

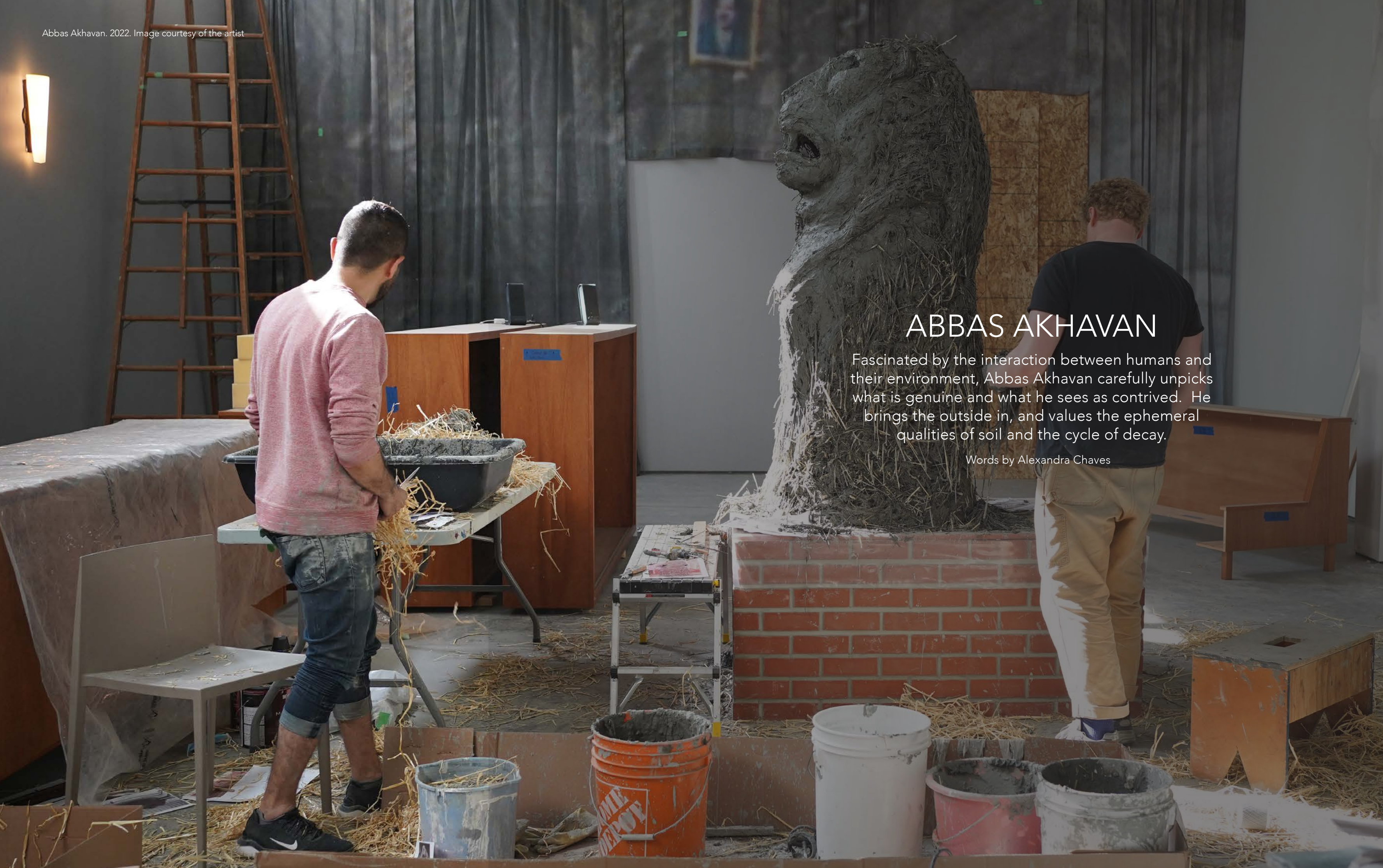
Fatiha Zemmouri.  
*Empreinte carbone 1. 2022.*  
Raw earth and pigments on  
wooden panel. 130 x 98 cm  
Image courtesy of the artist

# DOWN AND DIRTY

## ART MEETS LAND

When artists get to work, the starting point for many is what they encounter in the world around them. Landscape, topography and geology, composed of the raw elements that form our environment. Rock, soil and wood, variously carved, chipped, shaved, sculpted, manipulated and crafted into pieces of art or installations that express both an innate primeval quality and the imaginative insight of the creative into whose hands they have passed. In this special section we look at how artists have got down and dirty – often literally – to embrace all aspects of landscape, from microscopic particles of dust to the big picture of soaring mountains and desert horizons.





