

Abbas Akhavan: Every Artwork Is a Trap

"Every artwork is a trap, because it is supposed to be a window to something else, or a closure to an idea: it's a conceptual trap," says Abbas Akhavan.



Abbas Akhavan, *Study for a Garden: Fountain*, 2012. Oscillating water sprinkler, original linoleum floor, hidden cavity created below the floor acting as a water reservoir, pump, hose and water, dimensions variable. Courtesy the Delfina Foundation, London. Photo: Christa Holka.

by Gabrielle Moser

Abbas Akhavan is an impeccable host. When he welcomes me into his Toronto apartment on a hot July afternoon, it is mere moments before I am seated in front of a Turkish coffee, a freshly cut nectarine and several squares of dark chocolate. For an artist who spends much of his year abroad—residency and exhibition invitations have taken him to London, Montreal, Dubai, Istanbul and Vancouver in the last 12 months—this summer provides a much-needed respite for Akhavan, in a space that is not just the site where his work is conceptualized, but is also often its subject: the home.

Hosting, and its double-edged association with hostility (the two words share an etymological root), has been a central theme in the Tehran-born artist's work. Domestic spaces, such as the living room, the garden and the greenhouse, figure often in his installation and video works, in ways that suggest a potential violence contained just below the veneer of civility. *Study for a Curtain* (2015), which he recently exhibited at Dubai's Third Line Gallery, does not resemble the kitschy kitchen drapes its name might suggest, but instead is a carpet of non-native plant life laid on the floor: the kind one imagines might camouflage a pit trap. "It is a garden, a study. It could be a grave. It could be a carpet," Akhavan says.

This interest in the duplicity of materials and the slips between what something appears to be and what it might conceal has resulted in a diverse body of work that tackles timely issues of nationalism, war and environmental destruction through materials that are equal parts playful and insidious. Bronze casts, greenhouses, taxidermy animals, hot-air balloons and gold leaf have all appeared in Akhavan's varied practice. As the 2015 Sobey Art Award winner prepared to open a solo exhibition in September 2015 at Toronto's Mercer Union, we sat down to discuss the animism of materials, the benefits of making art at the periphery and working with ghosts.

Gabrielle Moser: Many of your works are site-specific or temporary gestures that no longer exist after an exhibition ends. Have you felt any added pressure to produce works since you were shortlisted for the Sobey Art Award?

Abbas Akhavan: Not really, but there were limited options for what I could show as part of the Sobey shortlist exhibition, because I only have two bodies of work that are solid—that literally exist in physical reality. One of them, *Study for a Monument* (2013–), is going to be displayed at Mercer: it is a kind of archival study of plants and flowers native to Iraq that have been enlarged to human scale, cast in bronze and are presented on white cotton sheets on the ground. So the Sobey curators asked for the other piece, *Fatigues* (2014), which I produced for the Biennale de Montréal, and is a series of taxidermy animals mounted in postures that depict them as dead creatures, instead of the lifelike or active poses we typically expect. It is an uncomfortable piece to show as part of an exhibition for a prize because part of the logic of the work is that it needs to be shown in proximity to other artists' works, seemingly casually installed on the gallery floor, without didactic panels or lighting. I don't want to step on other people's toes.

GM: What else will you be showing at Mercer Union?

AA: In addition to *Study for a Monument*, I'm showing a video that hasn't been exhibited alongside it before, *Ghost* (2013), and an older photograph, and after and after (2003/08). *Ghost* is a looping video of found footage of American soldiers who are returning home and sort of ambushing their family members, by surprising them and arriving at the house in uniform. The images slowly fade to white, and then back to the next image, almost like a fog, and the sound fades in and out at the same time. When it's audible, you mainly hear screaming, which then sometimes turns to laughter and then to crying. And sometimes people jump, like they have seen an actual ghost. If you're not looking at the footage, it sounds like multiple home invasions: which it essentially is.

GM: That seems to continue your interest in the home as a space of the uncanny, where seemingly everyday things can be made unusual and even dangerous.

AA: Absolutely. When you watch these videos, you begin to build empathy, both for the victims of an unjust war, but also with these soldiers. You see their houses and begin to see the crummy economic circumstances they are returning to. I think it complicates the status of victim and hero in the war. When you watch the video, you are watching footage of trauma, and I am not in any way being flippant about that.

And after and after in some ways continues this theme. It was made as a response to the first Iraqi elections after the American invasion, when images of Iraqis with purple ink marks on their fingers—from being marked as having voted—were published in newspapers around the world, and it confuses the status of the subject as either citizen or criminal.

