

Abbas Akhavan's "Folly" at VIE D'ANGE, Montréal

by Anna Kovler

In the centre of what used to be a car mechanic's shop, but functions now as an art gallery, Abbas Akhavan's sculpture takes up as much space as a car might have. Comprised of a large mossy boulder, a vintage fur coat and a yellow plastic bag, the conglomeration fuses into a single organism on account of a watering system that leaves the entity constantly wet and dripping. Hoses running along the ceiling periodically mist the sculpture from above, and water sources hidden in the coat send a constant stream trickling from its sleeve, tapping a rhythmic sound in the gallery similar to a garden fountain. The entity almost seems to be alive.

Slumped over the boulder like a ghost in eternal embrace, the wet coat elicits feelings of sadness and unease, recalling either a missing person or the raccoon killed for its fur. At the sculpture's base, the plastic bag evokes a different time scale and provenance, as something that breaks down at a slower rate than the rock's coverings. This grouping of allusions – to decay, luxury, wastefulness, and resource extraction – is aptly embodied in the exhibition's title "Folly," meaning both foolishness, and a type of decorative, useless architectural structure. Found commonly in the British countryside, architectural follies often recreated gothic or classical ruins, eliciting nostalgia and mourning in visitors walking through the garden, and serving no functional purpose other than stirring the emotions.

Akhavan's playful confusion of form and function marks the entire exhibition. In many of the works, reality is shifted either slightly or in a manner that surprises the viewer. The assisted readymade, *Claim*, consists of real 24 karat gold gilding on the existing metal security bars on the gallery's window. Security measure slips into decoration here without gaining any extra security, and on the contrary, poses an increased threat of theft (the gold would in fact be worthless if stolen, as it can't be separated from the bars).

Along one wall of the gallery, a sculptural installation recalls a greenhouse. Large pieces of tempered glass lean on the wall, providing cover for a few printed digital images while they are misted by a watering system above. Once an hour, the glass becomes soaking wet, creating an uncanny ecosystem of moisture, image and glass, giving the impression that perhaps, in another dimension, the photographs would begin to sprout, unfurling into a grander form. Pictured in the images, all sourced from the net, is an array of natural and cultural specimens particular to the history and ecology of the exhibition's location. Among other things, we see a Scotch Thistle (an invasive species to the region), the monument to Queen Victoria that was blown apart by the FLQ in Quebec City in 1963, and an image of the controversial work of Pierre Ayot from 1976 of a giant cross on its side that was ordered to be destroyed by then-mayor Jean Drapeau.

Eliciting a multiplicity of emotions and associations, Akhavan's works give the feeling that something profound has been stated, and yet when one tries to pin down a single concrete meaning, none seems possible. "I'm trying to make things coexist simultaneously," explains Akhavan, "without leading to a single narrative. There is no 'message,' that's not the objective."

Among the two pieces that will stay permanently installed at VIE D'ANGE is the measurement "764 feet" spelled out on the rooftop of the gallery, referring to the height of Mount Royal without the Mount Royal Cross. Bringing to mind both Ayot's censored sculpture from the seventies, and the replica of the work installed in Jeanne-Mance park in 2016, which faced an almost equally hostile response, (the mayor nearly withdrew a grant promised for the project), the installation suggests that the histories and stories of a community and city are indispensable tools for seeing, understanding, and emotionally processing our present moment.

Abbas Akhavan's solo exhibition "Folly" is on view at VIE D'ANGE in Montréal until October 10, 2018. Recent exhibitions include "A Kiss Under the Tail" at Arsenal Contemporary New York, and a new site specific work developed for the Fleck Clerestory Commission Program at the Power Plant in Toronto.



Abbas Akhavan. sept cent soixante quatre pieds. 2018. Paint on VIE D'ANGE rooftop. 975 x 1158 cm.