



ABBAS AKHAVAN'S PROJECT OF PROJECTION

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Abbas Akhavan, *Studio, 2025 and spring, 2021–25*. Installation view, *Abbas Akhavan: One Hundred Years* (5 September – 7 December 2025) at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. Both works courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. © Abbas Akhavan Photo: Rachel Topham Photography

Last year, Abbas Akhavan's exhibition *One Hundred Years* at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery in Vancouver presented new and recent installation works, sculptures and videos that blur the meanings and distinctions between stage, set, gameboard, studio and gallery to explore notions of time. Akhavan makes work that is often responsive to site, attentive to architecture and the encounter between work and audience. Through a largely sculptural and installation practice, the artist considers how spaces are defined, how we are complicit with or subject to the control of those spaces, and he often develops works through a residency model, as he did at the Belkin.

His work has an ongoing engagement with the garden as a site of human dominion over “nature”, ruins-in-process (such as through war), and an abiding interest in our more-than-human relations. This year, Akhavan will represent Canada at the 61st Venice Biennale, where his work is in direct response to those specific architectural and institutional contexts. As such, this article is both a reflection and a record of the Belkin Art Gallery’s exhibition – an event that will remain singular, having existed only within a specific spatial and conceptual configuration, but inflects upon Akhavan’s complex practice.

One Hundred Years is, in my estimation, a project of projection. As the curator who supported the artist over several years to develop the exhibition, I recognize his proposition as a spell in which visitors are offered a set of works that require activation. Referencing the fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*, *One Hundred Years* disrupts linear narrative to question how time operates in storytelling and in exhibition making. Akhavan pointed me to Will Storr’s *The Science of Storytelling* (2020), in which the author notes that “story time is compressed time.” Stories are often driven by a hero who leads us toward something better, and Akhavan’s installation operates as an open invitation for viewers to project their narratives onto the work. The looping time scales between each work in *One Hundred Years* vary, but each thrums with a circulatory power that impacts the reading of the works singularly and, more importantly, in relation to one another.



Abbas Akhavan, Installation view, *Abbas Akhavan: One Hundred Years* (5 September – 7 December 2025) at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. © Abbas Akhavan Photo: Rachel Topham Photography

Within the context of Akhavan's practice, that often hinges on the structure and metaphor of the garden (cultivated rather than wild land and its flora), *One Hundred Years* invites the visitor into a space that alters a recognition of the site of narrative itself. The exhibition is configured as a circulatory system, holding constructed forms that are frozen, burning, looping, and stilled, cycling us through a series of interconnected works and spaces in the Belkin.

This project of Akhavan's work is held between what it itself projects, and what it invites the visitor to project onto it. There is an alchemy to the way that Akhavan conjures works, makes things for people, things that become activated by the visitor, the guest, the stranger. In his long-standing interest in hospitality, *One Hundred Years* is both an invitation of generosity and one of difficulty.

From the outset, the artist invites visitors into the exhibition from backstage. They emerge through a doorway onto a stage: an elevated white platform backed by a cycloramic wall, populated by towering *Monstera deliciosa* – tropical plants native to Central and South America and are often kept as houseplants – under the bright and strangely digital light of full-spectrum grow lamps. Stepping off the stage and turning back, visitors take in the scene: the stage holds the animal-like personas of the plants “staged” and ready for their photoshoot, for their moment. The visitors can read them in the context of the work's title, *Studio* (2025), and the historical hint in the exhibition guide of an archival photograph of Henri Matisse's 1948 studio populated with these plants.

Adjacent to the stage, *spring* (2021/25) is a fountain with copper coils sparkling with white frost, lit by its own internal mechanism, that snakes its icy, sweating hoses under an adjoining wall to the pulsing drone of a chiller. This scene is reminiscent of a garden courtyard with its domesticated plants, their rhizomes and leaves fueled by artificial light, requiring and breathing moisture, and the fountain – civic in nature – frozen but humming with circumvolution.



Abbas Akhavan, *spring* (2021/25), found water fountain piping with lights and pond pump, copper piping, chiller, tubing, hardware, glycol and water; produced with support from Protocinema, Istanbul and Callister Craft Soda, Vancouver. Installation view: *Abbas Akhavan: One Hundred Years* at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. © Abbas Akhavan Photo: Rachel Topham Photography

Behind the wall, the chiller – steely and industrially alive – is revealed. Its job is to maintain the frozen fountain. In behind is the back of *LOOP* (2023/25), which is inaccessible from this approach, and tucked in unlit, edge spaces are the taxidermied animals – a fox, an owl and a badger – of *Fatigues* (2014). This repeat of a backstage, this murky space, heightens the emotional connection we have to the animals that we fear entered the gallery by mistake, got trapped behind the scenes. Like the cement landscapes of our urban and suburban worlds, such as parking lots and alleys, this space feels inhospitable to these creatures, and we wish to return them to a softer, greener place.



