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Sculpture in an Expansive Field

An Interview with Abbas Akhavan

by Robert Enright



Abbas Akhavan, installation view, "curtain call," 2023, Copenhagen Contemporary, Denmark. Photo: David Stjernholm. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. Artwork: *curtain call, variations on a folly*, 2021/2023, barley straw, subsoil, lightweight Leca, sharp sand, puddle clay, wood, chromakey green paint, pink noise, 390 x 650 x 1230 centimetres.

“I am simply trying to listen” is the way Abbas Akhavan, the Iranian Canadian artist living in Berlin and Montreal, explains how he makes art. The effect of his listening is that he constantly discovers what he doesn’t know, which means everything he makes is a surprise; it is something being made that he hasn’t made in that way before. What he wrote to curator and friend Vassilis Oikonomopoulos in a 2016 letter is really an aesthetic credo. He said he was “hoping to arrive where I am headed, through unfamiliar paths.”

The way he names his works is consistent with the aesthetic sensibility that he uses to make them. All his titles focus on the provisional and the contingent. They are studies (*Study for a Monument*, 2013–ongoing, and *Study for a Blue Shield*, 2015), variations (*Variations on Laundry*, June 7th and June 11th, 2010, and *Variations on Untitled Garden*, 2014), casts (*cast for a folly*, 2019/2022) and follies themselves. These are provisional projects, caught in the moment of making but not in the condition of being finished. They are aspirational and not conclusive. Studies are works in progress; variations are part of a sequencing of ideas. As works of migratory categorization, follies are faux architecture, pretend ruins and masquerading monuments.

Beyond their contingent naming, Abbas Akhavan’s preferred title is “Untitled,” an identification that suggests the work could still be in the process of being named. When he makes his *Makeshift Objects*, 2008, he is drawing our attention to their temporary nature and recognizing that they are a sufficient substitute for the real thing. This elusiveness is why he is attracted to the garden; the garden is an open concept that by its very nature is constantly changing. The attraction to malleability plays into his material choice as well. “I tend to use very few materials,” he says. “I am loyal to the materials and their ability to carry the intention of the work.” As a result, he likes fabric because of its adaptability; his attraction to bronze is that it “shape-shifts.”

During COVID, Abbas made a series of works in linen that were intended to be hung on a gallery wall. There are hints of other artists in their making: the three cuts in *Untitled*, 2021, recall Lucio Fontana’s “Tagli” and “Concetto spaziale” from 1958–68; and the folds and layered tatters of *grid*, 2021, would find proximities in Robert Morris’s felt sculptures from 1967. But the cuts in *Untitled* are gentler than Fontana’s; rather than making you feel the work could collapse, Abbas’s scissor-handing insists upon the works holding together. In another fabric piece with the same title and date, *Untitled*, 2021, four overlapping white sections of linen hang from the tan-coloured top piece; the configuration is more wall relief than sculpture or painting, like the beginning, or the remains, of a pattern for a bespoke linen suit. His series called “Untitled,” 2013–ongoing, are drawings of grated window frames that are a poetic, minimal engagement with form and containment. They have a transitory feel about them, as if they are there and not there. As it turns out, the not-there-ness will be their fate; the drawings are ink on photodegradable paper that will, over time and with exposure to light, disappear. These beautiful drawings will ghost themselves.

Abbas Akhavan’s larger projects share something of the nature of the smaller works. When the exhibitions are over, he dismantles them and gives away to people in the community any of the material that constituted their making. When he makes large works, he is careful to see that the impression they make on the site is as

careful as it can be. This is not to say they are not impressive. His version of the Colonnade leading to the Arch of Palmyra in *curtain call, variations on a folly*, 2021/2023, and his *variations on a folly*, 2022, a long and verdant garden of plants and stones installed at Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute in the UK, are compelling installations. While they are in the place of their making, they negotiate a presence in art, history and nature; when they are dismantled, they take on the shape and persistence of memory.