## ABBAS AKHAVAN

Fascinated by the interaction between humans and their environment, Abbas Akhavan carefully unpicks what is genuine and what he sees as contrived. He brings the outside in, and values the ephemeral qualities of soil and the cycle of decay.

Words by Alexandra Chaves





Abbas Akhavan. *study for a garden*. 2022. Installation view at Mount Stuart. Image courtesy of the artist, The Third Line and Catriona Jeffries

Abbas Akhavan's plant is dying. From his apartment balcony in Montreal, he shows me its scraggly branches and yellowing leaves via video call. It's a casualty of the artist's frequent travels, which often last months at a time as he takes on artist residencies and presents exhibitions abroad. When we have our conversation in mid-May, he has just returned from his latest residency, which culminated in a solo show at Mount Stuart on the Isle of Bute in Scotland, where he has produced a series of works responding to the historic estate's architecture and vast gardens.

The declining plant feels like an aberration, considering Akhavan's body of work. Conceptually, *study for a garden* (2022) is a continuation of the artist's previous projects involving botanical interventions in domestic spaces. The main piece of the show is *variations on a folly*, an 11-metre installation of a creek, replete with moss and ferns, set up in the vaulted sandstone crypt of Mount Stuart's 18th-century Neo-Gothic mansion.

Akhavan spent more than three months in Scotland developing the site-specific commission, as well as creating multimedia works that include an audio walk-through of the grounds. The mansion was originally built in 1719 as a residence for a marquess, but elaborately reconstructed after being damaged in a fire in the 19th

century. Surrounded by 300 acres of gardens, rivers and inlets, the estate brims with the beauty of nature. In his research, however, the artist discovered that these water channels were not all intrinsic to the terrain. "Speaking to the gardeners, I learned that a lot of the water features had been constructed or rerouted to create the mood of the landscape and for the sake of the inhabitants of the house," he says.

By bringing elements from the outside to the inside, Akhavan highlights this sense of un-naturality, to "shift the focus on what's real and what's not". He argues that we humans are in constant negotiation with our environment, bending nature to our whims and advantage. Gardens are where these negotiations become particularly apparent, with the artist describing them as "self-conscious manicured spaces between what we call nature and culture", where our dominance of nature unfurls in smaller yet immediate scales. How should these hedges line up against the trees? Which plants to prune and which flowers to let bloom? "The gardener chooses what lives and dies," he says.

A decade ago, Akhavan made his first *Study for a Garden* at the Delfina Foundation. Following a ten-week residency, he transformed what was then the Foundation's newly acquired and



Abbas Akhavan. *Fatigues*. 2014. Taxidermy animals. Dimensions variable. Installation view of *L'avenir*, La Biennale de Montréal 2014, Musée d'art contemporain, Montreal, Canada. This body of work, shown unauthored, is purposefully installed in poorly lit corners and other peripheral spaces of the museum without labels or didactic panels. The animals in the installation were not sourced from the fur trade nor were they trapped as game. The mammals died of natural causes or in car accidents and all of the birds died in collisions with buildings. Photography by Paul Litherland

yet-to-be renovated space in London into a site of overgrowth: planting invasive ivy under floral carpets, its tendrils snaking and blending across the pattern; a row of pines crowding the hallway; a water sprinkler flooding a room. "I don't think the outside is ever not on the inside," he explains. "It's just that we have a kind of filter. The work was corroding that filter, enhancing that imbalance in some ways."

Central to his work is the idea of the encounter. Akhavan makes us consider artifice, as in the work at Mount Stuart, or the invasion at Delfina. For his work *Fatigues* (2014), presented in a group show at the Montreal Biennale, he placed ethically sourced taxidermy animals and birds throughout the galleries of the city's Musée d'Art Contemporain. The lifeless bodies of eight creatures, including an owl, songbird, stag and fox, were laid down in ill-lit corners and peripheries with no accompanying wall text, so it would have been easy to miss them completely or be startled by the insertion of the 'wild' into such a setting.

Many of Akhavan's artwork titles orbit the same words: study, folly, variations, cast. By naming them studies, he suggests an "inconclusive, but connected" character to the works. "If something is a study, it has potential to become something else, to grow,"

he observes. He traces this interest back to art school, where he was often more drawn to unfinished paintings or preliminary sketches than to the finished works, explaining how "there's a kind of energetic immediacy to them" and adding that the intention becomes more interesting than the material. "There's an openness to the study. You're more forgiving about it. It lacks authority in some ways. I think, over the years, I'm still dealing with the same thing. All of my works are, in fact, studies."

