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Et in Arcadia Artifice

BY GREG THOMAS, 09.06.2022



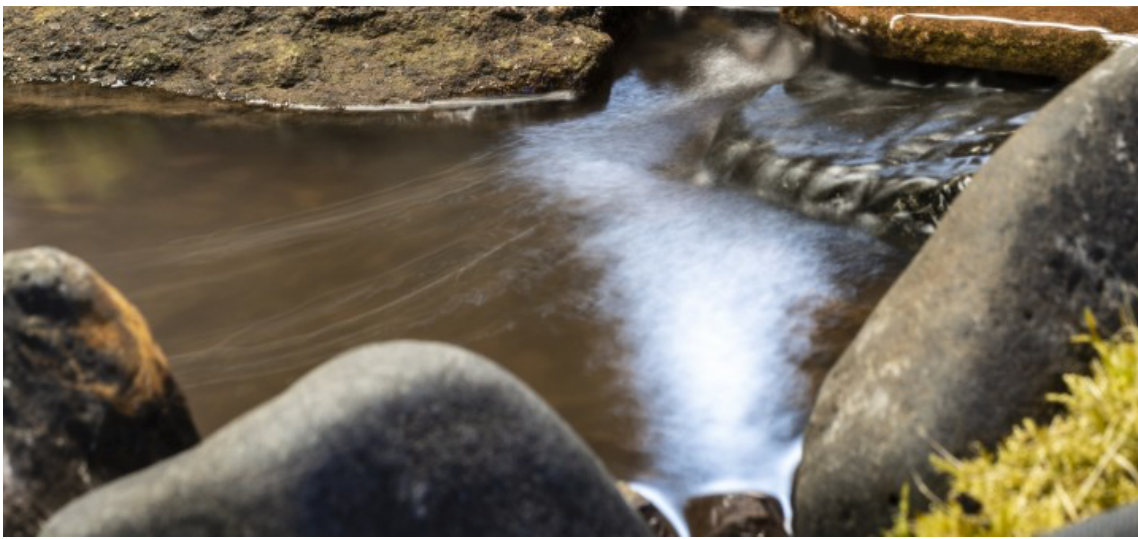
Abbas Akhavan, you used to call it blue sometimes, (2022). Courtesy the artist, The Third Line (UAE) and Catriona Jeffries (Canada). Image Keith Hunter.

Abbas Akhavan's interest in follies suits Mount Stuart. A vast gothic pile with Byzantine and Arts-and-Crafts flourishes, its main hall was modelled on Charlemagne's Palatine Chapel at Aachen, one of many projects undertaken by the Third Marquess of Bute (1847-1900) to express his mystical Christian credo. Behind the house a terraced garden with elaborate rockeries and watercourses is set on an artificial hill. Curator Morven Gregor assumed the hill was a natural feature before Akhavan began research for his show, study for a garden, which runs at Mount Stuart until October. Sometimes it's hard to tell a folly from the real thing.

One section of waterway from this manicured mound provided the blueprint for Akhavan's variations on a folly, set on stepped sheets of plywood in the crypt beneath the Marquess's chapel. Down the low-slung, gently sloping surface, a rill of water flows across a bed of packed soil, rocks, and clay, gathered from the garden along with plants and ferns. The vertical edges of the earthwork have been rammed and flattened with a wooden mould to create a sense of almost digitally precise cut-off, as if this were a cropped image. An earlier iteration of the variations on a folly series, exhibited in London in 2021, placed a cob-built replica of the Roman ruins at Palmyra – destroyed by Isis in 2015 – against a green-screen backing. Akhavan loves to play with our digitally-infiltrated sense of reality: real objects can seem like CGI follies.

Then again, this isn't a folly in a cynical, pop-art sense. We are not – or not only – being reminded of how human intervention reduces the natural world to a simulacrum of itself. Tiny mushrooms are sprouting from the sides of the structure, dandelion clocks quavering upwards from the soil. There is no sharp point separating the natural world from the artificial. Nature has been open – vulnerable – to our intervention since the dawn of settled agriculture, the age of cob-building and earth-ramming. In an era of climate crisis, it's salutary to consider that what really matters is how we impact on the natural world.





Abbas Akhavan, variations on a folly (detail), (2022). Courtesy the artist, The Third Line (UAE) and Catriona Jeffries (Canada). Image Keith Hunter.

En route through Mount Stuart's landscaped grounds to the kitchen garden, a sound-piece, 'you used to call it blue sometimes', is accessed through a QR code. Snippets of YouTube audio relay people's reactions – weepy, astonished – to putting on light-filtering glasses that 'cure' colour blindness: "Oh Jesus!...Is that a pink?" "Yeah you used to call that blue sometimes!" Artifice begins in the eyes, is a product of the senses. For those whose retinas contain overlapping green and red colour cones, the experience of this walk would have been utterly different (without a pair of patented EnChroma Glasses). Again, the nature/artifice boundary is dextrously picked apart.

Arriving at the kitchen garden pavilion – a magnificent glass rotunda – we are treated to the second part of 'you used to call it blue sometimes', a spectacle comparable to what our YouTube subjects might have felt. Sheets of dichroic film have been placed across several window panels, causing colour to split into a phantasm of hues, from deep violets to luminous blues. What would it be like to be gifted a different pair of eyes? To experience things in more intense, shifting colour spectra? Would it feel artificial? Or would our visual memories from before feel less real?

If our perception is coloured literally, it is also coloured figuratively, linguistically. Akhavan's Mp3 composition includes smatterings of bird-song, with descriptions of each species's name: "what you hear is the Cardinal's song. They are members of the sacred college of priests selected by the Pope...The small red bird, native to North and South America, was named after the red gowned religious figures...Cardinal has come to describe a particular shade of red." Histories of empire, of colonisation across human and animal domains, are woven into our taxonomies of flora and fauna, which in turn inflect our most instinctive, para-linguistic sensory reactions to the natural world. This is a fact to be reckoned with, rather than lamented or escaped from: what came first, the colour of the priest's gown, the colour of the bird, or the colour itself? Et in Arcadia Artifice.

Abbas Akhavan, *study for a garden* is showing at Mount Stuart until Sunday 2nd October