It is worth noting that the way Abbas Akhavan lives resists falling into a pattern of production. Since his first residency in 2007, a year after he graduated with his MFA from the University of British Columbia, he has accepted 19 additional residencies, with their accompanying exhibitions. He has no studio and while he lives in Montreal, he has travelled to and lived in other cities more than he has lived in Quebec. As he says, his life has been a series of ongoing moves.

There is, of course, some risk in embracing contingency and in a creative disposition where you’re always going and never wanting to arrive. He admits that it comes with difficulty, ambivalence and uncertainty, and there have been times after a residency where he realized that he “completely missed the mark.” But he almost always gets what he wants. His aim is “to craft a language that is inherently vulnerable, curious and open to failure.” He has achieved the first two of these propositions and, after almost 20 years of using the same combination of listening and making, has managed to avoid the achievement of failure.

The year 2026 is an especially significant one for Akhavan. He will represent Canada at the 61st Venice Biennale from May 9 to November 22, and will have his first American survey exhibition, called “Variations on a Garden,” at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis from November 12, 2026, to April 18, 2027.

The following interview was done by phone to Berlin in January 2026.

BORDER CROSSINGS: I want to ask about an exhibition you had at Vie D’ange in Montreal in 2018. You gold-leafed the bars on the outside window, you had a text piece on the roof of the gallery, and you also included a large mossy boulder over which you threw a vintage fur coat. I found the combination of the stone and the fur coat absolutely seductive. It seemed alive and it pulled me into ruminating on the relationship between nature and culture. I was completely hooked until I walked around the sculpture and saw this bright yellow plastic bag on the floor and it completely shattered my reverie. What made you choose the things that made up the sculpture?

ABBAS AKHAVAN: It sounds strange, but I sometimes misunderstand something in my sight, say an object or image. Something in the misrecognition can feel strange or even iridescent and in that shape-shifting moment, I find sculptural qualities that I further explore. That’s one way I arrive at materials. Vie D’ange, aside from being a great exhibition space, reconnected me to Montreal, a city I love dearly. The exhibition was the beginning of a great friendship with Daphné Boxer and Eli Kerr. They are very special people and their support was a huge source of inspiration for the project. The building, which used to be a mechanic’s car garage, had such an interesting vibe. It was inspiring. You could feel it in the air. As always, I wanted to

1–2. *Fatigues*, 2014, taxidermied specimen sources from animals that have died naturally or by accident. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography. Courtesy the artist; Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver; and Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver.

3. Installation view, "Variations on a garden," 2015, Mercer Union, Toronto. Collection of Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai (2013 version) and Servais Family Collection (2015 version). Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. Artwork: *Study for a Monument*, 2013–ongoing (2013 and 2015 versions depicted), cast bronze, cotton sheets, dimensions variable.



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work with water, in this case a form of circulation in the space that linked disparate works together. I used misters as a viewing device, something to frame the works with. I was thinking a lot about the relationship between the patterns of animals and their surrounding landscape, in this case how fur camouflages the boulder. We got this boulder from outside the city—it was hell to move. I draped the fur coat on top of the boulder. It was placed under a mister that would continuously wet the fur. Through a tubing system, I installed a fountain into the fur coat so that water would drip from one of its sleeves. The aim was for the moss and the fur to be wet together. Maybe to overlap and blur into one another. Gain some animism or even to feel like it could reawaken, not as an animal but as material. A lot of spiders ended up living on top of it. The misters would make rainbows during certain hours. It was a really special experience to be in Montreal and work in such a unique space. After the opening a few of us, including artists I had admired such as David Armstrong Six and Valérie Blass, went to a bar. At one point Eli lifted a glass and said, “If you ever decide to move back to Montreal, we’re here.” I get emotional talking about it because it was such a homecoming. A couple of years later I finally moved to Montreal.

The tonal blend of the rock and the fur was the seduction. Then I felt I’d been snookered by the plastic bag because it drew me out of that appreciation. I felt like I should be wearing a cat’s paw when I saw the plastic bag.

