Georgina Jackson, 'The Body in Ruins: Abbas Akhavan's Study for a Monument', *Afterall* 42, Autumn–Winter 2016

Abbas Akhavan, *Study for a Monument* (2013–15), cast bronze, white cotton sheets, dimensions variable. Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy the artist and Mercer Union, Toronto

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– Georgina Jackson

The way we act toward 'others' is shaped by the way we imagine them. Both philosophic and literary descriptions of such imagining show the difficulty of picturing other persons in their full weight and solidity.
– Elaine Scarry, 'The Difficulty of Imagining Other People'[1]

Georgina Jackson explores the traces and taxonomies of war through Abbas Akhavan's *Study for a Monument*.

Abbas Akhavan's *Study for a Monument* (2013–15) presents bronze plants laid out on a series of white cotton bed sheets across the gallery floor. These are the forms of *Asperula insignis*, *Delphinium micranthum* and *Ornithogalum iraqense*, amongst many others. Akhavan employs bronze as a material that is steeped in history: it connects the invention of human tools and language with the fabrication of weapons and the erection of monuments. Yet here on the floor there is an assertion of horizontality over verticality: materials are laid out like a forensic experiment, a mass grave or funerary tokens. These plants are not being used as simple adornment, nor to disguise support systems. These are all species native to an area between and around the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, in present-day Iraq. From plant pressings and digital images, they have been enlarged to human scale – sculpted into plasticine, cast into wax, encased within plaster, melted, cast into bronze and charred. The remnants of these material processes remain: shattered plaster invades the anatomy of the plants, creating a kind of ghosting against the white cotton sheets. Leaves, stems and flowers appear like dismembered corpses that have been put back together in front of our eyes.

Many of the plants memorialised in *Study for a Monument* are excerpted from six volumes of an archive titled 'The Flora of Iraq', held in the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in London.[2] Begun in 1960 by the Ministry of Agriculture in Baghdad in collaboration with Kew, this archive project sought to gather and categorise over 3,300 species of flora native to Iraq's deserts, marshes, plains and mountains. As the artist Marina Roy has argued, any archive bears witness to 'a past violence-authority captured through fundamental naming, territorialisation, planting roots, the laying down of laws and rules of conduct and documentation of exchange'.[3] With the rising interest in plant taxonomy during the nineteenth century, scientific expeditions ventured across the globe to gather native species and bring them back to the centres of ever-expanding empires. Over 30,000 plant species from around the world grow at Kew Gardens today, while the herbarium holds over seven million species, the largest in the world. Both living and dead, the plants preserved in this depository trace a history of evolution, and histories of generations of plant species, anatomy, systems and families. Plants are as bodies, with traces of their genealogy.

Akhavan's installation was first exhibited under the title *Study for a Hanging Garden* (2014),[4] hinting at another garden whose presence lingers in the plants' original site. The story of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon has been told and retold since Antiquity. Greek geographers recounted how its terraces could hold full-size trees, shrubs and vines, thanks to an irrigation system that drew water up from the Euphrates River in an otherwise barren land.[5]

1 Elaine Scarry, 'The Difficulty of Imagining Other People', in Martha Craven Nussbaum and Joshua Cohen (ed.), *For Love of Country?*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1996, p.98.
2 The archive is incomplete, with three remaining volumes currently in development. Governmental changes led to the project's cessation in 1985, but it commenced again in 2011. See http://www.kew.org/science-conservation/research-data/science-directory/projects/flora-iraq (last accessed on 22 July 2016). Abbas Akhavan also sourced digital images of living plants from the Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh.
3 Marina Roy, *Study for a Glasshouse: Abbas Akhavan* (exh. cat.), Brampton: Peel Art Gallery, 2013, unpaginated. Roy has collaborated with Akhavan on a number of exhibition projects.
4 The work was produced as part of the Abraaj Group Art Prize in 2014.
5 See Strabo, *Geography* (c.20 BCE–23 CE), book XVI, chapter 1, section 5, available at http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Strabo/16A*.html (last accessed on 2 August 2016).