I'm having a lot of doubts right now, though [about the choice of works for the Mercer Union show]. I'm trying to negotiate the relationships between the works and how the exhibition works. I keep asking myself, what is the purpose of this accumulation? The works were completed over the course of six years and over that period of time it became clear that they presented three ideas that deal with the invasion of Iraq, but on very different terms. I'm so

close to the work that I don't know how the pieces speak to one another, and whether they reduce one another into a thematic about "dealing with atrocity," or if they open up the potential for more complex meanings. But I think it's really important to talk about Iraq, especially in an election year in Canada: to talk about it all the time, because it's forgotten. People have erased it from their subjectivity. That is the dangerous ambition of this political future, to erase the existence of a place and then erase it in people's memory, so it can be taken over by corporate America and made into a vacation destination.

It's also different when you're exhibiting at home—or in Toronto, which is home for me right now: you have to face all these motherfuckers after the day of your opening, and they will have an opinion about you all of a sudden [laughs].

GM: Do you think they will tell you their opinions to your face, though, in Toronto?

AA: I hope they do! That to me is the scariest part of this politeness we are a part of in Canada. To me, talking to an artist about their work, good or bad—especially bad—comes from a place of deep investment. Giving negative criticism requires being vulnerable with your opinion.

GM: You have used the word "trap" a few times in relation to your works, especially in describing *Guests, Ghosts, Hosts* (2009), which was exhibited at Artspeak for their exhibition in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and *Study for a Curtain*. I'm curious about how you see these works as traps, and who they are traps for.

AA: Every artwork is a trap, because it is supposed to be a window to something else, or a closure to an idea: it's a conceptual trap. But because I work so much with natural materials, like plants and animals, I think it is also about how any kind of relationship to nature is a kind of trapping of nature for the benefit of humanity, whether that's resource extraction, or human-centric therapy, or for the "wellbeing" of the human. In the case of *Study for a Curtain*, the artwork was a trap for an idea about the use of nature as capital.

GM: Are the taxidermy animals in *Fatigues* another kind of trap?

AA: Yes, I think so, but in the opposite way: that work is the kind of trap that vortexes you from one reality to another. It's a shattering of a continuous moment. The objective with those animals was to teleport people out of the gallery into an empathetic relationship with a scene that does not necessarily operate on the same conceptual frameworks that an artwork does, because it was so true to the animal form that I wasn't really re-presenting those animals, I was just presenting them, as they would be. So, yes, they were a trap to get you out of the gallery. As viewers, we have different receptors for fur and feathers and teeth, because we are either prey or predators. I think those materials generally function differently than concrete, canvas or acrylic paint: we have different antennae as to how we approach those things. Not using plinths or labels was part of that thinking for me, to try to allow the artwork a level of animism that generally isn't allowed in the modes of display in a gallery. The next time I exhibit them, there will be animals included on the label that aren't there anymore. So the list will include a black bear, a grey wolf and a goshawk, but I think it's important not to represent them, so that the animals are present but as phantoms.

GM: Many of the materials that you use in your work suggest a kind of luxuriousness or wealth—like gold leaf, tropical plants, bronze and taxidermy animals—but they are used to address themes of the unequal distribution of wealth or the destruction of natural resources. Do you see a tension between your materials and the content of your work?

AA: What interests me about those materials is that they were all once alive: minerals, metals,

fur, plants. They have potential for animism, even as they have also become part of the migrating capital of luxury goods. But they don't need to be expensive materials to do this. I think that fabric, and laundry, also have that charge because we rub up against it so often. When I've gone to international art fairs—which I don't do very often, but I went to Art Basel this year for the first time—what I see so much at these places is artworks that feel like zombies. They're not even dead, because they were never actually alive. And I feel like any material that has any level of intelligence is kind of like a battery. If you spend enough time with it, you can charge it. My work might be a zombie, or dead, too: I'm not saying that I'm doing it any better. But the ambition is that somehow there is an investment—intellectually, conceptually, materially, temporally—that makes the artwork feel charged, like it can touch you back. Or when you look at it, it can look back. And I think that potential can be magical, when it happens. That is my hope with materials.

GM: You spend much of your year travelling and doing research abroad. How have those experiences shaped your practice?

AA: For me, residencies are one of the more generous models of practice, both for artists and the hosting institutions. As an artist, you leave your partner, or your family, or your dog (which is also your family) at home and you arrive without presumptions. And you make work that might actually fail completely because the people you are engaging with know more about that space than you do as a new person. It's one way to elude models of expertise because you're not just arriving with a box full of paintings you are going to reveal to them. It's more embedded, but it's also more precarious and open to failure. In many ways, residencies are radical acts of hospitality.

But travelling to these art centres, like London and Basel, has made me hungry for the productivity of neglect that comes with working at the periphery of the art market. That space of not seeing a lot of art, but reading about it—not being naive about it, but of toiling away at things that have no value outside of the time you spend making something or thinking about something, and not because you have allocated it space in a commercial gallery or at an art-fair booth. Neglect can be a really productive space. The things I have sometimes been critical about in working in Toronto or in Canada, more generally—that feeling of “nothing is happening here”—I have realized that those are actually spaces of potential, that can give you longevity in your career.