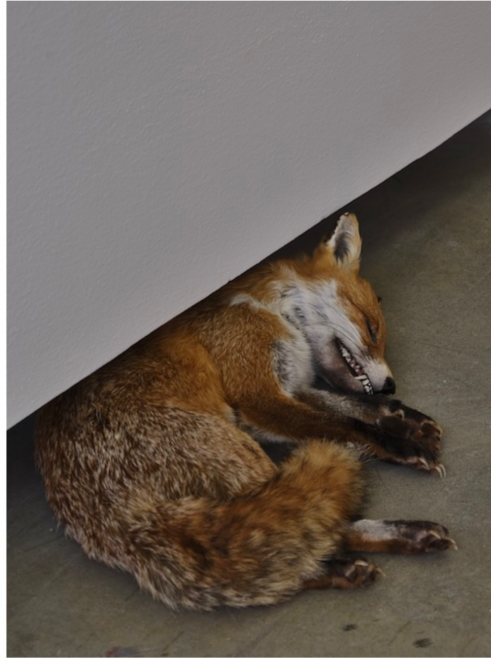


MOMUS

Time Made Strange: Abbas Akhavan at the Belkin Art Gallery

BY ANDREW WITT · REVIEWS · NOVEMBER 26, 2025



Abbas Akhavan, *Fatigues*, 2014 (taxidermied specimen sources from animals that have died naturally or by accident). Courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. Installation view: *Abbas Akhavan: One Hundred Years* (September 5–December 7, 2025) at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography.

One Hundred Years, Abbas Akhavan's current [exhibition](#) at the Belkin Art Gallery at the University of British Columbia (UBC), loosely draws on the Brothers Grimm's fairy tale in which a princess pricks her finger, falls asleep under a witch's spell, and the rest of the kingdom follows her into the same rhythm of sleep, slumbering for the next century. But there is no sleeping beauty, no prince, no kiss, no awakening, and not quite the stillness of an enchanted slumber, either. The exhibition serves less as a fairy tale than as a meditation on how the artworks inhabit and modulate time. *One Hundred Years* has been [described](#) as suspending time, but what it actually offers is something less tranquil, a model of time that doesn't pause so much as waver, decay, and reconstitute itself in uneven measure. Stand inside *One Hundred Years* long enough and you begin to feel time not as a single duration but as a set of competing tempos and overlapping durations. Things don't halt so much as shift between different speeds.

Much of the work in *One Hundred Years* loops back to earlier shows, earlier gestures in Akhavan's career, and the show itself is framed as a return of sorts. It has been almost twenty years since he graduated with an MFA from UBC in 2006, and now the artist will represent Canada at the 61st Venice Biennale. It's unlikely the exhibition itself will be reprised, but, in a way, it reads like a dress rehearsal—not for a specific installation but for the harder task of drawing together a career's worth of questions and problems. The Belkin show isn't a survey (Akhavan will have one at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 2026), but its scale and self-reflexivity invite a kind of reckoning.



Abbas Akhavan, *spring*, 2021/25 (found water fountain piping with lights and pond pump, copper piping, chiller, tubing, hardware, glycol and water; and *Studio*, 2025 (Monstera deliciosa, planters, concrete blocks, grow lights, lumber, hardware, drywall and paint). Both works courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. Installation view: *Abbas Akhavan: One Hundred Years* (September 5–December 7, 2025) at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography.

Akhavan has often used the garden as a structuring principle in his work, as an artificial ecology that provides both a performative logic and helps choreograph how audiences move through an exhibition. At the Belkin, this performative logic is immediately apparent in the first room, where five large tropical plants, *Monstera deliciosa*, are arranged on an elevated platform, like actors on a stage. Their broad, perforated leaves tower over the viewer. The five plants, each in its own pot, face a frozen fountain. From our perspective, it's hard to see how the freezing actually happens. No water flows from the spouts, but small icicles form along the fountain's pipes. The refrigeration unit that cools the water is installed on the opposite side of the room, out of sight, maintaining the system at just-below-freezing temperature.

This concealed machinery is central to Akhavan's artificial ecology: Life and temperature are regulated behind the scenes, forming a single circulatory system. What appears organic is sustained only through a web of hidden infrastructures that keep the whole tableau alive and humming. This modulation of time, not by natural cycles but by regulated systems, sets the stage for a show in which artifice itself becomes a temporal medium. The arrangement of potted plants deliberately recalls a [photograph](#) of Matisse's late studio, though it is not

altogether clear why Matisse is referenced here. The plants are overgrown and towering, arranged in a line against the wall. True to their name, they are monstrous—much larger than a person, their leaves spreading far beyond any domestic scale, looming overhead like a many-headed hydra. One moves around them, confronts them, perhaps photographs them, and participates in the choreography, much as one moves through a greenhouse picking out plants to take home.



Abbas Akhavan, *One Hundred Years*, 2025 (royal icing—confectioner's sugar egg whites and food coloring—stainless steel, hardware, oil lamp, paraffin oil, candles and lumber). Installation view: *Abbas Akhavan: One Hundred Years* (September 5–December 7, 2025) at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography.

