

# Abbas Akhavan: Fatigues

Throughout the galleries of Making Nature, Abbas Akhavan situated taxidermy animals on the ground and corners, away from the lighting, signage (un-authored), and pedestals, the staples of classical display. The artist's desire to stage an unusual encounter outside the premeditated relationship one might expect of a work of art confronted the viewer with a subtle institutional critique that reached far beyond the white walls of the gallery space.

interviewer: **Giovanni Aloi**  
interviewee: **Abbas Akhavan**

**B**orn in Tehran, Abbas Akhavan currently lives and works in Montreal. His practice ranges from site-specific ephemeral installations to drawing, video and performance. The domestic sphere has been an ongoing research in Akhavan's work. Earlier works explore the relationship between the house and nation state and how the trauma and systemic violence enacted upon civilians can be inherited and re-enacted within the family lineage – the home as a forked space between hospitality and hostility. More recent works have shifted focus onto spaces just outside the home – the garden, the backyard, and other domesticated landscapes.

**Giovanni Aloi:** Much of your work seems concerned with the notions of space and borders. Can you tell us when this preoccupation emerged in your practice and why it remains important to your work today?

**Abbas Akhavan:** I think my concern with “borders” is partially a symptom of my participation in numerous residency programs. I am currently in the Azores completing my seventeenth residency in nine years. It sounds romantic but it's also a lot of work. I have somehow managed to be a perpetual guest. The invitations, which I am grateful for, tend to make me very self-conscious about my relations as dealing with new people and places, and language barriers, to name a few, is a constant negotiation. So, the preoccupation with borders, which is present in much of my work, is a characteristic heightened by my lived experience. As you can imagine these “borders” can range from the intimate, domestic spaces of a host to passport border agents and other moments of hospitality and hostility.

**Aloi:** When did you become interested in nature?

**Akhavan:** I don't think I ever became interested in “nature”... to me it would be like asking when did you become interested in breathing... it is something inherent to our sense of existence. Even in its absence, it is all-consuming. But I also don't believe that “nature” exists. As in, with the exception of very rare cases, we are generally incapable of co-existing with nature. I think the moment “nature” is exposed to humans it ceases to exist. We are more opportunistic than observant — we domesticate, interpret, manipulate, pollute and pillage the “na-

## Abbas Akhavan

Right: *Fatigues*. Taxidermy animals, 2014-16. Courtesy Abbas Akhavan. Photograph by Steven Pocock/Wellcome Collection. © Abbas Akhavan



ture” around us for our benefit - be it for medicine, property, therapy, resource extraction... it's an endless list and even today with rapid climate change and mass extinction, the conservation about the planet is primarily for and about humanity's survival. Therefore much of my focus is on this mediation — I make work about the impact of humans on natural elements, often in relation to gardens, native and invasive species, infliction and deformation of animals, use of plant life for demarcation of private property and so on. I am not talking about melting ice caps or cutting edge green technology. My ambitions are more modest—more of an observation of my surroundings.

**Aloi:** Your work encompasses political and ecological dimensions. I say this with your *Study for a Monument* project from 2013 in mind. I had the opportunity to encounter it in New York a few years ago and was struck by its poetic tone. *Study for a Monument* might be seen as a compelling statement about our anthropocentric myopia, our inherent inability to adequately account for the destruction of natural habitats we cause during wars. In *Study for a Monument*, you sculpted and then cast in bronze a number of plant species endangered by Saddam Hussein's regime and later the second Iraq war of 2003. These permanent plant-effigies were cast as a memorial, lying on the ground as fallen bodies, memories of a recent past and markers of non-human lives that remain unacknowledged in news and reports. What role do death and memory play in your engagement with the natural world and how important is the political dimension in what you do?

**Akhavan:** *Study for a Monument* is a memorial, one owing to the tradition of funerary monuments. I have always been fascinated by anti-monuments because the often-overlooked common public monuments have frequently captured my attention. During the Iraq invasion of 2003, there was plenty of news footage and photographs of Saddam's monuments being toppled. I recall thinking back then that perhaps bronze monuments will be reappearing and regaining relevance in our collective conscious and bronze as a material will have a revival in contemporary art. More recently with the contestation of colonial figures, bronze monuments are in the foreground of discussion about power, collective memory, and iconoclasm. Bronze is an interesting material in that unlike wood and marble, it is not loyal: bronze shape-shifts—it is melted from one political leader to another. So within the context of the Iraq invasion and my ongoing interest in plants and monuments in general, I decided to make a memorial, but not of a human, rather of plants, horizontal instead of vertical, in fragments placed on cotton bedsheets... so they appear to be more transient in the display. They carry less authority, more akin to ruins or artifacts or confiscated goods examined during a condition report. The plants that I made are scaled up, their size is similar to botanical features often used for support structure or as decorative elements in conventional monuments. On bedsheets, they resemble body parts, or ammunition and shrapnel — fragments of objects that can cause harm or have been harmed, recently deceased on mass graves, or even extinct.

