

# Night falls slowly inside a photograph

by Anne Lesley Selcer

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The ethical, emotional and aesthetic have no separation in Abbas Akhavan's work. In hospitable and humorous ways, his installations make gentle incursions into the order of the museum — public and private, sacred and devalued. The recent *cast for a folly* downgraded the slick San Francisco Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art into a besieged museum in the developing world, welcoming American audiences into the bombed out lobby of Iraq National Museum. The artwork tells the story of the 2003 looting of some of humanity's earliest objects during the US invasion.

Although just into mid-career, Abbas' art bears the weight and nuance of a wise senior artist. Its intelligence shows up as depth. Like many "old men," Abbas is impish in person, regardless of how serious his words. He has lived through war. His old world tendency toward truism often ends in a surrealism of giggles peeling darkly into nihilist fuck-all irony. Still, there is a deep humanism in work that stays with the trouble of war, power, and home.

At one time, Abbas and I lived simultaneously in that green, solicitous North, Canada, where one generally feels safe, provided for and slightly oppressed by "tolerance." Toting our less green, less safe countries clankingly behind us, we shared firey conversations amongst the ambitious Vancouver, British Columbia's art scene. When we reunited by surprise in the lecture room at the Wattis one unexpected San Francisco evening, our scream-hugs exploded down the center isle. We later found a table in the same space, empty now in the day, and sat down for a talk.



*cast for a folly*, Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art, 2019

**Anne Lesley Selcer:** I thought we could talk about the formative art scene that we shared, as artist and art writer. We both identified as insider-outsiders, or maybe agonists with ambition?

**Abbas Akhavan:** Our time in Vancouver coincided with the last death grip of photo-conceptual authority. The sentiment of the scene was *put on a suit, act in accordance, don't embarrass us, don't be loud, don't be sexual*. The city felt disembodied, all mind and theory, with little room for heart. It was very insular. Authority was asserted and maintained by a whole range of people. I had just arrived from Montreal. I was accustomed to audacity, diversity, and an art scene reflective of political movements.

**ALS:** There was border-town obsession, a low-key, unspoken relationship to US imperialist power that translated into a preoccupation with class, "making it," being a "world-class" city. This provided content for many of our private conversations!

**AA:** The city was dominated by a lot of aggressive male energy. It felt like we were only learning and upholding a history that was predominantly white. I am not just talking about race...

**ALS:** Yeah, culturally white culture.

**AA:** We were taught to be subservient to art history and theory. I'm not promoting the antithesis of those things, but...

**ALS:** Being surrounded by that much aspiration toward authority made me want to go in the opposite direction. When I started writing about art, I wanted to specifically write against the over-historicizing happening there. Against valuation. I felt the way artworks were written about assigned them a place in an order, but little more.

**AA:** I like what you said, "the aspiration towards authority."

**ALS:** Your work digests power and plays it out through the creation of environments or objects. I'm remembering the piece you made with a head on a plate. Could you describe that?

**AA:** I was writing a thesis on hospitality, food, utensils and weapons, and their role in the process of civilizing bodies. Ken Lum was my professor. I served his head made out of fondant and cake. The piece was called *Heads of the Department*. Ken is a very intelligent and powerful person; he could give a critique that could make or break you. I thought it would be interesting to serve a piece of food that was a homage to him. His students would be ingesting his effigy — masticating, breaking him down, defecating. The cake implicated him in the critique. He couldn't defend it, and he couldn't speak against it. We had about an hour and a half of discussion and intense arguments. Some people were defending him and others were talking at him...

**ALS:** Him? People were talking about him not the piece? They were talking about him?





*Heads of the Department, 2006*

**AA:** It became like a smoke bomb or a diffuser. It rendered all of that antagonism or love transparent. One student who liked him compared me to Salome because it's a beheading. Another classmate came to my defense, accusing her of feminizing me to defend Ken. At one point when Ken interrupted one of the students, the student suddenly said, you always interrupt me! And it became this kind of...

**ALS:** ...family scene.

**AA:** It became such a family scene! In the end, I cut off the mouth. Sliced the head in half. It was dramatic. Then, it was almost like a balloon popped. Such a release. We all ate it, and Ken just started to open up. Nobody talked about the work anymore. Ken gave us all advice about life.

**ALS:** Cathartic violence.

**AA:** The night before the critique, my roommate came home drunk looking for snacks, and he was really startled when he found the human head in the fridge!

**ALS:** Oh my God! Speaking of institutional power, I'd like to talk about your most recent work at the Wattis, *cast for a folly*. I want to ask more about the title.

