



Abbas Akhavan in his
Toronto apartment and studio,
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ABBAS AKHAVAN and the art of place

Home Fronts

BY HADANI DITMARS • PHOTO LISA PETROLE



A murky video image appears on the screen. It is a cityscape at night, where a woman wearing a headscarf pushes her young child in a stroller. There is a visceral, war-zone feel to the slightly shaky camerawork, and what sounds like gunfire or bombing in the background. A brief frenzy of movement erupts after a loud boom, and for a moment you are sure this is a Middle Eastern city—perhaps a Tehran protest, or Baghdad after curfew. Then the camera pans to a sign that reads “Lebanese restaurant,” and you realize this is not a war zone, but the west end of Vancouver during the annual festival of fireworks, shown here larger than life, in vaguely menacing close-up.

Abbas Akhavan’s video work *August 2006* (2006) was inspired by the coincidence of the fireworks festival and the simultaneous bombings of Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon and Afghanistan, and it epitomizes the emerging artist’s exploration of the familiar-turned-ferocious within a framework of collapsed global space. The Tehran-born artist—who left Iran with his family at the end of the Iran-Iraq war in the late 1980s and settled in Canada—seems obsessed with the domestic sphere, and how it can enter more dangerous territory in the blink of a passing video frame.



Study for a Blue Shield 2011
Gallery wall painted, cut
and placed on the roof of the
exhibition space 3 x 2.5 m
COURTESY THE ARTIST/THE THIRD LINE

OPPOSITE: Installation view
of **Variations on Ghosts and
Guests** with (left) **Well** and
(above) **Curtains** 2011 Mixed
media COURTESY THE ARTIST/THE
THIRD LINE/THE DELFINA FOUNDATION
PHOTO MIRANDA SHARP

Akhavan was awarded the Kunstpreis Berlin in February, and is currently showing work in a solo exhibition at Montreal's Darling Foundry and a group show at the Belvedere museum in Vienna. The 34-year-old artist (whose work spans the spheres of video, installation, sculpture, painting and performance) seems to have finally found a home in Toronto, but in recent years a life of international residencies had imposed on him an uncertain nomadism: Toulouse, Dubai and Santander were all parts of Akhavan's international itinerary. Fittingly, his work from that period is imbued with a sense of tension—between the safe and the menacing, the absent and the present—and explores the transposition of geographical, cultural and political realities. And you can blame it all on the fireworks.

Just as the loud explosions during Vancouver's "Celebration of Light" resonated with Akhavan's memories of war zones, so too did the video strike a chord with the curator Haig Aivazian, who showed it at Dubai's The Third Line gallery in 2007 as part of a two-person exhibition. While the young artist toiled away in Vancouver, his work was gaining international ground in the Emirates. And so his dance between "here" and "there," between "home" and "away" went on, but always within a very site-specific context.

Who is this guy whose work so deftly explores issues of temporality and identity? Naturally, our exchanges occur over Skype, from my studio in Vancouver and his apartment in Toronto, and they take place in conversational fits and starts on a hot summer afternoon. The dark-haired, handsome Akhavan comes across as a complex and driven young man, yet one with a certain innocence and openness to new experiences that belie his childhood traumas. The narrative of his life and work is familiar to me, but is so exhausting in its scope, so relentless in its creative rigour, that we both must take breaks from the interview for snacks, coffee and even short siestas. A chat that ended with a childhood memory of bombs falling in his backyard resumes again with a friendly, genuinely curious query about what I made for lunch. His biggest regret about his hectic new travel schedule, he says, is that it leaves him little time to cook dinner for friends at home, a favourite and centring activity.

It's not surprising that Akhavan's explorations of domesticity often contain a violence that lurks close to the surface. This tension is epitomized in a project he calls *Makeshift Objects* (2008–ongoing), in which objects from his home are converted into replicas of shivs made by prisoners. Here, Akhavan explores the idea of the everyday turned menacing—"the fork that feeds you

also stabs you; the bathtub that bathes you also drowns you"—with shades of Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo and other torture regimes hovering nearby.

Foreign hostages in Saddam Hussein's Iraq were called "guests," and Akhavan is fascinated by the etymological connection between "host," "house" and "hostility." "They all stem from the Latin root *hos*," he notes. Akhavan's exploration of the host/guest relationship took a Canadian colonial turn with his 2009 multi-channel audio installation *Landscape: For the birds*, which was part of the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG)'s exhibition "How Soon Is Now," curated by Kathleen Ritter. The piece was both a sound sculpture and a site-specific provocation. Akhavan lived and worked in Vancouver from 2005 until 2010, and it was *Landscape* that first garnered him national attention. For the work, the artist installed eight horn tweeters in the tall cypress trees that flank the VAG's Hornby Street entrance, once the doorway to the courthouse that formerly occupied the building—where many First Nations people were tried. By playing the calls of invasive British bird species that had been introduced to North America in the aftermath of colonization (these sounds fluctuated between aggressive territorial calls and softer mating coos), the installation demanded an acknowledgement of Canada's history on the part of gallery visitors and passersby. Late-night partygoers and early-morning joggers alike would congregate around the trees, wondering at the noise.

