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Islands: A Conversation with Abbas Akhavan

In the fall of 2012, *Scapegoat* spoke with Abbas Akhavan about his project *Islands*, which was on view at The Third Line in Dubai from May 6 through June 10, 2010.

SCAPEGOAT SAYS *Islands* manages to imbricate four systems for the exchange of value on two infra-thin surfaces—the laminated thicknesses of foil, and drywall. The first system is the gold foil as a precious metal which sustains its value and has been used both as a currency itself and to back the values of national currencies. The second is the plan of Dubai, which acts as a representation of property. While this is purely symbolic within the work, it remains a significant dimension of its content, marking property in its sovereign form, as one guarantee of fiat currencies, and in its market forms, as a medium of capital circulation. Third is the drywall as part of contemporary architecture, which itself is both capital-intensive, and a highly volatile medium of investment and exchange. Finally, there is the work of art, which is both on the wall, apparently immobilized, and then cut out of the wall and allowed to circulate as a medium of exchange. Can you discuss how these four currency systems intersect in the work and in the city of Dubai, where you showed this piece?

ABBAS AKHAVAN It has been a while since the show, so I feel a little distant from the work...But needless to say, your observations are correct. When the show at The Third Line was proposed I had my share of concerns, as this was my first solo exhibition in a commercial gallery, and the inevitably of market circulation entered the conceptual fabric of the work. I was initially in denial about the influence of this commercial context, but gradually realized that it is something that I wanted

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to bring to the surface. A lot of my work is site-specific, so dealing with the commercial gallery as a site of economic exchange was inevitable.

In this case, I also inherited Dubai's geography, economy, reputation, etc. As I started to gather my research, I became aware of the fact that one of the most prevalent visual perceptions of Dubai is its aerial view, a distance that is created by the islands' geographical branding, and obviously the height of the buildings. This bird's-eye fantasy seems to be symptomatic of certain mushrooming cities like Dubai, Vancouver, and Shanghai. On the other hand, cities like Montreal, Istanbul, and Berlin tend to be photographed from a closer distance, at a scale that is easier to occupy, which is another kind of romance or branding—closer to the front porch, the patio, the winding narrow streets, and so on.

At the same time, I found the discourse around Dubai very speculative, spectacular, and reactionary, especially in early 2000s. Considering the West's history of impositions on the Middle East and well, the rest of the world, I think that the criticism has to be self-reflexive and well-informed. In this case, I think strong criticism of Dubai is apt, but it needs to be something more than a continuation of a colonial attitude masked by our deep concerns for labour laws. I found the criticism to be very naive and in denial of our own relationships to cheap labour and the environmental impact of "economic growth."

I was not in Dubai long enough to make a piece about the micro-politics or nuances of the region, so I addressed the implications of my own distance from the place into the work. In many ways, I would say that I worked with very obvious and at times vulgar materials, images, and ideas. The objective was to encapsulate a time and space: post economic-crash, Dubai, The Third Line, the market value of my own work as an artist, along with other unstable investments like gold, real estate, and art.

The materials used, as you mentioned, all deal with thin surfaces. Each work carries its own fluctuating, transparent,

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hypothetical value: the market value of an artist, the gallery as a site of exchange for capital (in this case the walls as souvenirs), the drywall (materials that were in demand during the building boom, now less valuable), gold (a currency outside of industry), real estate (rising and sinking, in this case literally), and the transparency of the artwork's value based on sales (with each sale, sections of the wall were cut and removed from the gallery, changing the work based on sales, rendering the value of the work transparent to buyers). Its aesthetic experience has been governed by its economy; its fragmentation and decay are a sign of its increasing value. Simply put, the work adopted the behaviour of its site in relation to the global economy. Also, a great deal of the work was bought by international collectors, so much of it has left Dubai.

SS Having explained the motivations behind your work, can you now reflect on the piece's actual material engagement with the gallery and the city? How did the show play out in relation to these different systems of exchange? Were you actually able to sell the work in your first gallery show? How did the gallery cope with your destruction of its walls? If people did buy pieces, what was their relation to the plan of Dubai that they purchased? How much is that much gold leaf worth as a material?

AA All land areas except for roads were covered in gold leaf. The water and roads were left as exposed white drywall. The entire map was traced, then done free hand. No tape was used. In fact, the close-up view of the map is quite rough and at times sloppy, so there was a big discrepancy between what you saw from afar and up close. The wall was loosely zoned and priced according to real estate values: the more desirable areas of the map, parts closest to the centre, where water and land intersect are the most expensive areas, and the price decreases as you move down further away from water. And the cost of the remaining wall increased by ten percent after every five sales.

I wanted to really follow a logic of real estate and the art market, one that made the purchase of the work urgent and time-based: the earlier you buy, the better the deal. The method of purchase was an investment of gold/real estate/art, one that superseded the aesthetic experience of the work, both in its urgency to buy while the deal is good, and in the effect of its sale, which caused the gradual defacement of the cohesive work. Keep in mind I had no delusions about my position—in a conservative, post-crash art market, an unknown young artist selling drywall is very susceptible to failure. But I wanted the potential for failure to be transparent. If nothing sold, then nothing changed, so the work would become visibly stagnant and obviously unwanted. There were other concerns, too, such as the material failure of drywall crumbling during removal, the discomfort of making something so loud and flashy, especially one that followed a framework that was so dependent on the market and sales. Despite my desire for a critical and reflexive gesture, I followed a path that was new for me and at times very uneasy. Finally, I think the iconoclastic act of breaking apart a map of a country could have come across as antagonistic and offensive. But despite the complications and concerns, I feel that the work operated within a logic that was hopefully critical and simultaneously mimetic of circumstances surrounding places like Dubai, where the economy is governing so much of our reality and ethics, dividing land, natural resources, people, and so on.

My initial desire was to sell monochromatic white paintings made of drywall, which we did, as some sections of the water that were just drywall sold. But the purchase of the work varied. Some people bought areas that they grew up in or near. Others bought areas because of high property value. Some people told me that this was their first time buying art because parts of the work were very affordable. As I mentioned before, some sections sold to other collectors and curators who were not in town and purchased work from afar, which surprised me. The show gave way to a lot of discussion

and press, which was great. But some people, including close friends, really disliked the work, felt that it was too crass. I am sure some still dislike the work, but some changed their opinion as the wall came apart. The gallery certainly had its reservations in the beginning. It took a lot of negotiation. It was a lot of work both in production and maintenance.

The gold I used was imitation gold leaf. I never wanted to use real gold for the map. Aside from being extremely expensive, I am not into contributing to the process of gold extraction, nor am I fond of that kind of demonstration of wealth. The imitation gold leaf oxidizes, so now they are turning marbled brown and green.

When I arrived in Dubai, I noticed that due to the economic crash a number of buildings were left half-finished. Over time, they started to fall into a state of ruin, dust covering everything left in neglect. As we removed the sold sections from the wall, we left the dust on the floor. There was this remarkable moment when the map and the dismantled gallery started to parallel what was happening outside: unfinished architecture becoming ruin. This was almost incomprehensible to me, like aiming for the future but falling into the past, like a collapse of time. ○

B10 Abbas Akhavan's practice ranges from site-specific ephemeral installations to drawing, video, and performance. The domestic sphere has been an ongoing focus in Akhavan's work. Much of his early 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 becoming 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. Akhavan was a recipient of the Berliner Kunstpreis, in 2012.