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Others claimed that it was built out of a king's love for his wife, who missed the forests of her home.[6] In the background of a nineteenth-century etching of the Hanging Gardens hovers the collossal structure of the Tower of Babel. Its story in the Book of Genesis details the gathering of multitudes of people at Babylon after the Great Flood, a monolingual humanity who began to build a tower to reach the heavens. On seeing this enterprise, however, God confounded their speech so that they could no longer understand one another, after which they splintered into groups across the globe. The Hanging Gardens and the Tower of Babel act as symbolic forces representing the one-time harmony amongst peoples, and between humanity and nature. The sources for these two stories are multifarious but they mostly locate the mythic structures where the Tigris and Euphrates converge, in the 'cradle of civilisation', near the town of Hillah, about eighty kilometres south of Baghdad.[7]

It was also here that Saddam Hussein reconstructed the 600-room palace of King Nebuchadnezzar II, ruler of Babylonia from approximately 605–562 BCE, who is often believed responsible for the Hanging Gardens. Between 1983 and 1987, at the height of the Iran-Iraq War, thousands of workers were imported from Sudan to lay sixty million sand-coloured bricks over the present-day ruins. The building bears many inscriptions detailing this triumphant construction; one states: 'In the era of President Saddam Hussein all Babylon was reconstructed in three stages, from Nebuchadnezzar to Saddam Hussein, Babylon is rising again.'[8] Against the backdrop of the casualties of the Iran-Iraq war,[9] this project was fervently ideological, asserting Iraq's history as the cradle of civilisation and encouraging Iraqis to see themselves as heirs to the great cultures of Babylonia. And yet the palace sat empty.

Following Iraq's defeat in the Gulf War, in 1991 Kurds in the north and Shias in the south rose up against the Hussein-led Baath regime, but were defeated within weeks, with some Shia rebels seeking refuge in the marshlands. As retribution, Hussein set about to exterminate the population of the marshlands – draining the land, setting the reeds on fire and executing thousands of residents in addition to the rebels, including the indigenous, semi-nomadic

6 See Berossus, cited in Josephus, *Contra Apionem* (c.94 CE), available at http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/af/af05.htm (last accessed on 3 July 2016).
7 Recent scholarship, however, shows that the Gardens may in fact have been located at Nineveh, near today's Mosul, in Northern Iraq. See Dalya Alberge, 'Babylon's hanging garden: ancient scripts give clue to missing wonder', *The Guardian*, 5 May 2013, available at https://www.theguardian.com/science/2013/may/05/babylon-hanging-garden-wonder-nineveh (last accessed on 3 July 2016).
8 Quoted in Gerard Russell, *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms: Journeys Into the Disappearing Religions of the Middle East*, London and New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014, p.5.
9 Akhavan was born in Tehran and moved to Canada following the onset of the Iran-Iraq war.

Marsh Arabs and displaced civilians. The destruction of the marshlands displaced hundreds of thousands of Marsh Arabs, of whom at least 40,000 are now living in refugee camps in Iran.[10]

The United Nations has described the loss of the Mesopotamian marshlands as 'one of the world's greatest environmental disasters'.[11] Located along the so-called aridity line, in these areas there is, on average, 200 millimetres of rainfall a year – the minimum required to grow crops at a large scale without irrigation. In surveying the recent history of this 'threshold of the desert' – across Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria and Palestine – Eyal Weizman discovered a distinct correlation between climate change and colonialism, drought and drone strikes.[12] He argues that climate change is a direct effect of political forces, entailing the erasure and displacement of entire populations. Naomi Klein is in agreement: 'Certain patterns have become quite clear; first, Western fighter jets followed by that abundance of oil; now, Western drones are closely shadowing the lack of water, as drought exacerbates conflict.'[13] Focussing on the city of Daraa in Syria, Weizman notes how the country's deepest drought on record drew huge numbers of displaced farmers in the years leading up to the outbreak of Syria's civil war; Daraa is also where the Syrian uprising broke out in 2011. Weizman's collaborative work with photographer Fazal Sheikh, meanwhile, has documented the Israeli government's policy to 'make the desert bloom', which has translated into the destruction of centuries-old Bedouin settlements in the Negev desert; many Bedouins have found themselves dispossessed of their land rights and livelihood, and pushed far deeper into the desert.[14] It is the garden which is often destroyed during war.

