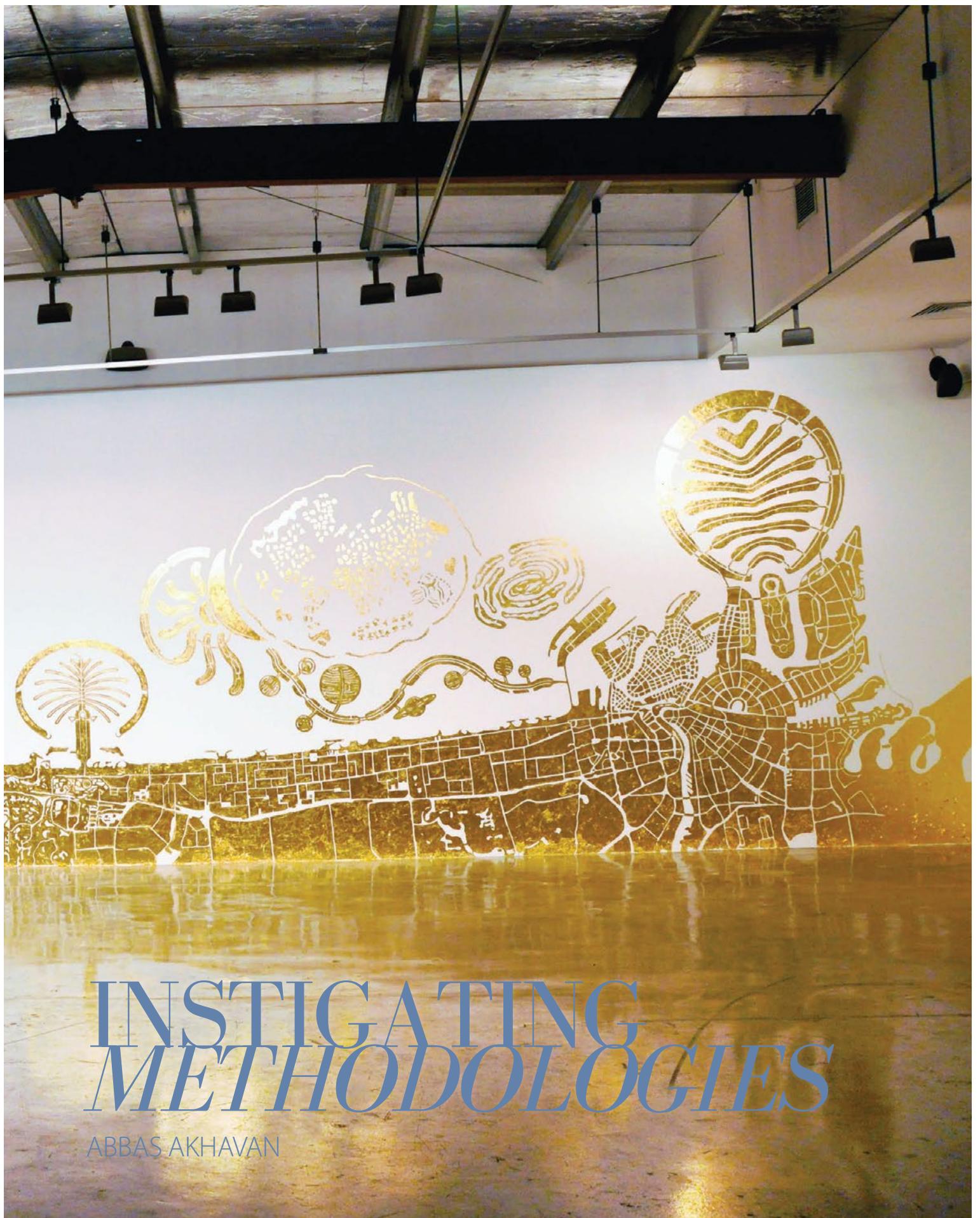




Rachel Bennett, 'Instigating Methodologies', *Canvas Magazine*, March–April 2015



# INSTIGATING METHODOLOGIES

ABBAS AKHAVAN



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To say Abbas Akhavan’s work is structured by displacement would deny its concerted engagement. **Rachel Bennett** speaks with the Iranian-born artist.

cross Abbas Akhavan’s oeuvre, boundaries are consistently erected and interrogated and the process of investigation made visible. Wary of attributing such investigations to the merely biographical, he nevertheless identifies origins in his forced migration, aged 14, from Iran to Canada. He’s characteristically measured in his telling, at pains to avoid self-mythologising – “I don’t want to essentialise my experience, but as somebody who travelled for reasons of war, I think boundaries between outside/inside, hostile/hospitable become permeable. There is a temporal and geographical severing.”