Having said that, this work was never so strategic in its realization. It comes from a place of great sorrow for lives and ecosystems and artifact devastated by an insatiable greed for economic and political gain. I recall going to the anti-war protests in the hopes of being heard. Hoping that this many people could walk together and push for peace. Sadly, of no avail and with little memory or care... no one talks



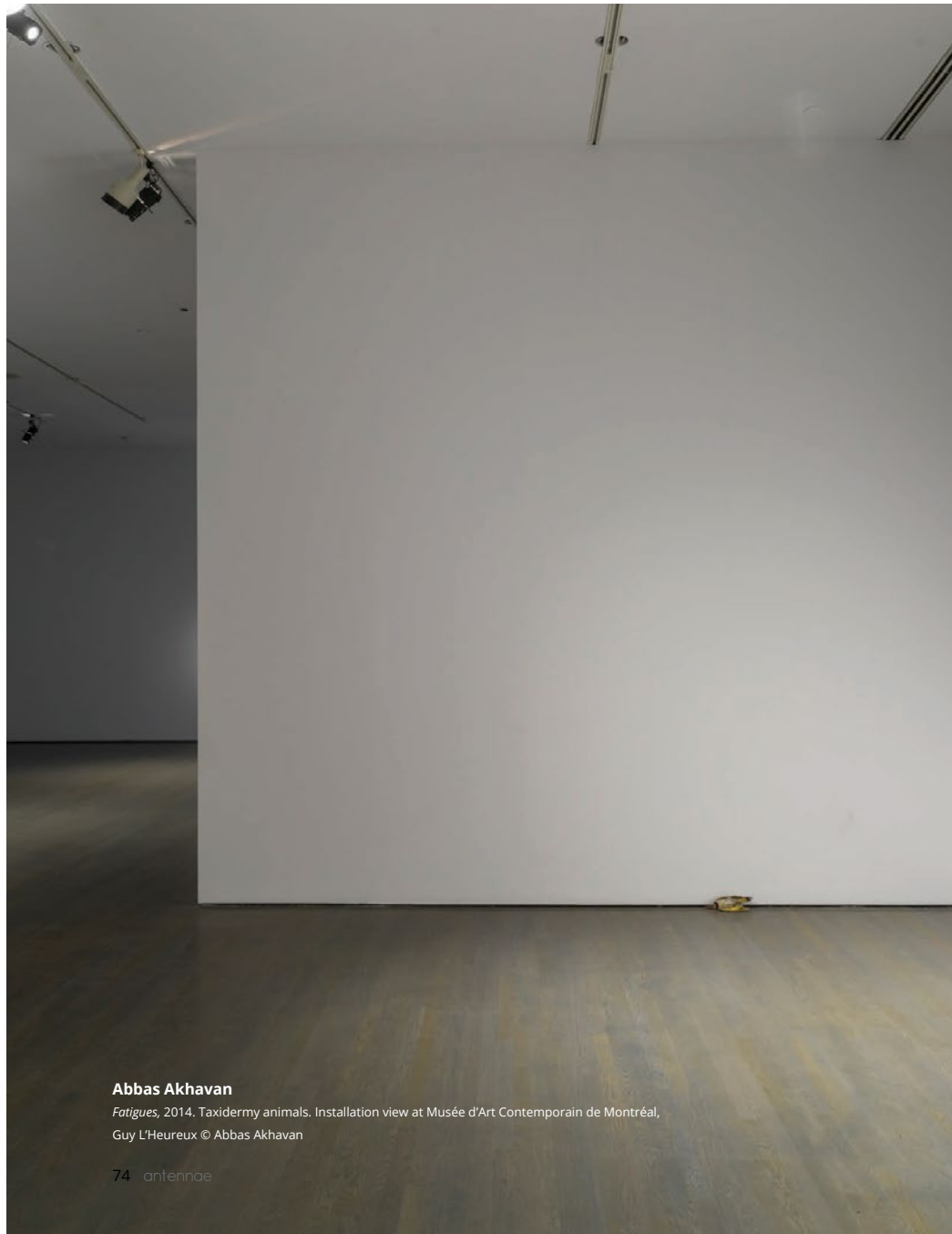
**Abbas Akhavan**

*Study for a Monument*, 2013 - ongoing. Bronze, cotton sheets. Installation views at Mercer. Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid  
 Courtesy of Family Servais Collection © Abbas Akhavan

about Iraq anymore. After all that devastation, the political sphere and the media has moved on—it is no longer present in our collective conscious.

