

THEATER OF FALSE RUINS: INTERVIEW WITH ABBAS AKHAVAN

BY NAZ CUGUOĞLU



Portrait of **ABBAS AKHAVAN**. Photo by Steve Farmer. Courtesy the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax.

Abbas Akhavan, whose practice spans drawing, video, sculpture, performance and site-specific installations, is fascinated by the places in which he works. He pays close attention to the local architecture, economy, and inhabitants, immersing himself in the area while maintaining a respectful distance, like a good neighbor. He is particularly interested in the domestic sphere—in his words, “a forked space between hospitality and hostility”—and the cultivated plots just outside the home (the garden, the backyard).

The Tehran-born artist emigrated to Canada with his family in the 1990s and is typically based in Toronto, but spent five months this year in San Francisco as the Capp Street artist-in-residence at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts. This culminated in his first solo show in the United States, titled “Cast for a Folly,” which uses as its departure point an obscure photograph of the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad. Looted during the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, the museum lost nearly 15,000 objects in a span of 36 hours. The photograph, taken by director of the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative Corine Wegener, depicts the museum lobby in an eerily frozen state, with its doors barricaded with empty vitrines, furniture in disarray, and a layer of dust, scattered loose due to the bombings, covering everything in sight. At the Wattis, Akhavan recreates this image in a new installation that includes sculptures, wall-based works, fabricated furniture, and living organisms. We spoke at a bar near Wattis about his move to San Francisco, the significance of the photograph, and his new show.

The conversations you initiate with various cities and their inhabitants play a central role in your practice. How did you find living in San Francisco, and how did it affect your artistic production?

The experience of inhabiting and working always varies. It's different here because I'm not making a site-specific work; I'm reproducing a site at the Wattis. It happens rarely but this gallery feels like a more neutral space. It's not commercial; it's kind of public but also not. Furthermore, its architecture is not historicized. It has a kind of warehouse neutrality. But of course, no space is really neutral—it's a variation in degrees of being indebted to history. This is one of the few times that I don't feel inclined to make a show about the site. The work is still strategic to this place—dealing with the Iraq War here is not a coincidence.

My residency has been really interesting, especially understanding the way local and international people perceive San Francisco. There are incongruities between what this place used to be, how people advise me about it, and how it feels right now. My experience reaffirmed some of my presumptions about San Francisco, but it also surprised me in certain ways. In my experience, Americans are not fearful of strangers and are far less anxious in public spaces. That's a really refreshing quality. I've had many insightful conversations about politics, art, food, and life in general in taxis, elevators and at bus stops.

What else surprised me? Definitely the wealth discrepancy—the way you see people suffer on the street and you just step over nearly dead humans. It's not unique to San Francisco, but the difference in the US is that if you trip, you die. If you don't have wealth, any injury could be life-threatening. Having said that, maybe this is less about place and more about time. As in it's symptomatic of today, when we respond with cruelty towards poverty, not giving much thought to what's happening to infrastructures of welfare and community that protect and care for life.