## ACTS OF SEVERANCE

The fervent activity of residencies, an almost perpetual motion that has spun Akhavan around the world (he’s undertaken 13 in three years), both belies and nurtures the spectre of an early childhood severance. For many years, residencies became a methodological framework, “with each I had limited time and limited, but new resources. Residencies act like funnelling; you have to go in to a state where you utilise compression to make work,” he explains. Thematic preoccupations, stemming from ongoing research into the domestic also prompted this quasi-nomadic existence. “For a long time, my work was dealing with ideas of hospitality, so I was trying to negotiate my relationship as a guest,” says Akhavan.



**"My cultural formations aren't necessarily national, as much as they are domestic."**

When we speak in January, Akhavan is in Istanbul. Currently, his time is spent between a bronze work in the city and his Toronto studio. He explains how the relentless movement has – through necessity and a natural evolution in his practice – given way to a slower, more deliberate approach, at least for now. The pleasure of this changed pace is not derived from hiatus, but from an alternative practice, and in part, from the new materials it permits.

He's spent the week at the foundry, where he is continuing to evolve a series of bronzes commemorating and archiving plants of the Tigris and Euphrates regions. It is a line of research originating in *Study For A Hanging Garden*, the work he did as part of the 2014 Abraaj Group Art Prize. The use of bronze is intrinsic to the study: it's a material of the monumental, but duplicitous. For Akhavan, "Bronze has an illusion of permanence, but in political turmoil it's melted and re-appropriated to any form necessary for that moment in time." Temporality is integrated into the works, including exhaustive research he undertook at Kew Gardens, the permanent/fragile bronzes displayed on sheets as if caught in transport. The durational working patterns become a source of pleasure. "There is a moment of reflection – I have time to stay with them. In a residency you make the pieces, the opening happens and you leave – you're always a kind of bastard to your own work," he says.

Despite these displacements, there are organic threads of thematic investigation that course evolutionary trajectories throughout his career. Neither linear nor aborted, ideas and rigorous observational research and practical methodologies are initiated, drawn together, cast off and revisited. Akhavan embraces these unpredictable trajectories. "Ideally the way you think is a compost pile: you throw in a pumpkin and a year later you have pumpkins, but you didn't actually plant any. It just becomes part of the way that you think," he explains. There is openness, even to that which seems analogous, as seen in his first Dubai work. In 2010, a gold city was mapped dispassionately on the wall of The Third Line, then was segmented

Opening spread:  
Installation view of *Study For A Map*. 2010. Imitation gold leaf on drywall. Variable dimensions.

This spread:  
Installation view of *Variation Of A Garden* at Galeri Mana. 2013. Pool and fabric. Variable dimensions. Image courtesy Galeri Mana, Istanbul.



and sold piecemeal, according to the value of the land. The work was of its time, distilling a post-crash aesthetic, "that's the nature of site-specificity – you respond to things outside your own taste, you mime the infrastructure which necessitates a certain response, even if it's against your own ideas of your work."

## UNIVERSALITY?

Seduced by the knowledge of Akhavan's dual East-West perspective, shared points of universal entry are readily identified; the kind that foster an accessible viewer position regardless of the contextual collateral we supply them with. *Makeshift Objects*, an ongoing series of innocuous household items re-appropriated as a prisoners' arsenal of shivs (knife-like weapons), are typically prismatic departures; "They seem very penetrable tools for any viewer," explains Akhavan. "Take a spoon – it talks about a subject position, but it doesn't essentialise subject position; anyone relates that spoon as a point of entry into an idea."

The shivs initiate us, telescope-like, into the more complex subjectivity bound to the do-

mestic; that which Akhavan identifies as a site of significant cultural formation. His personal vernacular stems from this. "My cultural formations aren't necessarily national, as much as they are domestic," he explains. "My Mom is of course an Iranian woman, but she doesn't fly a flag in our house and roll out carpets. That's the ingrained knowledge that enacts itself in all of us, your domesticity looks a lot like your parents."

Despite an apparent universality, Akhavan's works defy such readings: they're located between the very tightly contextualised site-specific, or else they re-appropriate and activate the quotidian. For these reasons he's "deeply wary of images and narratives that are 'Middle Eastern'" – too loaded to be individual, too personal to provide any meaningful universality. "I am also critical of my own wariness of these symbols. I've had the every day relationship every Iranian child has with them. An entire childhood is potentially felt and seen through the texture of the carpet – we crawled on it, we scuffed our chins on it – it's an image field," he says. Yet, this acknowledgement and wariness enacts further displacement; the re-appropriated ephemera are the stage-set of his cultural formation, "There is a



**"I think that there is a correspondence between the fictitious way of looking at art and the infrastructure that support it."**

kind of double severing happening because this is a visual language that was ours, but it has become loaded through a colonial history and post-colonial readings. It is severed from us twice," he says.

### TRAUMA AND THE DOMESTIC

Departing from the biographical, Akhavan's research has focused around the shared etymological roots of hospitality/hostility. Asked why this has preoccupied him so persistently, he doesn't see how it could not; these are no more or less than the "elemental tools for negotiating reality."