I have reservations about artworks that are sentimental. The plastic bag was a way to dislodge the romance of the work while offering a really beautiful colour. When you go for a walk in Mount Royal or any forest, you might see a raccoon or a deer, beautiful scenery, but most likely you’ll also see plastic disrupting the landscape. Unfortunately, that is now part of our relationship to the natural world. The work is like a *mise en scène* from Mount Royal. It’s a gabbro boulder, what much of Mount Royal consists of.

I can think of others of your works where you use trees to form a barrier for the viewer. In *Variations on Untitled Garden* (2014) in Quebec City, one configuration of the trees lines up in such a way that it actually impedes access to the foot-worn pathway. It’s like you’re doing a small-scale, green version of Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc*. What interests me is that your relationship to the viewer involves, if not antagonism, then some degree of resistance. You make the viewer work harder than the viewer may want.



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Sometimes an obstacle can lead you to a more interesting path. I think museums overgovern the way we look at art. My piece doesn’t have the brutality of *Tilted Arc*—I actually love that work so I’m not down on it—but we have different temperaments. I wanted the barrier to be equally as disruptive and oppressive but through softer means. It is alive and even smells good. Hedges naturalize their human-made purpose through looking like nature. The fact that it’s green and more forgiving means we don’t recognize the object as a fence. It somehow lubricates that relationship to power. And as you observed, their uniform seriality, anonymity and spatial intervention follow some of the characteristics of minimalism.



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1–2. Installation view, “Folly,” 2018, Vie D’ange, Montreal. Photo: Paul Litherland. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. Artwork: *Untitled*, 2018, erratic boulder, water system, vintage fur coat, plastic bag, 102 × 75 × 80 centimetres.

3–4. *Pandemic, Thuyen Ton Temple*, 2024, 10 inkjet prints, each 79 × 54 centimetres. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

In the past you’ve referred to what you describe as an iconoclastic relationship to making work. Where did the iconoclasm come from and is there still some element of it in your artmaking? I am old enough to contradict my younger ambitions. In this case, I don’t have any recollection of this comment. I do think that the creative impulse is inherently optimistic, even hopeful. I think great artwork has an obligation to do more than just deliver some blunt negative news about the world. Art can be reflective of the world’s hardships without cynicism and lazy irony. I’m wary of works that are trying to outsmart their audience. Irony seems like a defensive mindset. I am drawn to materials that are enchanting, materials that can shape-shift our perception of values. I am thinking

about the works of Christodoulos Panayiotou and Félix González-Torres. Materials are conduits. I value works that are sculpted as opposed to fabricated. And that difference has more to do with intention rather than production. I am drawn to works that create a sense of atmosphere. Spaces that make us halt.

One material you have been attracted to is fabric. You did bedsheets in 2008 where you hung sheets outside Hank Bull’s Vancouver apartment. I think you were commenting on rule-based, urban gentrification in Vancouver at the time. But then you do the same thing in 2010 in Spain in *Variations on Laundry, June 7th and June 11th*, during the FIFA World Cup when you hang the colours of the teams playing against Spain from a balcony. It’s as if you use fabric as a protest material.

For the Western Front exhibition, I hung bedsheets from Hank’s window. They were draped disproportionately long, hanging outside for the duration of the show. Laundry is domesticity spilling into the public, at times almost indecent and sloppy. Fabric is a material that has lifelike qualities, unlike, say, resin and fibreglass, so we relate to it. We constantly rub up against it. In the case of *Variations on Laundry*, I was doing a residency in Spain during the FIFA world championships. I saw a bit of antagonism towards German residents and then later towards those from the Netherlands. My initial urge was to buy a giant German flag and hang it outside my studio, but I realized that would be just lazy antagonism. So I tried to do something that might have people question their anger towards certain colours, in this case, a laundry line that happened to resemble a flag. For the record, I was really happy Spain won, as they played a great game. I’m not patriotic unless it’s called upon by desperate means. My flag resembles a laundry line.

You’ve said that your cultural affirmations are less national than domestic.