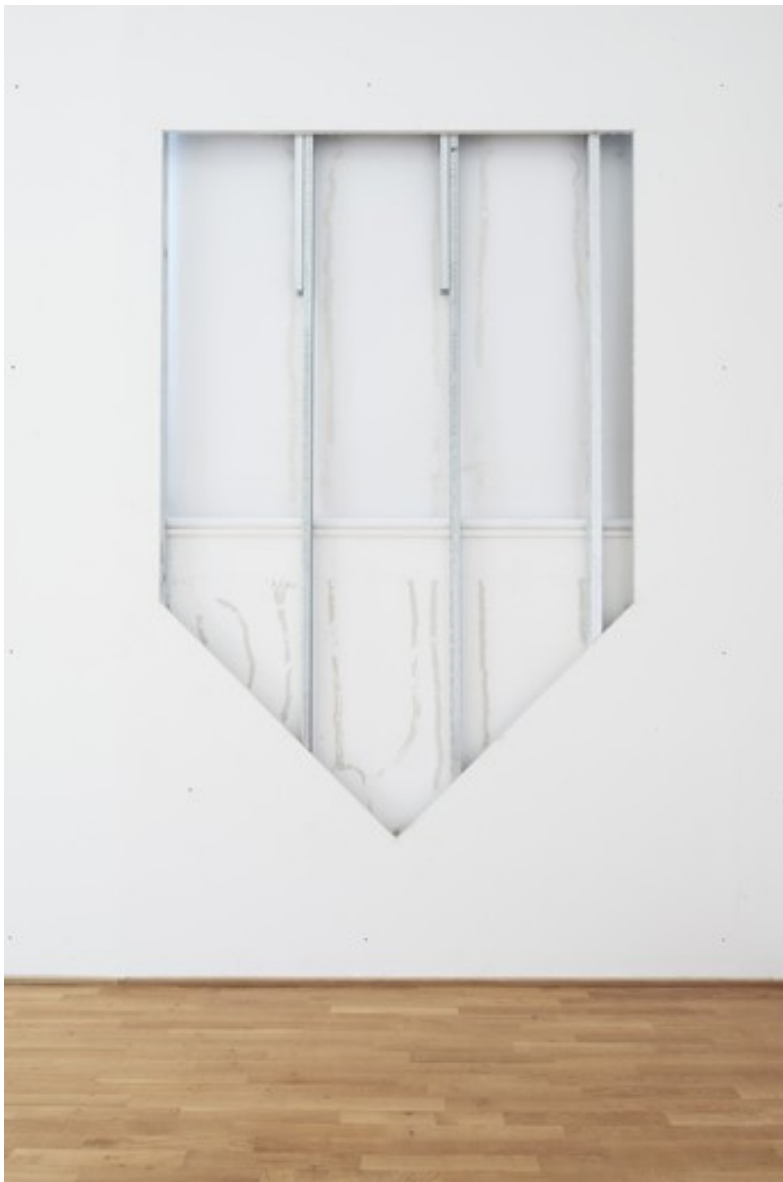


Installation view of **ABBAS AKHAVAN**'s "Cast for a Folly," at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, 2019. Photo by Johnna Arnold. Courtesy the artist; Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver; and The Third Line, Dubai.

How do you tackle the politics of space in your practice?

Much of my initial work dealt with domestic spaces. These are spaces that, to varying degrees, protect and acculturate and even nourish. It goes way back to the use of utensils and their evolution from hunting weapons to more “civil” dining tools. However, these objects and their evolution are not linear as they hold many potentials simultaneously. You see this kind of inversion of domestic objects or the negotiation of their potentials in some early works of Mona Hatoum, Paul McCarthy, and Martha Rosler. Elaine Scarry elaborates on this idea in her book *The Body in Pain* (1985), where she traces this forked potential in the word *hos*, meaning house, tracing it to words like *host*, *hostel*, *hospital*, and *hospitality*, but also to other oppositional terms like *hostis*, *hostility*, *hostage*, and so on.

As someone who works primarily in sculpture and installation, I am deeply invested in form, materials, and aesthetics. I am fascinated by architecture, plant life, and animals. For example, something as common as the green hedge is a simple and effective form of fencing with a rich history in relation to private property. I am always taken aback by how vegetation and architecture can be manipulated, sculpted into forms that can feel nourishing and life-affirming, and at other times into oppressive forms that govern our daily movements, limit access or even inflict violence.



Installation view of **ABBAS AKHAVAN**'s *Study for a Blue Shield*, 2010–17, gallery wall cut, painted and displayed on the roof of the exhibition space, 300 × 250 cm, at the artist's solo exhibition at Museum Villa Stuck, Munich, 2017. Photo by Jann Averwerser. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

How did your project at the Wattis come about?

I've been looking at this photograph by Corine Wegener for quite some time. I always wanted to do something with it. What I initially proposed for the show was very different. I changed my mind within days. Somebody said I'm a sprinter, not a long-distance runner. I tend to trust those moments when I make an intuitive decision. Before, I would assume that my doubt was insecurity. Now, I think it might be (at times) a good sense or instinct. My friend Kika Thorne curated a show I was in when I was much younger. I changed my mind at some point before the exhibition and made entirely new work. She told me that the sense of doubt I had was actually a strong intuition, one I should listen to. It was 11 years ago when she gave me that advice. I still carry it for every single show.