**AA:** The word folly has a few meanings but its origins are rooted in the French word *folie*, as in fool, madness, lack of good sense; foolishness. My aim was to reference a kind of false ruin, fallen Greek columns in a wealthy garden setting that a certain class of people happen upon to contemplate. A folly can also be a trivial piece of architecture, really grand with no purpose. Cast, as in a cast of actors, or casting an object — a replica, or a cast from an injury. Through theatrical references, I wanted to move the work away from any nostalgic connotations.

**ALS:** In an artist's talk you characterized post-war Iraq as "nostalgic for our pain." Maybe we could describe the piece?

**AA:** *cast for a folly* is a recreation of the lobby of the National Museum of Iraq. It is a semi-theater set based on a photograph from 2003 taken by Corine Wegener who is part of the American UNESCO Blue Shield Foundation.

**ALS:** The museum was looted in 2003.

**AA:** American soldiers just didn't have the protocol to protect the museum. Security guards started to feel anxious as people were breaking in seeking precious objects. Apparently, there very sophisticated plans for the international art market, but also, locals burying objects in their gardens in order to protect them. The US army was not properly trained to deal with the museum's artifacts. It is absurd, no? When you're invading a country that has some of the most precious history, so much of the origins of human civilization? In the years that followed, there was a call for a return of the objects. People were offered immunity, and numerous objects were given back.

**ALS:** I think about your work *Study for a Blue Shield*, where you cut out a painted piece of the gallery wall and put it on a roof.

**AA:** Museum staff put it a large sign on the roof as a kind of plea to the aerial bombers. The year that UNESCO founded the Blue Shield is the year that Jasper Johns made his first flag painting. I was thinking a lot about painting, its death, abstraction's claim to universality...

**ALS:** I also think about Wendy Brown's writing about the seed central bank in the Fertile Crescent. Apparently, it preserved seeds people had been using for crops since the beginning of humanity. Contemporary Iraqi farmers were still using them. After it was destroyed by a bomb, Monsanto sold the farmer non-self reproducing seeds. They sold pasta flour, which obviously isn't part of the Iraqi diet.

When I read the Iraqi people looted the museum, I recalled Ariella Azoulay writing that the Honduran migrant caravan was coming to reclaim their stolen and plundered objects. I was thinking about the culture taking back its objects.

**AA:** Kind of like a seed bank.

I didn't want produce an actual rooms from the Iraq museum. Despite how tempting the other photos, I decided to show the lobby because it's a threshold. Most of the show is made of furniture and vitrines in slight disorder. Not much is broken. Rather, content is missing and looted. Part of a chair, part of the table, the back of a column. There is a lot of erasure.

**ALS:** And there's dust...

**AA:** ...there's lots of dust. I like that from one angle it's half full or decomposing or unfinished, obviously a built set. Then from the other, it looks like a like a shitty bombed out waiting room.

**ALS:** Or a furniture store that's going out of business. You have an ongoing project where you fashion your own household objects — combs, forks and pens into shivs. In a recent artist talk, you like broke down the word hospitality into its shared root with hospital and also hostility.





*Makeshift Objects*, 2008

**AA:** House. The word hos. Hospital. Hospitality, and of course hostage, hostility. Elaine Scarry talks about this.

**ALS:** In *The Body in Pain*?

**AA:** Such a good book. Part of the reason I started working with domestic objects is because they're just really accessible. I started to research the transition or the transformation of a weapon to a tool. A weapon to a utensil. So the project is about the "evolution" of civilizing the body through these acts of etiquette around food and eating, the violence inherent within domestic objects...

**ALS:** ...in their history. Going back to your own personal history, the first piece I saw of yours was *August 2006*.

**AA:** Which you wrote an essay about. I still know it, “This explosion, it shares the shape of the fountain, of the chandelier...”

**ALS:** I felt like that piece hinged on the confusion between violence and pleasure. I was thinking about the way the body holds trauma. I was thinking about trauma as a bridge between representation and reality. Thinking about spectacle. It ends in a fireworks display that enacts visual pleasure.

**AA:** That was very important for me. You know that piece was from a lived experience. It was August, 2006. There were multiple wars going on.