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The change of title from *Study for a Hanging Garden* to *Study for a Monument* is significant, for it marks a desire to reinscribe the plant pressings into the present. The plants are enlarged and fragmented, with flower heads resembling human skulls, stems recalling skeletal spines and broken parts taking on the appearance of shards of bone. The green patina of the bronze hints at their referential origin, but they are charred. Physical trauma is evidenced, shattered fragments of plaster invade the forms, and traces remain on the white sheets. In layering archival remains and material trauma with the past and persistent injuring of land and people, *Study for a Monument* posits how trauma can be disclosed, how we can feel and how we feel for others.

Writer Elaine Scarry has explored the limits of language to disclose the human body in pain. She describes how, with the intensification of pain, 'you can watch language deteriorate. One's ability to say sentences, and then even one's ability to say words, disappears.'[15] This incapacity to communicate trauma delineates the very capacity to understand the atrocities of war. This silencing permits us to inflict pain to others – if a little to those we know, for those we don't know, the 'ease with which people will license injuring increases, as in a war that one doesn't fight in oneself but that one agrees to authorise.'[16] Though language doesn't allow us to express the pain and injury of war, it prevails because of the fraught relation between war and language, that is,

> *between the collective casualties that occur within war, and the verbal issues (freedom, national sovereignty, the right to disputed ground, the extra-territorial authority of a particular ideology) that stand* outside *war, that are there* before *the act of war begins and after it ends, that are understood by warring populations as the motive and justification and will be again reorganised after the war as the thing substantiated or (if one is on the losing side) not substantiated by war's activity.*[17]

10 See Hassan Partow, *The Mesopotamian Marshlands: Demise of an Ecosystem, Early Warning and Assessment Technical Report*, Geneva: United Nations Environment Programme, 2001, available at http://www.grid.unep.ch/activities/sustainable/tigris/mesopotamia.pdf (last accessed on 3 July 2016).
11 *Ibid.*, viii.
12 Eyal Weizman in conversation with George Prochnick, 'The Desert Threshold', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 18 October 2015, available at https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-desert-threshold/ (last accessed on 3 July 2016).
13 Naomi Klein, 'Let Them Drown: The Violence of Othering in a Warming World', *The London Review of Books*, vol.38, no.11, 2 June 2016, available at http://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n11/naomi-klein/let-them-drown (last accessed on 3 July 2016).
14 See Fazal Sheikh and Eyal Weizman, *The Conflict Shoreline: Colonialism as Climate Change in the Negev Desert*, Berlin: Steidl Verlag, 2015.
15 Elaine Scarry in conversation with Jennifer L. Geddes, 'On Evil, Pain and Beauty', *The Hedgehog Review*, Summer 2000, p.79.
16 Elizabeth Irene Smith, '"The Body in Pain": an interview with Elaine Scarry', *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, volume 32, issue 2, September 2006, p.226.
17 Elaine Scarry, *The Body In Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, p.63. Emphasis in the original.

Abbas Akhavan, *Untitled Garden*, 2008–12, emerald green cedars, cedar planters, soil. Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy the artist and The Third Line, Dubai

Where language falters, Susan Sontag suggested, the photographic image can succeed. To open her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), she wrote:

> *To be sure, a cityscape is not made of flesh. Still, sheared-off buildings are almost as eloquent as bodies in the street. (Kabul, Sarajevo, East Mostar, Grozny, sixteen acres of Manhattan after September 1, 2001, the refugee camp in Jenin…) Look, the photographs say, this is what it's like. This is what war does. And that, that is what it does, too. War tears, rends. War rips open, eviscerates. War scorches. War dismembers. War ruins.*[18]

An early example she cites is Ernst Friedrich's book *Krieg dem Kriege! Guerre à la Guerre! War against War! Oorlog aan den Oorlog!* (1924), which revealed extensive images of World War I previously deemed unpublishable by government censors. Sontag argues that the possibility of replacing image with feeling, peace with horror, is central to the book's example of 'photography as shock therapy'.[19] In Sontag's estimation, it is impossible for the image to capture everything that has occurred; or for the spectator to imagine the real terror of what took place; or, indeed, to contemplate how this trauma could enter into the realm of normality. To bear witness to such images 'is still just watching'.[20] And yet, despite its inability to fully disclose the horrors of the war, the image remains necessary.