Abbas Akhavan, *One Hundred Years*, 2025. Royal icing (confectioner's sugar, egg whites and food colouring), stainless steel, hardware, oil lamp, paraffin oil, candles and lumber. Installation view, *Abbas Akhavan: One Hundred Years* at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. © Abbas Akhavan Photo: Rachel Topham Photography

Artifice and actuality are tensions in Akhavan's work, where all is "real" but understood as an image of itself. The namesake of the exhibition – the work *One Hundred Years* (2025) – takes the fairy tale questions of magic, sleep and awakening as part of the circulatory system of time and images. This absurd, oversized, cascading, collapsing cake is covered in candles, three of which burn without end. This Disney animation-turned-sculpture, made with royal icing, is a marker of time: a birthday perhaps. That progression of time, however, is suspended, and instead the cake becomes a monument or a vigil. The birthday cake perpetually holds form in its perceived collapse, its candles never burning down. Nevertheless, it is alive in its stasis, the flames consuming oxygen. Across from the cake is a two-way mirror, a reminder of the space between perceiving and being perceived.



Abbas Akhavan, *Zoo*, 2025. Live-feed stream, monitors, lumber and hardware, and *One Hundred Years*, 2025. Royal icing (confectioner's sugar, egg whites and food colouring), stainless steel, hardware, oil lamp, paraffin oil, candles and lumber. Installation view: *Abbas Akhavan: One Hundred Years* at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. Both works courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography

This understanding of potentially being watched sets the visitor up for *Zoo* (2025), a live feed from zoo cameras on a grid of large monitors that offers visitors real-time viewing. The captive apes, tigers, giraffes, foxes and others live out their lives in constructed habitats, in temporalities and rhythms that are far from the wild, yet meet our human timescales and desires. In watching and being watched, the gallery space itself is revealed as a container for control and surveillance.



Abbas Akhavan, *LOOP*, 2023–25. Lumber, rocks, water, pond membrane, geocell boxes, water pump, tubing, chromakey paint and newsprint. Installation view: *Abbas Akhavan: One Hundred Years* at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. © Abbas Akhavan Photo: Rachel Topham Photography

The visitor is now delivered in front of *LOOP* as a near-final work within the cycle. This structure – another stage, platform or altar that is also cycloramic, painted chroma-key green – holds a stone fountain in which water circulates in a closed system against a space for whatever projection one desires. Here viewers may encounter a vision of the world without the space to feel, see or know it.

The final or perhaps the first work in the exhibition, *Untitled* (2025) is a single, daily image on the Belkin Art Gallery's outdoor LED screen. Like Instagram stories, the images are available to visitors for only one day. For the 94 days of the exhibition, the artist selected one image per day, ranging from greenscreen waterfalls, stage curtains and animation stills to monuments wrapped against potential destruction. These images aren't indexes per se, but they point to the circulatory nature of images, to the way the artist understands, uses and produces images, and how, in turn, visitors make images for themselves which circulate, unfolding the work in other time scales.

One Hundred Years is dream-like, contrived, intelligent. Akhavan cast a spell that wasn't broken in the loop, in the circulatory system that I lived with, monitored, walked every day like a gardener, looking for signs of contamination, change, hope. In questioning how to suspend narrative and linear time, Akhavan makes us aware of our processes of cognition – between external and internal cognition, from events in the world to memories – forming a set of observations and insights that are as much about the visitor's as about the artist's. Although storytelling is suppressed by the artist, the visitor constructs a narrative through the frozen (but still moving, sweating) fountain, through the living plants' quietly shifting still life, through the candles' perpetual flame, through the present-ness of the zoo feed, the fountain's cycling water, the taxidermied animals' "sleeping"; all holding possibilities for life. Time is suspended from its expected flow, holding the potential to stop entirely, pick up speed, but most of all to circulate.

***Abbas Akhavan: One Hundred Years* was presented at the [Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery](#), Vancouver, from September 5 to December 7, 2025. [Abbas Akhavan](#) is Canada's representative artist at the [61st Venice Biennale](#), May 9 to November 22, 2026 Share this article and subscribe to our [newsletters](#) to stay up-to-date on the latest articles, Gallery exhibitions, news and events, and to learn more about art in Canada.**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melanie O'Brian is Associate Director/Curator at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia. As a curator of contemporary art, she has an abiding interest in artist-led initiatives, experimental forms, the intersection between visual art and writing, and the history of institutions.