**ALS:** There was the bombing of Qana.

**AA:** Beirut was being bombed, Iraq, Afghanistan, Gaza. I titled the work *August 2006* to be very particular about that. I had left my apartment that evening feeling overwhelmed by the news. I didn’t know there was a week-long fireworks festival going on. I was walking down Davie Street when fireworks went off at the bottom of the hill. Everybody started running and screaming. I felt a parallel reality. I found it very disturbing. I thought, “Oh god, I know this scene, I’ve lived through war.” I came back the following evening and did the same walk down the hill. In the video recording there is a woman running next to me. She’s wearing a headscarf. She’s pushing her baby carriage and there’s a sound of screaming, and the frequent boom! boom! boom! It looks like I’ve scripted the whole thing. As I arrive to the bottom of the hill the video goes silent. The rest of the footage is close ups of sparks flying and falling, kind of cosmic, almost abstract, painterly.





August 2006, 2006

**ALS:** I remember you telling me a story about your mom yelling at a soldier while a house was bombed.

**AA:** It was a birthday party.

**ALS:** Oh my god. In universities, it was popular around 2006 to be reading Agamben's "state of exception," a state of permanent emergency the government uses to establish absolute, non-democratic power. Now we're no longer hand-wringing, we're just trying to survive it. I'm curious about the dynamic at the *cast for a folly* opening where the mass of relatively well dressed Bay Area art world people standing inside the destroyed lobby of the National Museum of Iraq. Did you notice this dynamic? How did it change the space for them to have physical access in this way? Azoulay writes, "One tends to ignore the fact that together with the built environment that was destroyed, their rights inscribed in that environment were also destroyed. And that very loss of those rights is in the first place what turned the photographed persons into what they have become."

**AA:** I think about the work differently because of your question. I tried to create these moments of impenetrable, simultaneous space. I hinted at that with a green screen. Opening night was eerie, and a little bit magical because there's no artificial lighting for the piece. As the light outside went down, the wall sconces became the only source of light in a room with warm, dim bulbs. Openings are weird. You get there, and the moment you start to be present, it's over. There was a moment when I didn't know where I was. I had not been in the gallery that late before. I thought, "I don't know this show in this light." I had looked at this piece for three weeks, and there were five years of me looking at that photograph. Then suddenly, there was this simultaneity of people coming into a photograph with me. As the sun set and the lighting shifted, I realized that I was in the lobby of the museum at night for the first time.

**ALS:** Oh wow, that's amazing.

**AA:** It was unexpected, a kind of portal.

**ALS:** When I saw the piece before it opened, it was a depiction of an empty space. Then at the opening, the space was not empty. This empty space was not only *not* empty; it was filled up with the imperial subjects enjoying themselves in a different kind of museum.

**AA:** It's more about what happens when you look at that photograph at the back of the catalog without a caption and think maybe you were there. Maybe in conversation about what you did last night, you say, "I went to this show where it was in the lobby of the Iraq museum." The photograph is in the last page of the exhibition catalog, but the caption of the photo is on the back cover. The information is there, but there's a deferral of how it is revealed.

**ALS:** I think it's profound that you created a photograph. You created one moment in time, one held frozen in time for what, three months? I feel like I could think about that for the whole length of another interview. Let's do it again!

**AA:** We're back to photography at the end. Let's talk about photoconceptualism! This is what Vancouver taught me!

The work of **Abbas Akhavan** (b. 1977, Tehran, Iran; lives/works: Montreal) ranges from site-specific ephemeral installations to drawing, video, sculpture and performance. The direction of his research has been deeply influenced by the specificity of the sites where he works: the architectures that house them, the economies that surround them, and the people that frequent them. The domestic sphere, which he proposes as a forked space between hospitality and hostility, has been an ongoing area of study in his practice. More recent works have wandered into spaces and species just outside the home: the garden, the backyard, and other domesticated landscapes. His solo exhibitions include The Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art, San Francisco (2019) The Power Plant, Toronto (2018); Museum Villa Stuck, Munich (2017); Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, (2017); Artspeak, Vancouver (2015); and Delfina Foundation, London (2012). Recent group exhibitions include Liverpool Biennial (2018); SALT Galata, Istanbul (2017); Prospect New Orleans (2017); Sharjah Biennial 13, United Arab Emirates (2017); Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2016); Witte de With, Rotterdam (2015); and the 10th Gwangju Biennale, South Korea (2014). Akhavan received his MFA from the University of British Columbia, Vancouver (2006), and his BFA from Concordia University, Montreal (2004). Residencies include Fogo Island Arts, Fogo Island, Canada (2019, 2016, 2013); Atelier Calder, Saché, France (2017); and Flora ars+natura, Bogotá, Colombia (2015). He is the recipient of the Fellbach Triennial Award (2017); Sobey Art Award (2015); Abraaj Group Art Prize (2014); and the Berliner Kunstpreis (2012).