

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 playground... 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.