

The representation of nature in art history has a long tradition of being politically charged: in paintings and sculptures, rulers and states appear as forces of nature, massive rocks or wild waters. Power and virtue, territorial claims and violent subjugation were expressed in natural imagery and politicized landscapes. In this way plants, animal and rocks were (and still are) instrumentalized for the purpose of representing and securing power structures.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, plants have also frequently been subject to poetic, religious or moral readings in art and understood as attributes or symbols. And the artistic examination of flora has been a means to create systems of order as well. In the history of botany, natural scientists with a knack for drawing, such as Maria Sibylla Merian and Alexander von Humboldt, contributed to knowledge production by means of recording and categorizing.

Abbas Akhavan responds to these manifold implications of the artistic use of plants by addressing nature as shaped or manipulated by humans. Far from their religious interpretation as Edenic or archaic fields, gardens to Akhavan are places that are created through demarcation. Cultivated nature or tamed wilderness is a terrain that needs to be defended, be it against uncontrolled growth or against people who shouldn't have access. Hedges in gardens serve the purpose of rendering boundaries visible. Often apparent only in land registry maps, the boundary lines of properties are translated into "nature." Sometimes fences "support" those hedges or trees, but more often than not they alone represent the demarcation between one property and the adjacent land. The plant is thus assigned the task of a guard. Akhavan's work *Untitled Garden* (2008/2017, ill. p. 14) refers to the instrumentalization of the tree as protection against the foreign. A row of arborvitae trees are planted in a narrow, elongated box. The dense formation of these trees, in this case the "Brabant" variety, gives the impression of a defensive line. Together, they form what appears like a military phalanx that needs to be overcome. At the same time the installation, due to its scale, inevitably stands in the way in the exhibition spaces, impeding passage and forcing visitors to take detours. The tree selected by Akhavan bears yet another political implication: Thuja occidentalis is an evergreen tree of the cypress family that is used throughout the world to demarcate privatized public space. At the same time, though, it has a colonial past and migratory history, for the tree was brought to Europe from its proper territories in North America as part of the trade links between Great Britain and its Canadian colonies.<sup>2</sup> The history of the Thuja illustrates that trees and plants can be used for measures of control, of social or territorial demarcation and disciplining. In this way they become objects that secure social power structures, just as Michel Foucault has described it in his much-discussed analysis titled *Discipline and Punish*.<sup>3</sup> Akhavan's sculpture points to the ways in

which territories are marked by nature, causing the latter to contribute to codifications, inclusion and exclusion.

At the same time Akhavan also works with the tradition of plant sculptures which, as in the work of the photographer Karl Blossfeldt, may be conceived within a diverse practice of artistic translation. Blossfeldt is known today for his plant portraits of the nineteen-twenties, which pay particular attention to details and lend the biological objects the appearance of architecture or sculptures. Yet taking photographs was just one possible way of appropriation: Blossfeldt was a sculptor and modeler, and from 1899 on taught the course "Modeling Based on Living Plants" at the School of the Berlin Kunstgewerbemuseum (Museum of Decorative Arts). Plants were prepared, drawn, modeled in plaster, cast in bronze (fig. 1, p. 102) or, indeed, elaborately photographed.<sup>4</sup> In his work Blossfeldt thus overcame the tight boundaries between art forms. Akhavan's plant pieces similarly meander between art forms, techniques and materials. They are hybrids between sculpture and extensive installation. *Study for a Monument* (fig. 2, p. 102), which was initially presented with the title *Study for a Hanging Garden*, references the legendary hanging gardens of Babylon, located between the rivers Euphrates and Tigris. Ever since the Iraq War and so-called "Islamic State" reign of terror, this area has time and again been the stage for acts of war. Many of the plants that are indigenous to the area are therefore endangered. Akhavan has used visual archives from the Kew Gardens and the Edinburgh Royal Botanic Gardens, in order to first sculpt the plants in plasticine and wax and then make, subsequently, bronze casts of them. As early as 1390, Cennino Cennini had already described this method of producing casts of natural objects in his *Libro dell'arte*, and knowledge of this technique quickly spread north of the Alps and elsewhere. Ever since, casts of natural objects have been produced as unique pieces in silver or bronze and collected or used to decorate valuable objects.<sup>5</sup>

Akhavan's bronze plants also carry this denotation of significance and value. The bronzes are displayed on white sheets that are spread out on the floor. In this way, the artist imitates the regimented presentation of archaeological finds as they await assembly and classification. As a result, the plants have already been transferred into a status of an artefact and an object found at a later time, which preserves merely a memory of something long forgotten. Through this gesture, Akhavan moves the present into a future that commemorates its past in the form of remnants.

Parallels to these artistic objects which replace, recall and reference nature can be found in the glass flowers of the Blaschka collection. Those colorful and extremely realistic-seeming objects (fig. 3) were produced between 1887 and 1936 for the Harvard Botanical Museum by the glass artists Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka from Hosterwitz near Dresden.<sup>6</sup> Today, the collection



Fig. 3 | Abb. 3 Leopold und Rudolf Blaschka: Glasmodell einer Iris (*Iris versicolor* L.), 1887–1936, Harvard, Harvard Museum of Natural History



Fig. 4 | Abb. 4 Glassmodelle von Blumen in dem Studio der Blaschkas, bevor sie 1891 in das Harvard Botanical Museum gebracht wurden | Models of glass flowers in the Blaschkas' studio before they were shipped to the Harvard Botanical Museum, 1891.

comprises 4,300 unique pieces, including 847 life-size plants and countless details.<sup>7</sup> A photograph (fig. 4) shows some glass flowers at the Blaschka home just before they were shipped to the US. Their mode of presentation on a white fabric ground is similar to the one found in *Study for a Monument*. Like the glass flowers, Akhavan's bronze plants are objects of study that serve as placeholders for the original plants. The "dead" object is a very attractive and valuable substitute for the organic material which is savored in its details. Here remembering is an act of translation from one material to another. In the case of Akhavan, moreover, the plant monuments already carry within them their own extinction as victims of war: in this sense, the white fabric on which they lie is both an ennobling frame and a burial shroud.