**Aloi:** We have recently witnessed a rise of interest in the lives of plants. This has also reflected into a more insistent presence of living plants in the gallery space. You have worked with ivy, emerald cedars, and other plants. What does it mean to incorporate living plants in a work of art?

**Akhavan:** Currently, as you suggest, the cycle of plant-use in art seems plentiful, at times a little trendy and, even worse, it can be just sentimental or mimetic and decorative. But as it happens with everything, this cycle will fade. Remember neon art and fiber art? Currently, the art world is going through a “resin heavy” period. Regardless... I have been making work with and about, plants for a while. I am certainly not the first and won't be the last. Plants, whether as an idea or material belong to everyone. I tend to perceive this field in the spirit of a garden; the bigger the contribution the better the biodiversity, and hopefully more awareness about horticulture and ecology.



**Abbas Akhavan**

*Fatigues*, 2014. Taxidermy animals. Installation view at Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal,  
Guy L'Heureux © Abbas Akhavan

74 antennae

So it's nice to feel like we are all participating in some sort of communal discourse and research as opposed to authorship.

**Aloi:** ...and you have also worked with taxidermy. When did the interest for one of natural history's most important representational tool emerge in your practice?

**Akhavan:** When dealing with domestic spaces and borders and balconies and gardens and so on, it is inevitable to think about animals. Like most people living in a city, my interest in animals is about their absence. As John Berger writes in *Why Look at Animals?*, "Everywhere animals disappear". This is how we experience wildlife - in its lack. "Nature" ceases to exist and we see that every day on the news, in documentaries, environmental reports, and even in our neighbourhoods we hear fewer bird songs. As long as capitalism can make good business from the destruction of natural resources, we are going to witness mass extinction. So here's hoping for good business in green energy. Sadly, at least for now, money governs against life.

Back to your question about taxidermy... The representation of animals is something I have been thinking about for a while. Oxana Tamofeeva discusses these concerns in her book, *History of Animals*. We have plenty of art that depicts animals in hunting scenes and landscape paintings and even contemporary versions. Aside from representational appearances, animals frequently stand in as representatives of human values, say the lion on a crest as a symbol of power, dogs for loyalty, eagle for nationhood and patriotism and so on. I wanted to make a work where the animal was not representational nor a representative, but rather simply present. Unlike the artificially frozen action of conventional taxidermy we see in natural history museums, without the imposition of human values and with little interpretation, I wanted animals in the art gallery but I wanted them to be un-authored, without labels, without proper lighting or props and plinths, dispersed in the corners and other peripheries spaces of the gallery. Of course, they are still in a museum and function within a certain convention of looking, but I have been told that they act as portals—momentarily suspending their artifice and in resembling something recently dead or asleep, they might have the potential to move.

**Aloi:** Do you see your taxidermy animals as political?

**Akhavan:** Maybe.

**Aloi:** Do you make the taxidermy animals yourself?

**Akhavan:** No, I am not a taxidermist. The animals are sourced through different means but never from fur trade or trapping. The birds have died from collisions with buildings and most of the mammals from car accidents. This information is always made available to the audience. The works shown at the Wellcome Collection were made in close conversation with Jazmine Miles-Long, a vegan ethical taxidermist whom uses taxidermy primarily for educational purposes. Through images, sketches and studies, I work closely with taxidermists like Jazmine in order to get the animals in certain positions.

**Aloi:** The first time I encountered one of your taxidermy animals in a

gallery I was reminded of Gabriel Orozco's *Empty Shoe Box* (1993). In a sense, Orozco's work, similarly to your taxidermy animals, challenged the viewer with a "matter of fact" type of encounter. It short-circuited the institutional power semantics that, to a degree, contextualize and pre-digest the encounter between a work of art and the viewer. I am more specifically referring to the renouncement of a plinth and the forgoing of any informative label by the work. What thought process has led you to display your taxidermy animals in a vacuum and why have you opted for this solution?

.....  
*Natural history museums are places of wonder and discovery. But they are not neutral and unproblematic representations of the natural world. They don't just preserve nature either; they invent it through a mix of art and science, myth, and fact.*  
 .....