Akhavan received his MFA from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver in 2006, though his path to art school wasn't straightforward. Born in Tehran in 1977, his family left at the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War and he was raised by a single mother in Windsor and then London, Ontario under "not the most ideal circumstances, financially", as he puts it. "The potential of being an artist, especially as a Middle Eastern immigrant in Canada, was the biggest impossibility in some ways," he says. But he found a way: he concocted a story to his mother about getting a full scholarship in Victoria (of geographical significance, as it is on the other side of Canada from Ontario). "To her, education was the most important thing. She told me, 'you have to go'". So he went, and found himself lost in the city with no money and no real university application. "I





Abbas Akhavan. *curtain call, variations on a folly*. 2021. Installation view. Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery. Photography by Andy Keate. Image courtesy of the artist





Abbas Akhavan. *curtain call, variations on a folly*. 2021. Installation view. Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery. Photography by Andy Keate. Image courtesy of the artist

had to fake my way through,” he recalls. After a job stint as a busboy and a failed attempt to enroll on a course, Akhavan moved to Montreal to complete his undergraduate studies at Concordia University.

Akhavan speaks to me with candour, much as I’ve seen him do at talks and panel discussions. His sentences, long and rife with detail and meaning, meander through multiple thoughts. He apologises for this (“I talk in fragments”), although his phrases reveal an artist whose ideas run as deep as they are wide.

His works are often ephemeral and site-specific, a consequence of them being produced during multiple artist residencies across the world. Akhavan says this approach was only partially intentional. “I was more curious, especially as a younger person, to see the world and learn from what’s outside of me,” he explains, adding that his site-responsive practice entails getting close to the people who work for and around these institutions, such as gardeners and woodworkers. It has

only been in the last few years, due to the pandemic, that he has rented a studio.

Among his main materials is soil. He uses the technique of rammed earth and cob to reproduce ancient ruins, particularly those destroyed by human forces, such as the colonnade of the temple in Palmyra, damaged by ISIS in 2015–16 and reinterpreted in the work *Curtain Call, Variations on a Folly* (2021). With the help of cob builders, the artist constructed the colonnade by ramming a mixture of dirt, clay, sand and straw into hollow wooden cylinders with a central pole. Each layer of earth was left to dry before piling on another until the material was compressed enough around the pole that the cylinder could be removed.

Another piece related to Palmyra is a sculpture of a lamassu’s feet (*Variations on Ghost*, 2017/2018), the only parts of the original left intact by the terrorist group. The soil-based material used by Akhavan matches the fate of these antiquities. “As soon as the exhibition is over, they crumble into ruin again,” he says. For this



Abbas Akhavan. *Study For A Garden*. 2012. Installation at the Delfina Foundation. Image courtesy of the Third Line

process, Akhavan starts with non-chemical topsoil that is steamed to eliminate pests. Such treatment enables the soil to regain its nutrients and be used again. Afterwards, as per the artist’s request, gardeners and local people are free to collect the topsoil, which can amount to as much as six or seven tonnes, to reuse. “I feel like I should just do that as an artwork, give away soil,” the artist muses. “I’m intending to just dump tonnes of soil in the gallery and have it taken away over time.”

The human infliction of power onto nature and heritage is never far from Akhavan’s work. Nature as we know it – swathes of forest, mountains and rivers, volcanoes and valleys – is merely what people have decided to spare from destruction or development, at least for now. “I’m wary of the word ‘nature’. I use it in quotation marks,” he explains. “Whatever we call nature ceases to exist as soon as it is exposed to us, because we have an agenda – domestication, misinterpretation, pillaging, digging, destruction for capitalist means. Even preservation is done with future use in mind.”

In this way, everything returns to the garden, with certain parts for show and others for extraction. “The entire planet has become a garden,” Akhavan says. Avoiding any moral statements, he instead makes visible our relationship to our environment through micro and macro lenses. “I’m not outside of this. I’m part of that ecosystem.”

As he settles back into life in Montreal, the artist considers the consequence of his semi-peripatetic life on the artist residency circuit. His friends are usually unsure when he’s in town, and he and his partner have been thinking of buying some cacti that can survive periods of unwatering. He may move to Europe, but has not decided on which city yet. There are some residencies on the horizon. However, Akhavan wants to focus on the part of his practice that is tied to connection. “My ambitions in life are about reciprocity,” he affirms. “Once we’ve been satiated by the drive to insert our subjectivity to the world, we now have to facilitate others to do that.”