This artificial ecology marks Akhavan's departure from how the garden is usually conceived in [contemporary art or discourse](#). His gardens are neither inherently restorative nor pastoral. They can be beautiful, but they are also brutal, sites where decisions are made about what will live and what will die, or what will live on in a different form. Akhavan is perhaps best known for his 2013–16 work *Study for a Monument* (absent from the Belkin show), largely because it toured widely, from the Guggenheim Museum in New York to Artspeak in Vancouver, the artist-run center Mercer Union in Toronto, and the Douglas Hyde Gallery in Dublin. The installation featured bronze casts of plants native to the Tigris-Euphrates region, devastated by Saddam Hussein's destruction of salt marshes and the subsequent Iraq War. Laid on white bedsheets as if displayed at a market stall, the casts, stripped of any pedestal, appear as decorative remnants of a larger, absent whole. Akhavan's sculptures bear the marks of decay: Some are oxidized, others are blackened and charred by fire, with thistles

and other plant forms cast at human scale that suggest burial and ruin. Because they are conceived as a “study,” they remain provisional, based on reproductions rather than the actual plants, many of which have died or been destroyed. In this sense, *Study for a Monument* already pointed toward the temporal concerns that *100 Years* takes up more directly.

In the Belkin show, after encountering the arrangement of *Monstera deliciosa* and the frozen fountain, you turn a corner to find an oversize, tilting cake with flickering candles that faces a two-way mirror reflecting the room. Around the next corner, a dead fox lies in wait; opposite it, a dead owl is tucked beneath the wall. The animals are taxidermy—“ethically sourced” by a vegan taxidermist, as the [artist notes](#)—creatures that were not hunted but met their ends by accidental or natural causes. If the plants and fountains articulate one register of Akhavan’s artificial ecology through the technological sustainment of life, the taxidermy animals articulate its opposite: the preservation of death under the semblance of vitality. Together they compose a system in which time moves unevenly, its shifting tempo set not by nature but by artifice.



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Reentering the room with the mirror and cake, you cross the reflective surface once more, catching your own image as you look toward the cake. At this point, confronted with the artifice of blue icing, flickering candles, and precarious stacks of foam, you might pause with a question in mind—not the usual, “But is it art?” but the more ludic: “But is it cake?”

This question calls back to a work Akhavan made during his student days at UBC. While writing a thesis on “hospitality, food, utensils, and weapons,” he baked a cake in the likeness of his seminar leader, the artist Ken Lum, a work he titled *Heads of the Department* (2006). The scene that followed was slightly absurd and faintly grotesque: During the class discussion, the cake was carved up as if on a mortuary slab, served in neat slices to Lum and the other students—a comic beheading staged as a collegial performance, the institution consuming its own head under the pretense of an MFA critique.



Abbas Akhavan, *Zoo*, 2025 (live-feed stream, monitors, lumber and hardware) and *One Hundred Years*, 2025, behind. Both works courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. Installation view: *Abbas Akhavan: One Hundred Years* (September 5–December 7, 2025) at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography.

Passing once again over the cake and mirror, you enter a room where live feeds from various zoos play on a bank of screens, some showing empty enclosures, others briefly animated by movement (I happened to catch a lone fox), before finally arriving at a small fountain where water flows against a green-screen wall. Nothing in this exhibition grows or dies entirely on its own; everything is mediated or replayed or surveilled through technical means. Walking back toward the gallery entrance, you encounter a dead badger tucked into a corner of the room directly opposite the front desk. The creature’s body is arranged in a curiously playful pose, belly up as if caught mid-gesture.

The entire exhibition forces this durational encounter: Time passes as you pass over it, around it, and within it. The plants grow, the cake tilts, the candles flicker, the surveillance footage loops, the fountain recycles its water, flowing, looping, flowing. The dead animals look lively but remain dead. This circulation of water, footage, heat, and decay extends the logic of Akhavan's artificial ecology. Even the frozen fountain refuses stillness: The pipes thaw, the ice gradually melts, and the Belkin staff mop up the pool of water the next day. Time could be measured by the interval separating the moment you step onto the stage and the moment you walk off it.

Akhavan's uneven treatment of time generates a kind of estrangement, embracing the weird and unsettling relations artworks can set loose in the world. On my last visit to the exhibition, I took a closer look at the fox tucked between the wall separating the cake from the fountain. Like the other taxidermy animals in the show, it was awkwardly placed. At first, it resembled a sleeping dog lying in the shade. In earlier exhibitions, the work appeared under the title *Fatigues* (2014), though it often went unsigned or unacknowledged—as in its 2017 presentation at the Wellcome Collection in London—appearing only peripherally in catalogues or barely in view. That anonymity seems considered, making the animals' presence feel incidental, as if they had simply wandered off the street.

The fox's refusal, or inability, to meet our gaze clarifies the stakes of the exhibition. The temporality of the experience is abrupt, almost percussive. There is no absorption, no slow reveal. Within this artificial ecology, time feels strained; the fox occupies the uneasy afterlife of things kept alive past their natural duration. And while in this strange afterlife, the fox becomes a kind of negative mirror, a reminder that much of the world remains inaccessible, unknowable. The fox closes its eyes to us, closes its eyes to the world.

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Bio

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By Andrew Witt

Andrew Witt is an art historian and critic who writes on contemporary art. He is currently the 2025–2026 PERICULUM Foundation Discourse Fellow. His book *Lost Days, Endless Nights: Photography and Film from Los Angeles* was recently published by MIT Press (2025).