Later that year, Akhavan returned to his exploration of the relationship between the West and the Middle East, but within a very Canadian context. While he scorns some post-9/11 art as shallow and exploitative, the four site-specific works collectively called *Guests, Ghosts, Hosts* (2009) featured in Artspeak's "Speaking Truth to Reconciliation" exhibition examined issues of race and reconciliation in a clever, nuanced way. To draw attention to the art world's racial homogeneity, Akhavan issued multiple invitations to non-white viewers and arranged for a Caucasian belly dancer to perform in the gallery at unannounced intervals. He also erected two small plinths on a metre-long platform—"a kind of a trap, really," he admits—where viewers met an eye-level sign that read "Each day, a Caucasian male will come into the gallery, stand on this platform, and host discussions on accountability and reconciliation." The sign highlighted the absurdity of excluding whites from discussions about race, and also invited a certain accountability. "No white males actually obliged," remembers Akhavan. During an accompanying conference, he further explored ideas of identity and truth telling by hiring an Iraqi friend to pose as him and deliver a lecture in Arabic without translation. The lecture began with the sentence "I am a liar" and included a YouTube clip of American soldiers in Baghdad encouraging non-English-speaking Iraqi children to say "white power" for their video camera.

Akhavan returned to Dubai for another exhibition at The Third Line, showing a work called *Islands* (2010) that features a map of Dubai gold-leafed onto the wall, with residential real-estate clusters highlighted in relief. The artist literally sold chunks of the gilded wall to clients, and



he remembers that—as in the real world—“The waterfront properties were the first to go.” But it was his subsequent 2011 Dubai installation, *Variations on Ghosts and Guests*, commissioned by Dubai Culture and the London-based Delfina Foundation, that brought many of his preoccupations with identity, domesticity, labour and violence to a new level.

A video of the piece is revealing. In an old stone house in Dubai’s Al-Bastakiya district, where many of the hundred-year-old residences have recently been restored as B&Bs and galleries, everything seems normal until you notice clothes perched in the trees in the outer courtyard; they are like the bundles that locals use to send dirty garments to the laundry. In an inner courtyard, elegant stacks of dishes have been transformed into sculptural fountains (evocative of the wells that would have stood there a century ago), with water trickling down into large metal cooking pots. The first instinct is to wash them, to put some order to the chaos. Clean bed sheets hang in rows overhead, suggesting the traditional Emirati cooling system—but here the sun projects bar-like shadows that bring to mind a prison. A few metres away, two people have been paid to sleep in shifts on a bed. A couple of German women who visited the installation told Akhavan that the precise rows of hanging linen “reminded them of home.” A local Dubai family came and revealed that the house had once belonged to their father. They were emigrants from the south of Iran, and had brought Persian sweets for Akhavan.

“I’m interested,” says the artist, “in making site-specific work that sparks

interest in viewers because it relates to their local politics or architecture or culture. You learn about your own work when people come to see it.” In Akhavan’s work, the viewer is never passive, but implicated—involved somehow in the drama of the installation. In Dubai, the references to labour and leisure, tourists and migrant workers, guests and hosts, resonated with locals and foreigners alike.

Last spring at Toronto’s Trinity Square Video, Akhavan connected Canadians to the Emirates with an installation titled *Hawkers* (2011). Here, video of traditional Emirati falconry, an ancient art now largely performed for tourists, lured viewers into a room—just as a dead pigeon is used to lure the falcon, or as the whole spectacle lures tourists. A nearby installation featuring a low wooden plinth laden with souvenirs for travellers also implicated the artist as “hawker.” At first, Akhavan’s video gaze is focused on the exotic Emirati falconer in the desert, complete with a camel. But soon it shifts to a British tourist and his children, shown in anthropological-style close-ups on dress and gesture. Viewers sit in the middle of the room, situated between the screen on one end, and four heaters—sculptural objects in their own right—on the other. A precarious metaphorical balance exists between seeing the video and feeling the heat from the heaters.

“I am like that viewer,” observes Akhavan, “in between the fire and the screen.” ■

To view more art by Abbas Akhavan, visit canadianart.ca/akhavan