My life has been a series of ongoing moves. I have lived in many cities and different countries, sometimes out of choice and other times against my choosing. What was outside the window was always different. The main source of my feeling grounded has been a semblance of domesticity. For the past two years I have been in Berlin teaching, but I’m constantly thinking about which plant to buy for which corner of my Montreal home. So in a way Montreal has changed that. For the first time, I feel more tethered to a city.

You economically frame your practice inside that domestic space through the words “hospitality”



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and “hostility.” How do we read the difference between the two terms?

During graduate school at University of British Columbia, I was researching and making work about the concept of the home as a forked space between hospitality and hostility, hostage and hospital—contradictory words with etymological roots in the Latin word *hos*, meaning “house.” These ideas come from Elaine Scarry’s writings, in particular *The Body in Pain*. I was looking at works by Mona Hatoum, Paul McCarthy and Martha Rosler. I was interested in evolution of weaponry into utensils, an act of civilizing the body, and how Rosler and Hatoum were inverting that transformation. They were strategically using tools as weapons—acting “uncivilized” as a means to deal with a “barbaric” civilization. During this time, I made a series of small sculptures titled *Makeshift Objects* (2008). They are replicas of shivs made by prisoners. I found many images online but chose to only make a series out of materials in my apartment: toothbrushes, a fragment from a chair leg, a bar of soap, a spoon, and so on.

Makeshift Objects is an early example of how intricate your work can be. Those objects run a range from curious and abject and even to frightening when they turn into “make-shiv” objects. They become weapons. But the emotional reaction they generate seems disproportionate to the space they occupy on the wall. Did you realize how intense those small objects were?

Yes. I found their intensity in their ability to hold binaries and contradictions. They are also very relatable. People recognize them as domestic objects and carry their misuse back to their own domestic spaces. So a spoon can be a source of nourishment,



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but if sharpened well enough, it can be a weapon for harm. Scarry writes eloquently about intention and materials: “The hand that pounds a human face is a weapon, and the hand that pounds the dough for bread or the clay for a bowl is a tool. The knife that enters the cow or the horse is a weapon and the knife that cuts through the no longer alive meat at dinner is a tool.”

You’ve resisted talking about your work through the lens of autobiography, but you can see the temptation to do that in looking at an artist whose family is forced out of their home country by

1. Installation view, *cast for a folly*, 2022, Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver. Collection of Walker Art Museum. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. Artwork: *cast for a folly*, 2019/2022, museum vitrines, benches, false doorway, digitally printed sharktooth scrim fabric wall, green screen, mirrors, sconces, oscillating fan, chairs, plastic bucket, air conditioner, open cell foam cushions, moving blanket, clay bricks, pump, water lilies, dolly, straw, sand, plywood, mortar, dimensions variable.

2. *cast for a folly* (detail).

3. *One Hundred Years*, 2025, royal icing (confectioner’s sugar, egg whites and food colouring), stainless steel, hardware, oil lamp, paraffin oil, candles and lumber, dimensions variable. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography. Courtesy the artist; Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver; and Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver.



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political circumstances and who returns to that area of the world in a number of major works. I tend to think of those works as being shaped by your personal experience.

I do have reservations about autobiography, but I also agree that we're all shaped by our experiences. My reservation comes from the fact that artists have been lately encouraged and schooled from a young age to hawk their identity for capital. We used to be starving artists, but now the art world produces malnourished artists, fattened up by the market for collectors through subservience to mega-rich gallerists. Artists from an early stage fall into debt to their dealers and one day someone comes to your studio and says, "Can you make this but smaller and in orange?" And you can't say no because they own your studio and they pay your staff. I am obviously making broad sweeping statements and don't mean to diminish all artists. I'm rather critical of the system that is producing this pattern. To be frank, I've resisted these offerings at the hardest times in my life. I always stayed away from powerful people who could influence and even change my relationship to my work. When I was a younger artist, while living hand to mouth, I was approached by blue chip galleries and I refused to work with them. Some people think I'm an idiot as I still can't afford a steady studio space,

