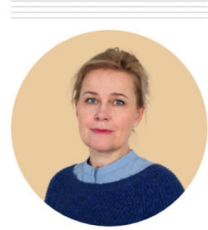


The Observer  
Art and design



Laura Cumming

@LauraCummingArt

Sun 22 Aug 2021 13.00  
BST



## Abbas Akhavan review - a poetic monument to folly



▲ Curtain Call, Variations on a Folly, 2021 by Abbas Akhavan at Chisenhale Gallery. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Andy Keate

### Chisenhale Gallery, London

The Isis-destroyed ancient ruins of Palmyra rise again in precarious straw and London clay, shaped by the hands of this deeply allusive Iranian artist

**T**he scent reaches you before the sight - an exhilarating combination of evergreen and fresh sap emitting from the gallery entrance. It seems to presage woods in deep summer. And sure enough, the spectacle inside is like a glade of high trees, their dark trunks rising to crowns of leaves, scatterings of soil on the floor. But at exactly the same moment, what you are looking at is also something quite else, immediately distinct and recognisable - the colonnade of a magnificent classical temple.

The trees are both trunks and columns; the leaves might be acanthus on a Corinthian capital. The whole structure is formed out of what seems to be organic matter, possibly straw-strewn black earth.

That is the one-two surprise on arrival: what you see is entirely archaeological - a Greco-Roman colonnade - and at the same time wholly botanical, even arboreal. How can it be both at once? That is the opening wonder.

Each column is in fact a sculpture, formed by the hands of Abbas Akhavan. Born in Tehran in 1977, Akhavan moved to Canada with his family during the Iran-Iraq war and is now based in Montreal. He is an extremely subtle thinker. Anyone who saw his Delfina exhibition in 2013 (he has scarcely shown here since then, alas) may remember the way he brought the outside indoors, letting nature take over a townhouse with high hedges, leaking waterfalls and sprouting floors. With his unhurried cast of mind, Akhavan is constantly pondering our place on earth as contemporary beings living among old buildings, quite often ruins, and the strange relations between people, archaeology and nature.



▲ A detail view of *Curtain Call, Variations on a Folly*. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Andy Keate

It is possible, for instance, that you may recognise the shape of this colonnade: the original lead up to the monumental Arch of Palmyra, the 2,000-year-old ruined city in Syria, so much of which was destroyed by Isis in 2015. What is thought to be the body of Khaled al-Asaad, the Syrian archaeologist who tried to defend Palmyra was only recently found in the rubble, beheaded. At the very least, Akhavan's sculptural installation is its own kind of monument to this tragic history - to these ancient buildings and perhaps to that man, all vanished away. Earth to earth, dust into dust.

Syrian citizens have tried to recreate Palmyra in miniature in their own devastated homes. And it is said that Syria has signed a contract with Russia to reconstruct the ancient buildings on the site. But there already exists a facsimile of the legendary arch, through which travellers processed more than two millennia. It is based on the aggregate data of innumerable photographs, transformed through 3D printing into a cut-down version in Egyptian marble. This is the work of the Institute for Digital Archaeology, a joint project between professors at Harvard and Oxford, partnered by, among others (and you may ask yourself why), the Dubai Futures Foundation and the UAE.

The repro arch was first unveiled in Trafalgar Square in 2016 by Boris Johnson, then mayor of London, with a speech of posturing defiance in which he raises two digits - ho ho - to the barbarians. It then went on a European tour. There is no doubt that Akhavan is alluding to this curious circus, and the illusion that we are actually seeing or encountering the arch. His installation stands upon a sardonic landscape, in the form of a sweeping chroma key green screen, as used in film and television to isolate a subject from its background and transport it elsewhere. His colonnade is, as it were, neither here nor there.



And the absurdity of both the marble prop and its ceremonial unveiling is the subject of another work in this show. An image of the scene where the gleaming white sheet covered the 3D facsimile before unveiling is itself printed on another gleaming white sheet, roughly the size of a magician's silk handkerchief. Now you see it, now you don't.

A vast painting across the gallery roof is more inscrutable, not least because it can only be seen from surrounding tower blocks and the birds in the air. It involves the phrase "cat's paw", from the fable by La Fontaine, in which a monkey flatters a cat into burning its paws on a fire to supply him with roasted chestnuts. Nowadays it refers to people who become the dupes or tools of others.



▲ An aerial view of Cat's Paw, 2021 by Abbas Akhavan.  
Photograph: Ali Sadeghian

My sense is that this may have something to do with institutions, including galleries and museums, which continue to follow the bidding of politicians and patrons. We can manufacture versions of ancient Syrian architecture but block the asylum of Syrian refugees; we can display hallowed artefacts in our museums without responsibility to the societies that made them or the civilians who tried to defend them. We can perform for the sponsors but sidestep restitution.

What is so marvellous about Akhavan's central installation is its dense poetry of idea and allusion. The sculptures come from the earth itself - in this case that old organic building material, cob, mixed with London clay. We are here, after all, even while imagining Palmyra. And as the classical columns recede from the eye, so they cease to represent columns, reverting to composting nature itself. The uprights are columns, then disintegrating trunks, then bodies, falling away. Yet the idea remains, and the vision of humanity stands.

● [Abbas Akhavan](#) is at the Chisenhale Gallery, London E3, until 17 October

---