Death and violence sometimes accompany life in the work of Akhavan and through a little manipulation the found natural object can turn into a dangerous object and/or artwork. His *Study for a Garden* (ill. p. 75) is a sharpened branch which, as a result, becomes weapon-like. Leaning against a wall, the branches have been just casually put aside and can become spears through use—or, alternatively, be an artistic object, because the seemingly wooden branches are bronze sculptures. The ambiguity of these at first glance unspectacular things at the same time becomes a reflection on the establishment of meaning through attribution. For the impact and the perception of these objects—and their material value—change only as a result of them being labeled as "branch," "spear" and "sculpture," or as a result of their use. This ambiguity is confusing, as it causes the known and familiar to become an elusive object that defies categorization and classification. In this multilayeredness, which also carries a disturbing potential within itself, Akhavan's works resemble the household items transformed into dangerous objects in the work of British artist Mona Hatoum.<sup>8</sup>

In his 1919 essay on *The Uncanny (Das Unheimliche)*, the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud presents the concepts of *unheimlich* (uncanny) and *heimlich* (homely) as opposites that help explain one another, with *heimlich* being defined as etymologically close to *heimisch* (native, domestic, familiar).<sup>9</sup> Freud traces the uncanny, "which is undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror," back to the "well-known, the long-familiar."<sup>10</sup> *Heimlich* and *unheimlich* are the two sides of an ambiguous figure which can become either the familiar or the uncanny, depending on the perspective: "It may be true that the uncanny (*unheimlich*) is something which is secretly familiar (*heimlich heimisch*), which has undergone repression and then returned from it, and that everything that is uncanny fulfils this condition."<sup>11</sup> Freud is particularly interested in the moment when one turns into another: "How this is possible, in what circumstances the familiar can become unfamiliar and frightening, I shall show in

what follows."<sup>12</sup> Freud's theory of the uncanny may be a point of reference for understanding Akhavan's works which are always more than the natural form they are given. Whether *Study for a Garden* (2013, fig. 5, p. 104) is the green branch of an arborvitae or a sculpture—or whether it possibly has the shape of a besom—lies in the eyes of the artist and the beholder. Precisely in these manifold possible interpretations lies the disconcerting potential of the works of Abbas Akhavan, which are both familiar and strange.

- 1 See Martin Warnke, *Political Landscape. The Art History of Nature* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), pp. 145–46.
- 2 See Gina Badger, *Unsettled Objects (The Alchemy of Dispossession and Display)* in the exhibition *Switch On, The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery – Harbourfront Centre* (2012), <http://thepowerplant.org/SwitchOn/Features/February-2013/Unsettled-Objects-%28The-Alchemy-of-Dispossession-an.aspx> (accessed May 4, 2017).
- 3 See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (New York, 1975).
- 4 Blossfeldt's multi-layered work, including but not limited to his well-known photographs, was the subject of a 2012 exhibition at the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich, which was curated by Simone Förster: *Karl Blossfeldt und die Sprache der Pflanzen* (Karl Blossfeldt and the Language of Plants). Blossfeldt's less well-known bronzes have been published and described by Rajka Knipper in *Die Sammlung Karl Blossfeldt in der Universität der Künste Berlin. Lehrmittel für den kunstgewerblichen Unterricht* (Cologne, 2009), pp. 25–28; [http://www.photographie-sk-kultur.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/download/Knipper\\_20090312.pdf](http://www.photographie-sk-kultur.de/fileadmin/user_upload/download/Knipper_20090312.pdf) (accessed May 8, 2017).
- 5 See Edgar Lein, "Über den Naturabguss von Pflanzen und Tieren," in *Nürnberger Goldschmiedekunst 1541–1868*, vol. 2: *Goldglanz und Silberstrahl*, exh. cat. Germanisches Nationalmuseum (Nuremberg, 2007), pp. 205–15, here pp. 205–06.
- 6 In 1886, George Lincoln Goodale, the first director of the Harvard Botanical Museum, commissioned Blaschka to create glass plants as illustrative teaching aids and display pieces. The glass objects were initially just intended to bring variety and colour into a collection focused on dried and prepared plants.
- 7 For the history of the collection, see Susan M. Rossi-Wilcox, "A Brief History of Harvard's Glass Flowers Collection and Its Development," in *Journal of Glass Studies* 57 (2015), pp. 197–211.
- 8 By electrically charging objects (*Home*, 1999) or adding blades to them (*Untitled [ropeelchair]*, 1998), Hatoum transforms everyday items into dangerous things. For the works by Hatoum referred to here see, for example, Rainald Schumacher, "Mona Hatoum. Doppelklang – Organische Arabesken und narrative Raster," in Schumacher, Ingild Goetz et al. (eds.), *Mona Hatoum*, exh. cat. Goetz Collection, Munich (Ostfildern, 2011), pp. 20–42, here pp. 34–38.
- 9 Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVII (London, 1925), pp. 219–53.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 219.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 245.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 220.