but what I make has, for better or worse, never been compromised to cater to the market. In a roundabout way this is connected to autobiography. Artists, with all their complexities and dynamic potentials, are being reduced to their biographies. We have responsibilities and capabilities greater than confessionals and self-preservation. Bigger pictures to explore than self-portraits. As the Venice Biennale is approaching, despite my disinterest in illustrating my personal biography, there are numerous press blurbs saying, "His work is about identity and memory" and so on. And who is writing this? Whose memory? What identity? And that's precisely my point. Empty and even fictitious art talk about identity and memory has saturated real discourse. It seems to be the dominant way we look at art: through a myopic lens.

But you have looked at what you recognize as historical moments that are close to you. I'm assuming that the sacking of the Iraq Museum, the deliberate destruction of the marshlands and displacement of 40,000 Marsh Arabs under Saddam Hussein, and the destruction of the Colonnade are examples of those close historical moments. What I'm getting at is how do you personally deal with what you succinctly call geo-trauma?

Installation view, "Walk With Me,"
2024, Alserkal Arts Foundation, Dubai.
Photo Kristina Sergeeva/Seeing Things.
Courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.
Artwork: *Stock: Variation on a Fountain*,
2024, construction materials sourced
from Alserkal's storage, wood, piping,
hose, pond pumps, pond liner, water,
dimensions variable.

I think everybody experiences different degrees of geo-trauma and they happen in different ways. I remember when I was teaching at Emily Carr, a student in her 30s tearfully explained how she couldn't find her apartment of 10 years because of the rapid gentrification in Vancouver. That is also a form of geo-trauma. The Iraq invasion of 2003, despite Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, was motivated by a fiction. A cat's paw. There was no evidence for the war that killed an estimated one million civilians, destroyed vast amounts of wildlife and left a residue of chemical toxicity. As a young 20-something-year-old artist living in Montreal, a very politically active city, history was unfolding in front of my eyes. We were constantly protesting in the hopes that the insanity would stop. Newspapers and online articles were printing endless images of Saddam's monuments being torn down. As artists, a lot of our work is looking at and analyzing images. I was mindful that somehow bronze had become a charged and relevant material. *Study for a Monument* (2013–ongoing) is, both in medium and concept, linked to monuments and war images. It is made in the tradition of funerary memorials, in this case, commemorating native plant life from a part of the world currently called Iraq. I think artists tell the stories of the times they live in. But to be a witness is different from being the subject. Every work I have made about Iraq and Syria is about and in defence of art—whether it is monuments, UNESCO's Blue Shield, the Iraq Museum, Palmyra Arch and so on. Politics certainly plays a role in those events, but the work is an observation about how images of history are made, unmade and deformed. Those works are about the perseverance and protection of culture in the midst of violence. Akin to a pilot light—it's a guiding force against chaos. As you mentioned, I did migrate from Iran during the Iran–Iraq war. As you know, Arab nations like Iraq and Syria are vastly different in geography and culture from Iran. Since I was raised in an atheist family that has never returned since 1989, my relationship to that part of the world is informed by my life in Canada. I guess what I am trying to say is that I would never have made *cast for a folly* (2019/2022) if the attacks on the Iraq Museum had not taken place. The work is based on the photograph taken by Corine Wegener and her staff at the Smithsonian. I would never have made the colonnades of Palmyra if Boris Johnson hadn't unveiled the arch in London as a folly in the hopes of rewriting history. I think those concerns are as relevant to a British or American person as they are to an Iranian living in Montreal. Certainly, they are relevant to my sense of reality but not as my biography as I am not Syrian or Iraqi. We are all capable of caring for things that we are not directly affected by and don't benefit from. So it's not about my personal memory or in defence of my identity.