> *Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing – may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don't forget.*[21]

Study for a Monument is not a visual or verbal testimony, it is an act of occupation and commemoration within the white cube, the physical haunting of the acts of war. The plant pressings contained within a series of books within an archive are enlarged and given volume; they hold space. Spread across a series of bed sheets, *Study for a Monument* pushes

18 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, London: Penguin Books, 2003, p.7 Emphasis in the original.
19 *Ibid.*, p.13.
20 *Ibid.*, p.105.
21 *Ibid.*, p.102.
22 Hito Steyerl, *Hito Steyerl: The Wretched of the Screen* (ed. Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood and Anton Vidokle), Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012, p.115.

viewers to the extremities of its perimeters, rendering them unable to contemplate the work's scale in full. This is not the first time that Akhavan has used the occupation of the gallery space as a critical strategy. In *Untitled Garden* (2012), for example, he inserted a 65-foot-long cedar planter of 8-foot-tall trees within the galleries of The Power Plant in Toronto, circumventing arterial access to the galleries. The work presented an impenetrable wall of *Thuja occidentalis*, or emerald cedars, which were transported in early trade between the North American colonies and Great Britain, where they were used for the enclosure of the commons; this wood now frequently greenwashes the barricades of corporate plazas and civic spaces across the globe.In *Variations on a Laundry* (2010), Akhavan hung a single clothes line in front of the balustraded balcony of the Fundación Botín's Villa Iris, in Santander, Spain. The colours of his garments changed every few days, to replicate the colours of the team playing against Spain in the FIFA World Cup finals, thereby inserting the position of the 'adversary' – momentarily – in a space located between private and public. While Akhavan has become known for lightness of touch in his site-specific, ephemeral installations, there is a weight to *Study for a Monument*, both physically and conceptually.

Study for a Monument *blurs the lines between object and witness, between plant and human life, trauma and testimony.*

The sediments of history deposited in these petrified flowers recalls Walter Benjamin's description of how social relations can be condensed into material form. Following Benjamin, Hito Steyerl writes: 'A thing is never just an object, but a fossil in which a constellation of forces are petrified. Things are never just inert objects, passive items or lifeless shucks, but consist of tensions, forces, hidden powers, all being constantly exchanged.'[22] Weizman has examined the role that things play in our capacity to understand war and trauma. He outlines how, following attacks on Gaza between December 2008 and January 2009, 'the "interrogation" of ruins and the rubble of destroyed buildings' resulted in 'evidence' to be raised in legal-political disputes.[23] So much so that the UN report on the conflict was 'reinforced by clichés of the kind that often give evidence an almost human status. "Evidence speaks for itself," albeit unlike humans, "it does not lie."'[24] One should, then, consider the 'biography of objects' in its entirety, since

> *it becomes clear that it is not only the moment of death but rather the entire process of life – a sequence of illnesses, incidents and accidents, along with the conditions of nutrition, labour and habit – that is fossilised into the morphology and texture of bones, and that a certain blurring of the boundary between object and subject is here undertaken.*[25]

In tracing the changes in how 'evidence' is read throughout history, Weizman teases out the recent shift of emphasis from the 'truth' of a witness's account to that of the material evidence, or 'forensic architecture'.[26] He argues that personal testimonies, while bringing 'histories of violence and abuse into the public domain', also disclose 'the limits of the frame by which historical accounts foreground individual victims rather than collective action'.[27] In the face of the incapacity of language or images to disclose trauma, it is the object which is called upon to evidence the acts of war. Here the materiality of *Study for a Monument*, laid out as a form of forensic evidence, comes to the fore. In enlarging and anthropomorphising plants native to Iraq, at the confluence of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, Akhavan blurs the lines between object and witness, plant and human life, trauma and testimony. In this layering of histories – fictional and real, of ruins, of trauma, of the very beginnings of language – and in the impossibility to disclose pain through voice or image, there arises a pause, a space to feel the trauma and pain of others. These are sentient objects, bodies in ruins.

23 E. Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza*, London: Verso Books, 2011, p.100.
24 *Ibid.*, p.104.
25 *Ibid.*, p. 110.
26 Forensic Architecture is the name of the research agency that Eyal Weizman leads at Goldsmiths, University of London. See http://www.forensic-architecture.org (last accessed on 3 July 2016).
27 E. Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils*, *op. cit.*, p.113.