



It's a Kind of a Domesticated Wilderness: An Interview with Abbas Akhavan

By : *Marina Jordan*

[Abbas Akhavan's "Study for a Curtain" (2015). Image courtesy of The Third Line Gallery.]

People ask me, "What does it mean?" And I say: "It doesn't mean anything." Evidently, the work of Toronto-based artist Abbas Akhavan carries connotations, pointing the viewer to a certain direction. Yet the artist refrains from pedagogic messages, thus encouraging viewers to form their own opinions. At the core of Akhavan's practice, which he defines as a declination of possible answers to the same problem, lies the idea of the sacred—the respect of nature's welcoming tenderness, blended with a menacing pugnacity. Installed for the first time at the [Third Line Gallery in Dubai](#), his *Study for a Curtain*—modeled after a pit trap and comprised of exotic plant leaves—draws on antagonisms of attraction and hazard. Here he tells us more about his practice of the ephemeral.

Marina Jordan: Before having a peek at your installation [still in progress at the time] I was expecting to see an actual curtain. Instead, I discovered branches, leaves, and potted plants.

Abbas Akhavan: The curtain is concealing the floor. It's not necessarily vertical. It's anything that covers up, like a foil or a filter. You don't see what's underneath, because it is modeled after a pit trap.

In real life, it is camouflaged into the entire space. But I think the work is more than that. It is a garden, a study. It could be a grave. It could be a carpet.

MI: Do you see the piece finished in its integrality, when you start installing, or does it result from a certain degree of improvisation?

AA: I have some things in mind, but because it is so much about the space, a lot of editing happens in the process. It is rather about adding elements then removing them. I do have something very clear in mind and start with the floor piece, and the fan, and the chyme. It's an environment, not an object so if it gets too crowded I can remove some things. If the conceptual framework is too didactic, I remove something. But there really isn't a message or a meaning. That's why I have reservations about putting out didactic texts next to the work. The macadamisation of art has given such an authority to language. People come in with this need for explanation but I think it's so much more interesting for them to glean their own information. There is definitely a path, but I don't want people to feel like they are being led to a destination.

MI: How did you decide to repeatedly include "Study" in the titles of your work, and why do so many of your studies include plants?

AA: Study sounds very speculative and open. It's about trying to find something out, as opposed to a finalized work. When you call something a study, people don't feel like they are dealing with an authority. They are open to the openness of the work.

Although I have been working with plants for the past six years, I do have reservations when it comes to using them frivolously. When I do use plant life in itself, I want to use it in a duplicitous way. In this particular case, all the plants are non-native to Dubai.

MI: Your work clearly expresses a concern with domestic environments. What particular aspects of this subject are you exploring through your installations?

AA: Part of the reason I started dealing with domestic objects is because we all have a relationship to utensils, knives, and beds. It's a very open access point for people to talk about. I think there are a lot of presumptions about the domestic space that I want to explore. Especially when it becomes a bigger sphere, for example dealing with xenophobia. The house is a microcosm for a much bigger concern. I also deal with domesticated landscapes and parks.

When you walk into a forest, your brain creates a pattern to understand the complexity of the forest, so you actually stop seeing what is in front of you, because your brain is compensating. So it is about domesticating your experience, making it familiar.

The work upstairs [in the Third Line Gallery's Project Space] is very much about that. It's about our own preservation, our enlightenment. We domesticate the real all the time, in order to comprehend it.

MI: How did you transition from *Study of a Garden* to *Study of a Curtain*?

AA: It is the same pattern of the same fabric in a way. The problem is the same: I am just trying to find another solution, dealing with how landscapes are territorial and how gardens are symbolic places of civility but also contested spaces of property.

I am interested in formal issues, too. *Study of a Curtain* is beautiful to look at, with its leaves on the floor. And that's not my doing, it's just how plant life is; it has this incredible intelligence and form.



MI: How do you feel about viewers always needing to know what your works means?

AA: In the 1990s art historians started teaching artists how to make art and I think that's not necessarily fruitful for artists. Maybe this is only symptomatic of Canada, but I find that so many artists are afraid of having their own opinion about an artwork, and reference others instead. Meaning is a sort of safe zone, for people to not have their own ideas and that's really problematic. In a recent show that I did at the Montreal Biennial [showing a series of taxidermy animals displayed around the gallery in dead poses] I didn't put labels next to my work and purposely avoided proper lighting. People were confused, but also understood the work without knowing what it means. It became encounters that were more exploratory. People were more curious, interrogating instead of stating the meaning.

MI: Most of your installations are site specific and ephemeral. Do you not miss having the possibility of seeing your work over and over again?

AA: Sometimes I do. But now that I have made bronze objects in *Study for a Hanging Garden*, there is something to go back to. Overall, I think the work should be an experience. If it has legs, it can travel and be recreated in-situ.

MI: How do you go about installing *Study for a Curtain*?

AA: I do a lot of procrastination (laughs), delaying the pleasure of making.

So far, except for a few shows, it has been a very stressful scenario. I show up, I feel the space... If it is a residency, it's much easier. A site-specific installation is much more susceptible to failure. In Canada, I did not have the means of collecting tropical leaves. So it is going on a limb and figuring things out on the spot. In the past, it was more difficult, because I was working with smaller budgets and made decisions that were potentially risky for my health. I have done things where I almost electrocuted myself, because I am not a skilled worker. I learn out of desperation.



MI: You mentioned in an earlier interview that you had mixed feelings about commercial success. Did you sense more interest from commercial galleries, following your 2014 AGAP nomination?

AA: AGAP is more permanent than commercial I guess, as you receive a large sum of money that helps create a substantial body of work that you wouldn't have means for otherwise. I am not anti-market. I just don't make work for a market. Abraaj is a very nice opportunity.

Two years before that [2014 AGAP nomination] I submitted something that was more ephemeral and have been asked if I could make it permanent, to which I said no.

I think people that collect art, write, and read about art, they understand that ephemerality. Sometimes, collectors buy the most absurd thing because it gives them a green card that sets them ahead from their friends, who keep buying paintings about... I won't say what (laughs again). Somehow, I feel very privileged, humbled, and lucky. I am not doing anything crazy out there, but people have been very generous and supportive of what I do.

**Extracted from an interview with the artist conducted by the author on 2 March 2015*