Why do you think *curtain call, variations on a folly* (2021/2023) has been singled out for such constant attention and praise? I think its scale leaves a strong impression on the viewers. Colonnades, like other grand architectures, have intimidating proportions. The digital flat chromakey green screen against the organic ancient cob looks strange and vibrant. The work has a strong scent. It is monumental and yet held together with moisture. After every show the whole thing is returned to dust

and donated to local gardeners and eco-architects. When I was younger, I was taught to make artworks with a certain set of tools. I think for this show I made my own tools. I am very grateful to Chisenhale Gallery in London for their trust and support.

It's indicative that you mention contradiction. I often sense that when you present one read of your work, you also seem to be suggesting the possibility of an opposite read. For the piece you did at Mount Stuart House in Scotland in 2022, you build an ecosystem in a crypt. It's like you are your own Descartes. You're inescapably binary in the way you come at things.

The crypt is a deconsecrated church. During the First World War, it was used as a medical facility for wounded personnel. The interior of Mount Stuart House, unlike the empty crypt, is full of valuable goods: extensive woodcarvings, plenty of art, precious books, grand furniture and massive, rare tapestries. During my residency I learned that much of the property, which looked natural, was in fact constructed to cater to the family's religious beliefs. In the middle of the expansive gardens, the house sits like a giant folly. Along with other works that touched on gardens and ornithology, I refilled the crypt with the surrounding landscape, resulting in a 12-metre-long stream. It was a close replica of an existing one, but in this case constructed on top of plywood and scaffolding. The folly, which is traditionally a superfluous piece of architecture built in a garden, was, in this iteration, inverted as a landscape inside the house. The work read like an encounter, the way you cross paths with a dog or a tree. People would linger by the stream as though they were on a walk in a forest.

The way you install *Study for a Monument* is incredibly effective. You lay out the plants on sections of white cloth, so they could be archaeological specimens, but they could also be the unshrouded bodies of victims of war and violence. It's a work that has an almost unbearable presence. Is it a special work for you?

I saw a lot of death and devastation on the news and in documentaries in the aftermath of the Iraq War. I wanted to make a monument but not a conventional one on a podium: instead, something horizontal and fragmented. The bedsheets were a means of drawing the work closer to the audience while simultaneously creating a clear barrier. As you mentioned, it also makes the bronze resemble hawked or confiscated goods. They look like objects that are going through condition reports. They resemble pained body parts in burial sites. They also mimic botanical illustration. It is important that the audience gets to walk around the work as they would in a garden or a graveyard.

***Fatigues* (2014), like *Study for a Monument*, is a powerful piece. Do you think that's because we can't be sure what status to assign to these animals? Are they alive; are they recently dead; have they been taxidermied?**

At natural history museums animals are often fixed in static positions. I find their forced poses of running or sitting very contrived, very dead. I agree with your point about the uncertainty of how the audience approaches the *Fatigues*. This is why I don't author them when I include them in group shows.

They are shown dispersed to the peripheries of the gallery. They are not labelled and not properly lit. I guess in their ability to look asleep, exhausted, or maybe dead, they carry the potential to have been recently alive. That they might move. For the sake of transparency, when shown, we specify that they are not sourced from fur trade but rather from collisions and natural causes.

A critic for *The Observer* called you deeply elusive. What she was drawing attention to is a quality that other writers have picked up on, and that is its poetic quality.

I think the best art form is the haiku. Haikus don't describe the poet's feelings; rather, they conjure an experience, akin, standing witness beside the poet. It's a feeling of coexisting inside a landscape. The particularities of the scenery offer precise insight into the writer's condition but not through mannered descriptions of, say, heartbreak or deep sadness. Those are very unique means of expression that I admire and strive towards. I tend to use very few materials. I am loyal to the materials and their ability to carry the intention of the work. I have reservations about overexpressive work. I think restraint can ward off sentiment and decorative tendencies. But I am not sure why or how an artwork is considered poetic. I am happy that it is something that is legible in my work.

I've interviewed hundreds of artists, but I don't think I've ever interviewed anyone whose "career" is quite like yours. I know that when you start out, you're a poor student, you've got no money and no resources, so you apply for a residency, and you get it. It's a gig; it occupies your time; you get to do what you want. And now 19 residencies later, that's still what you're doing. Has what was necessary when you began evolved into a consistent way of working?

