentant politicians and gun-toting soldiers taking hold in a power vacuum left by western forces filled our various screens. It was all media to be consumed, history to be regurgitated later down the line.

Akhavan isn't here to give answers, or to peddle an easy narrative, he's here to show how symbols of war can be twisted and manipulated; to prove that it doesn't matter how many archaeologists try to save these structures and sculptures, the ruins never stop being ruined.

BY: EDDY FRANKEL

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Craft/Work

Folly Good Show: Abbas Akhavan at Chisenhale Gallery

— *Amah-Rose Abrams* , September 4th, 2021 07:16

The East London exhibition drags visitors out of their digital stupor, writes Amah-Rose Abrams



What is a folly? A fool's errand, a joke, or a jape? It also has another meaning.

An architectural folly is a small building created purely for aesthetic pleasure. Their origins lie in grand English and French houses of the 16th century where they would be installed in their sprawling, ornate gardens to inspire contemplation. Often designed in a classical style they were intended to encourage thoughts of bygone histories and civilisations and later 18th century constructions would be left unfinished for those passing to consider.

Abbas Akhavan's *Curtain Call, Variations on a Folly* installed at East London's Chisenhale Gallery is a clever meditation on this concept. Akhavan, using sound, light and sculpture, drags us out of the digital space into real life as he makes us look at contemporary history through the lens of the near distant past. He has also created one of his roof top painted works on the roof of the gallery which reads 'CAT'S PAW' and can be seen by passing aircraft, birds and drones.

"We have been having conversations since 2019," said Akhavan. "I wanted it to be more site-specific, potentially but I'm also at a point where I want a little bit more wiggle room or playroom... So I was also kind of smitten by the capacity of this space."

The Chisenhale Gallery might be the ultimate blank canvas, a large rectangular room in which artists have free rein. After a long period of contemplation, extended by restrictions of the pandemic, Akhavan decided on an idea centred around a folly after seeing an image of Boris Johnson standing, in Trafalgar Square, in front a recreation the 2,000-year-old Arch of Triumph destroyed in Palmyra in 2015.

"They would reproduce like fake ruins to stumble upon strategically in their garden walks to contemplate the demise of civilization, essentially, or the ruins of another civilization," explains the artist. "I found this is really interesting as it kind of gives permission to these play with that tradition."

The resulting work is a reconstruction of the colonnade that led from the Arch of Triumph in cob, placed on and against a large greenscreen plinth and background combined with a sound element which guides visitors to a vantage point in front of the colonnade. The cob, a comment of the adoption of basic building practices which are sold back to us as luxury eco-friendly commodities, absorbs light as does the greenscreen that it sits against.

"The cob doesn't reflect any light, it absorbs light, but it has so much texture," Akhavan explains. "It's incredible much information it has, that your eye kind of falls into it in that in relation to that green, which also absorbs a lot of light, and has no texture whatsoever. It's that kind of union that I sense that I think a lot of what I see on green screen kind of sculpture is a visual language that everybody uses as a tool. It's also in the art world, whatever it is called artists also use it as a display mechanism. I've seen it before, so I'm not doing anything new. I'm just participating in that tradition."

This creates a mind-blowing experience of colour in the space that draws you into the work. Guided by the sound, a pink sound echoed by the pink shadows caused by the greenscreen you stand at the centre of the colonnade. At a point of forced perspective you are forced to contemplate this folly, this ruin, this past civilisation ancient, yet lost so recently.

For Akhavan the greenscreen not only has a unique colour and texture but using it as a backdrop or plinth references the digital by its omission as sitting on it is an ancient structure made from a traditional material. These two very real and present structures are not presented to us as augmented or superimposed, they are physical and dominant in the space and to contemplate it we must remain present. Why have a pixel rendering of a lost ruin when we can build a folly?

"I find it weird that while 'the world' has so many materials that have so much weight and gravity, why we're all settling for these illusionistic, weightless, illustrative renderings of the real world? Why are we going so topical and superficial and why is this mimetic space so attractive?"

The moment of contemplation which is so key to this work when we stand at a point where the sound and light create a slight tension, just enough to make us focus. Using pink noise and intelligent lighting the shades of green and pink in the room are echoed on levels we may not be aware of. When deciding on the sound with a designer Akhavan learned more about the spectrum of sound.

"He told me what pink noise and brown noise were, so I started thinking about sound as chroma as opposed to pink itself, I wanted there to be another colour that you don't see which is the pink noise but also the green produces pink shadows," he explains.

There are so many posits, ideas and theories to be explored and enjoyed within this work but you can also just go and bathe your senses in it. One strong idea in the work for me was that while the digital world, metaverse or augmented worlds have played a huge positive role in our lives over the last two years it's key that we drag them, along with ourselves, into the real one.