The photograph by Wegener shows the main lobby of the Iraq National Museum after it was looted. I have made quite a few bodies of work about Iraq and the 2003 invasion such as *Study for a Blue Shield* (2011) and *Study for a Monument* (2013–). I have also made a few works about the lion as a fragment or ruin. One of them is a large work made with rammed earth titled *Variations on Ghost* (2017). It references the claws of the Lamassu, an Assyrian protective deity often depicted as half lion or ox and half human with wings. In the middle of the lobby of the Iraq National Museum was a large stone sculpture of a lion. That's what first attracted me, but then I was also drawn to the disorder of the lobby. It's so close to my research and interest in hospitality, thinking about similarities between spaces of gardens and museum lobbies. So, we are staging the lobby of the Iraq National Museum inside the Wattis, which has the same proportions—there's a nice correspondence between those two spaces. But the objective is not to just copy or to stage a forced chaos. I hope that there is something much more complex at play.



Detailed view of **ABBAS AKHAVAN's** *Study for a Monument*, 2013–16, cast bronze, cotton sheets, dimensions variable, at "Variations on a Garden," Mercer Union, Toronto, 2015. Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

The objective of the show is not authenticity but a kind of loyalty to the photograph. A loyalty that is also about acknowledging what I don't know about the picture, the shortcomings of this distance—be it a massive measure of space, land masses, water, politics, or (dpi) resolutions. It is about what I don't know about the Iraq Museum's lobby. That's why, in the show, some of the furniture and objects are incomplete, almost erased. The show is called "Cast for a Folly." "Folly" stands for foolishness, but for theater too. Likewise, "cast" can mean a group of actors, or a replica. Follies are also false architectural ruins, often purposeless, extravagant, decorative buildings erected in lavish

French and English gardens during the 18th century. They were meant to conjure sentiment through a patina of a ruin, like residues from a fallen civilization.

In my readings I found out that a number of museums that are vulnerable to looting often don't exhibit real historical artifacts but rather make duplicates—they show fakes. Obviously, museums don't like to disclose this information. At first, I had doubts about what my work would mean when there are real artifacts that people could go visit, but given the proliferation of fakes, it gradually made sense for me to remake a lion from the Iraq Museum. So many objects—even the lion in the lobby—could potentially be fake. If you can't access the original artifacts of Mesopotamian history within the Iraq National Museum, then you might as well see it at the Wattis. Afterwards, I want this exhibition to go to England and then France.



Installation view of **ABBAS AKHAVAN**'s *Variations on Ghost*, 2017, soil, water, 120 × 320 × 220 cm, at the artist's solo exhibition at Museum Villa Stuck, Munich, 2017. Photo by Jann Averwerser. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.



Installation view of **ABBAS AKHAVAN**'s "Cast for a Folly," at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, 2019. Photo by Johnna Arnold. Courtesy the artist; Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver; and The Third Line, Dubai.

Yet this show is not only about looting.

If I wanted to re-enact something around the idea of looting and destruction alone, there would have been far better options and more effective images to recreate. I hope the installation is read more thoroughly in relation to art, value, and the transference and transformation of objects within history. This work is about sculpture. It's derived from an image, and the politics of that image are a catalyst, but that's not where you arrive; it's where you depart from. You don't end up in the Iraq lobby. There are multiple modes of abstraction that happen. A kind of magic realism happens. Some of the buckets in the exhibition are like watering holes with live algae growing in them. Like the two-sided hollow pillars—fake pillars that from one side seem solid but from behind, one realizes they are hollow props, providing no support—there are so many cavities. From one angle, when you enter, the space looks like Wegener's photograph, but then when you go to the opposite side of the gallery, you see it as a stage, with furniture as placeholders, artifacts as props, curtains for walls. There is a transition that happens from picture to space, to sculpture, to erasure and other shortcomings and hopefully expansions.

Your exhibition involves time-based experiences as well, such as allowing dust and grass to accumulate in the gallery over the course of its run.

San Francisco's Presidio park used to be a former US Army military fort. Throughout the show, we're routinely collecting grass clippings from Presidio. Much can be said about grass, property, and territory. I'm keen to see how these formless mounds of green will keep accumulating and drying in large piles at the Wattis. I'm interested excess: the unwanted parts of the garden; vegetation that used to be of value until discarded; things that are of the garden but no longer part of it.