During one of my first appointments with a chiropractor in Montreal, Dr Karen, in the process of cracking my neck, asks me if my mother is a nomad. She further elaborates by telling me that unlike my father, who is very rooted to his hometown, my mother's drifting tendencies are not a symptom of being lost but rather a way of life. A kind of calling. She's in fact correct. My mother has moved her whole life, and she has drifted across the globe with very sparse resources. I'm quite protective of her and I've always felt she was a victim of circumstances like poverty, migration, war and sexism. And while those things are true, Dr Karen looks at me and says, "Migration is your mother's act of agency; it's the wind behind her back." She then, while holding my head as I am lying on my back, stares into my eyes and says,



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"Aren't you adrift often?" So, as my chiropractor has observed, my wanderings, while at times really dreadful and complicated, might be an inherited instinct. An act of agency. After leaving Iran at the age of 11, I lived for a few years in Sweden, then moved to Windsor and London, Ontario, with my mom. In order to become an artist, I lied about a scholarship and moved to Victoria at the age of 19. Then in 2001 moved to Montreal for two years, then Vancouver for five years, Toronto for almost



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1. *serpent*, 2019, pigmented food-grade rubber dog toy, 4 × 23 × 19 centimetres. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

2. *untitled*, 2022, concrete, birdcage, 33 × 45 × 25 centimetres. Photo: Ben Westoby. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

3. *grid*, 2021, water-based pigment on linen, 222 × 39 × 22 centimetres. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

4. *grid* (detail).



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eight (did multiple residencies during this time), then San Francisco for six months, then Montreal since 2019, and now Berlin. I want to emphasize that while this pattern of life offers changes that I find invigorating, it also comes with great difficulty and ambivalence. Finding new resources like apartments, doctors and friends, dealing with bureaucracy while staying sane and maintaining a practice can be really taxing. Today at the age of 48, I am thinking a lot more about getting a dog, developing more predictable routines and having a steady studio.

One of the things you like about Fogo Island is it's a great place to be bored. What function does boredom play?

Boredom often leads to creativity. During all my residencies, I stay sedentary. I don't drift to nearby towns. I want to stay put and watch time go by. I read a bit and I walk a lot. I think I have permanently left part of my heart in Fogo.

You say you go to the residency empty-handed, and you seem to go there empty-headed as well. You're a kind of human tabula rasa, letting the place determine what it is you'll do once you get there.

Well, that sounds more romantic than it is. Given that I am not a very disciplined person, these opportunities force me into a compressed time of productivity. During residencies that end with exhibitions, it's important to be porous and stay close to failure. This way of working is different from a studio practice. No insured shipping crates with precious goods arrive on-site to confirm my

expertise. I don't have the means of working with my own team or travel with an assistant. But I find the intensity inspiring. Since site-specific work is often linked to a location, locals come to the work with their own set of skills and knowledge. So it has different entanglements with the viewer, at times a little more confrontational but more often deeply rewarding.

Your titling of your pieces makes everything provisional. Nothing is conclusive; everything is in an incomplete state, an idea in progress. Is the naming of your pieces a clue to how you regard the idea of a piece of art being finished or not?

Gardens are planted with the hopes of growth and transformation. They often outlive the gardener. Gardens, like studies, have aspirational qualities. They find their form with time. A study as in a space for being studious and as an artwork, say a preliminary drawing for a painting, while potentially incomplete, is not insufficient. In fact, it can offer a different kind of insight about the painting and even carry an energetic immediacy that the final carefully composed painting lacks.

The other word you choose is "folly." The thing about a folly is that it touches on a wide range of categories. It can be architecture, monument, sculpture, or ruin. It's any of those things, but it's never completely one of them. And this sense of the provisional seems to be the right fit for your sensibility.

Yes, *curtain call* and *cast for a folly* are staged in order to distance them from any claims of authenticity in relation to the original reference, to emphasize

their role as place holders. Kind of like what an understudy is to an actor.

