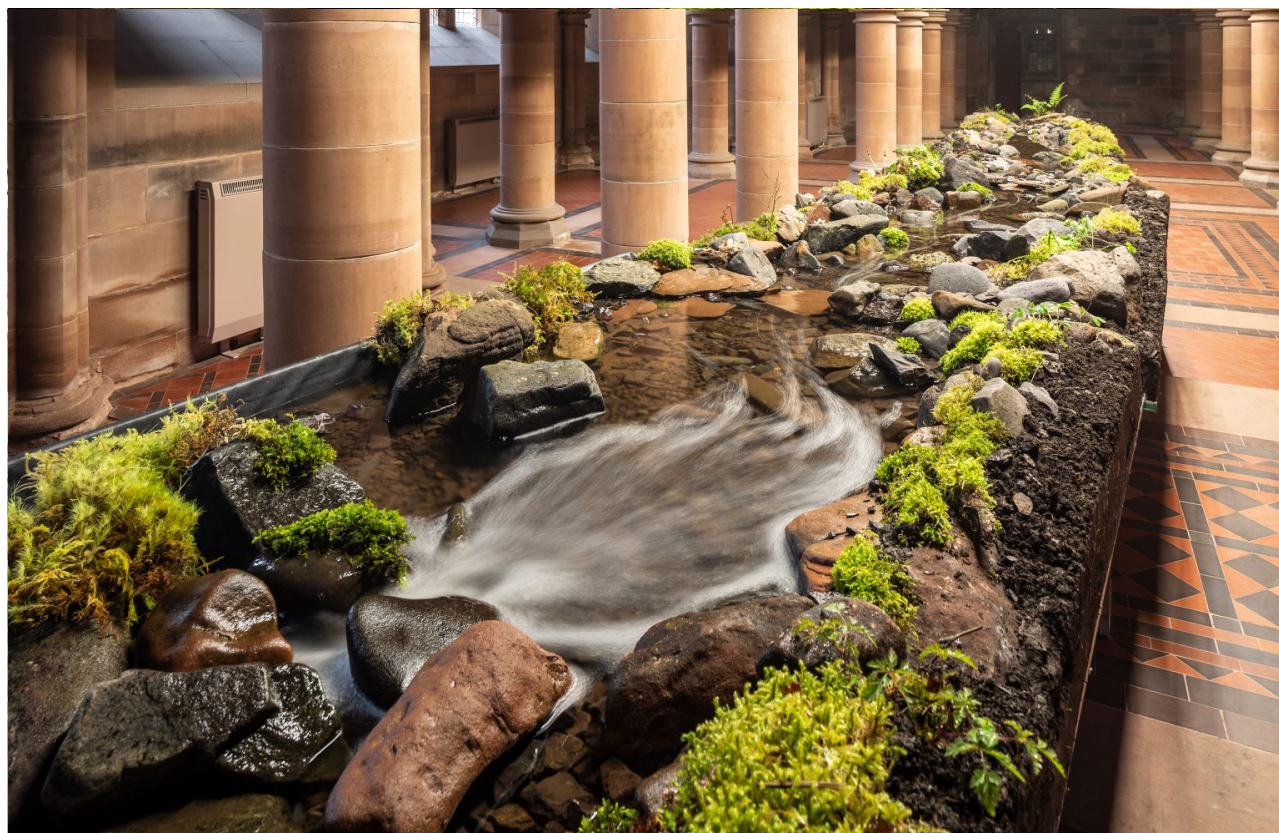


sculpture

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Abbas Akhavan, *variations on a folly*, 2022. Scaffold, plywood, pond liner, aggregate, clay, garden silt, soil, rocks, water, pond pump and tubing, plants sourced from the gardens, hardware, and full-spectrum lights, installation view. Photo: Keith Hunter, Courtesy the artist, The Third Line (UAE), and Catriona Jeffries (Canada)

Abbas Akhavan

September 27, 2022 by Beth Williamson

Isle of Bute, Scotland

Mount Stuart

Abbas Akhavan's "study for a garden" ([on view](#) through October 2, 2022), the artist's first solo exhibition in Scotland, features a group of works installed on the grounds of Mount Stuart. Yet the key to the show is a site-specific commission located inside the Gothic Revival house. In a sandstone crypt, deep beneath the ornate Marble Chapel, Akhavan has cultivated a self-sustaining, closed-system garden consisting of plants and reclaimed materials gathered on the estate. Constructed from scaffolding poles, plywood, a pond liner, pump, and tubing, *variations on a folly* (2022) supports a miniature landscape of clay, soil, rocks, and water, where sphagnum moss and hart's-tongue fern flourish under specially installed full-spectrum lighting. Akhavan's ecosystem is a folly, one supposes, because such an indoor garden makes little sense in an underground setting. Then again, it makes total sense as a response to the folly that already exists at Mount Stuart. The original was built as a summer house in 1737 and later replaced with a stone version in the 19th century. Its location at a cliff base is a prime spot for cultivating ferns.

Akhavan's *variations on a folly* raises a lot of questions. To construct a living ecosystem in a crypt is curious. The space, situated beneath the main floor of the chapel, does not benefit from the glorious light that pours in from the clerestory, hence the need for artificial lighting. Yet this almost impossible garden invigorates the crypt, normally a place of stasis, with new life and the sound of running water. Its presence echoes the symbolism of the Cosmati-style pavement in the chapel above, which references the elements. While Akhavan's *folly* may not include every element, it comes close. There is a meditative element to the work, as the flowing water circulates along the length of the narrow, planted area and is pumped back around to flow once again. The coolness of the air in the crypt and the movement of the water combine to create a gentle breeze, or draft, which recalls the life-giving qualities of water and life-affirming qualities of art—the draught of life.

Leaving the crypt to walk to the Kitchen Garden pavilion, visitors are accompanied by the audio of Akhavan's *you used to call it blue sometimes* (2022), a soundscape that explores how we all experience color differently and leads to another, associated work of the same name. Within the glass pavilion, transparent dichroic film changes how we see surrounding colors and prompts us to revisit, in our minds, *folly* in the crypt.

When the exhibition closes, all of the elements composing Akhavan's *folly* will be returned to the garden, so while the assembled work may be ephemeral, its individual parts will live on at Mount Stuart, contributing to the gardens and ponds. Like many viewers, I left "study for a garden" with renewed curiosity about how we can experience the world and the hope that we will find ways to preserve its resources for all our sakes.

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