Whilst a site of individuated formation, the domestic is not only biographical, but rather stands more widely for private places tenuously separated from the public. Akhavan explored these arbitrary but explicit barriers through *Variations On Laundry*, a 2010 residency in Santander,

Spain. Using the contextual framework of the FIFA World Cup, he hung suggestively colour-coded clothes from the studio window, mimicking the opposite team's strip and telegraphing heightened nationalistic rivalry. Transgressing the manicured exteriors of the wealthy neighbourhood, he effectively permeated the erected barriers, overtly displaying suggestions of an interior, to the chagrin of residents.

More fraught than the hinterland between private and public is the tense relationship between domestic and nation-state. The domestic is never distinct from the nation-state, but is always inheriting its trauma. Giving a primary reading, Akhavan sets out a simple and effective analogy of these structures: "You see the way family rituals change post war – an analogy might be war beating up the country, the country beating up the family, the father the

This page:  
*Untitled Garden*. 2008–12.  
Emerald green cedar trees,  
cedar planter, soil and  
water. 220 x 10 cm.

Facing page:  
*Untitled Everything – Untitled Flowers*. 2008.  
Site-specific installation at  
Western Front, Vancouver.



mother, the mother the child. It's a lineage of trauma," says Akhavan. Boundaries become synonymous with coercion, enacted by a recurrent garden motif. Rousseau was an early proponent of gardens as sites of conflict; they signalled deception, that society was 'inauthentic to the core'. Akhavan confesses his gardens too are "not the most optimistic places. They're usually about contested territories, the way bodies are trafficked through spaces." There is a latent violence found in these spaces. The cedar trees of *Untitled Garden* furtively manoeuvre themselves, ultimately blocking routes and entries. These were one of four 2012 interventions that encroached on House 31, part of a Delfina Foundation residency. Another, a hose-fountain, sprung from the floor and bruised the ceiling below.

This coercion is not only physical, but is manifested suggestively and subliminally. In *Untitled Everything* (2008) interventions distilled observed behaviours. One involved shoes, piled in front of the entrance to a group exhibition, causing opening night attendees to go barefoot. In another, flowers that adorned the exterior were taken for a memorial with spontaneous tributes added, until a disgruntled few realised there was no tragedy to mark. Akhavan recognised how his gestures "became a kind of depository for sentiment" and, ultimately, how they "channelled a collective behaviour."

He confesses to inherent manipulation here, but it was not the aim. Rather, he sought to blur boundaries, making fluid the fiction of the interior space with the reality of the exterior: "I don't want the doorway of the gallery to be the gateway where you stop believing. There is so much fiction of the interior space – an idea of disbelief. I think that there is a correspondence between the fictitious way of looking at art and the infrastructures that support it, that are already on the outside of the gallery."

This spread (from left to right):  
Installation view of  
*Variations On Laundry*,  
June 7th And June 11th at  
Fundación Botín, Spain,  
2010. Variable dimensions;  
*Makeshift Objects*,  
2008–ongoing. Modified  
cardboard box, eye wear,  
tooth brush and razor,  
plate, chair, coat hanger  
and T-shirt.  
Variable dimensions.

*All images courtesy the artist  
and The Third Line, Dubai,  
unless otherwise specified.*



## ACTIVATING, NOT OCCUPYING

Akhavan's variations on gallery and domestic spaces are not an occupation. Rather, subtle modifications are performed, creating opportunities for encounter with the constructs of domesticity and the related dualities at play. In *Fatigues* (2014), animals appear fallen – resting or dead. They were found, unlabelled, throughout the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal's galleries and public spaces. Intended as "an encounter outside of art", for Akhavan "what was amazing was standing there while a parent was trying to explain to their kid that the deer was not in fact 'real', that it wasn't 'dead'. But then, of course, you have to explain what dead is." They became reflexive-sites where "a sort of unveiling or revealing of themselves" took place.

His latest intervention at The Third Line's project space continues this series with a pit-fall trap on the gallery floor and, outside the gallery, non-native fruit at the foot of palm trees. "I want to draw attention to how the gallery floor has the potential to be anything, how we project false potential onto it" he explains. The requisite meaning – making is undertaken by the viewer and the assumed conclusions – that there is a hole beneath the trap, that the fruit has fallen from the trees – causes the slightest re-adjustment of perspective. This is at the core of these seemingly disparate practices and investigations. "I'm not trying to make meaning in many cases, it's just gesture," says Akhavan. And it is through these unfurled gestures that meticulously observed constructs are made playfully visible: once they have been shown to us, we cannot un-see them and reassessment is demanded. □

*Study For A Curtain* runs at The Third Line from 16 March–18 April. For more information visit [www.thethirdline.com](http://www.thethirdline.com).