So you're waiting to be given the role of Hamlet but you're always being asked to play Polonius?

Or you're sitting on the bench because Hamlet and Polonius both showed up. The limitations of a folly can offer a lot of malleability and ease for how an artwork is encountered. The ornamental, often fantastical architectures are not for shelter. They often mimic ruins, but their decay is a patina. Follies tend to lack authorship. They are frivolous and we accept them within those terms. Sounds a lot like art, no? I am not being cynical. I think art needs room. We are currently taking art very seriously but for the wrong reasons. But to elaborate on the comment about actors, what I love about actors is that we can watch, say, Viola Davis in a film where she makes us laugh or even sob with sadness. She could perform the role of a traumatized war survivor, or what have you. As viewers we don't doubt the gravity of our feelings because Davis has not experienced war. We are capable of experiencing a degree of empathy or joy as a shared experience regardless of the actor's biography. I think those rules of engagement and connection are wonderful models for how we make and can experience art.

I'm struck by how different your works can be. *One Hundred Years* (2025), a sculpture in the guise of a 10-layered birthday cake, has a Rachel Harrison wacky lean to it; *serpent* (2019) hilariously includes an edible rubber dog toy; the 10 inkjet prints for *Pandemic*, *Thuyen Ton Temple* (2024) present a grotesque corporeality; *Stock: Variation on a Fountain* (2024) is composed of industrial material. These works could have been done by different artists. What is the source of their range?

I glean from ideas and materials around me, but to be honest with you, it comes with some uncertainties. I have done shows where I afterwards realize I have completely missed the mark. But that's the nature of the work. Recently, during a site visit while I was looking around, a curator tried to suggest what I should make. I had to politely explain to them that I'm not here trying to catch ideas. I'm not confused. I'm just unfamiliar. So I have to be attentive to the people around me without being opportunistic or overinfluenced. I am interested in generalities. I talk to gardeners about gardens, not their lives. Whether in the studio or on-site, making art comes with a lot of uncertainty and that uncertainty can manifest as self-doubt. But it's a joy when you figure it out. In a way, you always have the solutions; you just want better problems.

One piece I especially like is *fountain* (2022) because it could be an object in an industrial building. It's innocuous: a plastic bin, a pond pump, some tubing. And then there's snail mucin serum, which is a secretion for skincare. So in the context of the name of the piece, I think "fountain of youth." A similar thing happens with *untitled* (2022), a sort of rough concrete birdcage. You put it near a casement window that opens onto a beautiful tree, and I imagine that tree to be full of birds, but they can't get into that birdcage. I look at these two pieces, and wonder, how am I supposed to read them? Is the message of *untitled* irony, triumph, escape, freedom from danger for the birds?

William Kentridge was asked about advice and he said something like, "Advice isn't something you say. Advice is something somebody has the capacity or the will to hear." I guess what I am trying to say is that people have their own ways of relating to art. But to answer your question, I wanted to cage the cage. I wanted to suffocate the air out of the cage. So the cage is actually being contained as opposed to the cage having the potential to contain an animal. It was also a formal exercise. I love the work of Jean-Luc Moulène. He has this work where he has blown glass into a birdcage. While he filled the cage with breath, I wanted to extract all the air out of the space. There are traces of the cage wires coming through the concrete. It feels tender and consuming. *fountain*, made during a residency in Naples, is influenced by sanitary fountains you find around the city. In this case, a plastic bin and a mirror are sutured together with a tube that, with the help of a small pond pump, loops water from the bucket through the mirror and back into the bucket. The water contains Galantamine and snail mucin serum. Galantamine, an alkaloid sourced from the bulbs of daffodils, is used to treat memory loss caused by dementia. Daffodils are members of the genus *Narcissus*. Snail mucin, made from snail secretions, is a beauty product that prevents and reduces fine lines around the eyes. These are all ingredients that originate from the garden. In this case they are carried with a pump and looped into the illusion of a spring. The work is a reflection about time and our means of negotiating and mitigating its passing. ■