**Akhavan:** To be close to Orozco's *Empty Shoe Box* feels like a lovely vicinity. As I mentioned before, a few people referred to fatigues as portals, maybe similar to an empty shoebox indeed—fatigues, like the box, is almost obliging, refusing to dictate an interpretation. At the Wellcome Collection, I chose to remain anonymous as I don't think the pieces need an omnipresent author. Art galleries over determine artworks with conclusive often reductive answers. Gallery labels are more like a rescue ring buoys. They prevent people from thinking. The viewer is more buoyant than we credit them. So, at the Wellcome Collection, security guards and front desk people knew about my contribution, and if asked they offered information, but my name was not anywhere in the gallery. Some works demand their own mode of display and in this case, I knew my absence and lack of didactic panels would not confuse people but in fact expand the work. If I could change one thing about this work, it would be to eliminate all photo documentation of the animals. I wish this work could only be seen in person. But it is too late. Unfortunately, the photos dilute their encounter as people who know about them approach the work with certain preconceived notions, they have an expectation.

**Aloi:** Are you interested in the work of other artists using taxidermy?

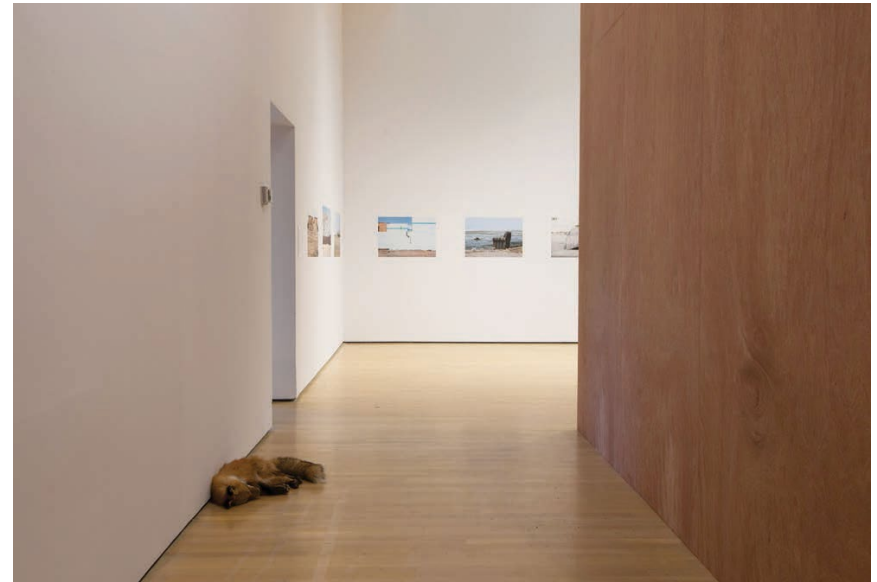
**Akhavan:** To be frank, no. I am not fond of taxidermy and even feel uncomfortable with my own work. A lot of artists use taxidermy without disclosing where they source their dead. They are shown in dioramas and installations that exist within certain artificial conventions. They feel decorative and even cruel. I'm sure you've seen foxes in outfits and birds or other mammals with beads and crystals and such coming out of their bodies. I find it indecent.

**Aloi:** How did you and Honor Beppard choose which taxidermy animals to include in the *Making Nature* exhibition?

**Akhavan:** So, Honor and I worked closely with Jazmine to find animals that were available and in particular wanted animals that live on the peripheries of the cities. So a badger, a barn owl, and a fox. I know foxes live in London but they don't do well as they are frequently injured and very ill-looking.

**Aloi:** What are you currently working on?

**Akhavan:** I just opened an exhibition at the CCA Wattis Institute curated by Kim Nguyen. For the exhibition, I recreated the lobby of the National Museum of Iraq after the museum was looted in 2003. The show is called *cast for a folly*. It is a kind of stage for a play. It is based on a photograph taken by Corine Wegener. Hopefully, the work func



**Abbas Akhavan**

*Fatigues*, 2014. Taxidermy animals. Installation view at Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal, Guy L'Heureux. All images courtesy of the artist; Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver; and The Third Line, Dubai © Abbas Akhavan

tions beyond just being mimetic or theatrical.

I will soon head back to Fogo Island for another residency and to produce a site-specific exhibition. I am so grateful to return to Fogo. There is so much silence and space and boredom there. I don't often have access to that kind of space... it's both physical and psychological. After Fogo, I am going to make a video piece about race-horse stables. It will be primarily stationary footage of horses being cared for as they are being bathed, having physiotherapy treatments and groomed. The footage is overlapped with audio from interviews with people that have quit making art - conversations with artists that have rejected their field.

**Abbas Akhavan** was born in Tehran, Iran in 1977. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts from Concordia University in 2004 and his Master of Fine Arts from the University of British Columbia in 2006. His recent solo exhibitions include *script for an island*, at FOGO Island Arts, (2019); *cast for a folly*, at CCA Wattis Institute, San Francisco (2019); and *variations on a garden*, Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin (2017). Akhavan is the recipient of Kunstpreis Berlin (2012); Abraj Group Art Prize (2014) and the Soby Art Award (2015).