

ART

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A Walk in the Park

The Tehran-born, Toronto-based artist discusses the challenge of making works on site, taking on the concept of the folly, creating self-conscious objects and rethinking monuments.

Abbas Akhavan interviewed by Tom Denman

Tom Denman: You've just finished your 19th residency. How does this type of work environment influence your practice?

Abbas Akhavan: Over time, much of my practice has become about relationships. When I arrive, say at Mount Stuart House, the work is made through developing and maintaining negotiations and conversations with people on site. The work is not collaborative, but our dynamics are both personal and professional. I'm often hosted for months and being a guest for that long has its complexities for all parties. Aside from that, our dynamics entail a lot of problem solving and labour, be it with the woodworkers, gardeners, technicians and so on. It involves a lot of professional interactions that, if I am lucky, turn into friendships. In many ways, the work provides a path for me to go to places, meet people and then respond accordingly.

This kind of site-oriented practice started after I left grad school. I was quite poor, in debt and had no means of sustaining a studio. I started applying for residencies and it just kind of stuck. What started as a means of bridging the gaps in my resources became the very structure of my thinking and making. Now, aside from residencies, I spend about a month or two on site for most solo shows.

I rarely ship artworks. I like to make work on site with materials that are often repurposed after the exhibition. For example, at Mount Stuart, we built this stream in the crypt. The majority of it is made of materials from nearby gardens and the rest – plywood, pump, full-spectrum lights and tarps – are given to the gardeners after we dismantle the show.

While I have recently started a studio practice at home, I like to maintain this way of working. It is tough but rewarding. In general, crated artworks arrive with a determined amount of worth and authority. They embody a kind of expertise. Making work on site is different. My presence on site, my presumptions and my footprint have to be carefully negotiated. I am wary of my own overdetermined voice. While I have certain interests, focuses of research and methods of making, generally I arrive empty-handed and I have to figure out what I want to make and then find the means of making it. It's a balancing act, one prone to failure.

The work's reception, like its production, is also about relations. The people I work with and the people that come to see the shows bring their own set of knowledge and lived experiences. Aside from the art crowd, specific people who belong and live on site bring with them a degree of insight that is unique to the reading of the work. They are vocal and well versed about the nuances of the location and the ideas I am making work in and about.



Study for a Monument, 2013–, installation view, Palais de Tokyo, Paris

In some of your recent installations, you incorporated chroma key 'green screens' normally used for creating digital visual effects. In 2019's *cast for a folly*, the green screen suggested a portal, connecting the Wattis Institute in San Francisco - where the work was installed - to the lobby of the Iraq Museum in Baghdad after it was looted in 2003, of which it is a reconstruction based on a photograph by Corine Wegener. At Chisenhale Gallery in London last year, for *curtain call, variations on a folly* you reconstructed the colonnade leading to the Arch of Palmyra, which was thought to have been destroyed by IS militants in 2015. The colonnade stood on a green screen stage, a potential reference to the Institute of Digital Archaeology's replication of the arch erected temporarily in London's Trafalgar Square in 2016, and equally to its original site - yet such specificity is unstable. Used as an analogue device, the screens evoke a sense of dislocation that is limitless. We're here, but also nowhere.

Well, I actually think that the green screen connotes that we are anywhere but here. That is why I use it in gallery spaces. I'm partially responding to the presumptions that such spaces are neutral, which of course is a fiction. Within the gallery I create another stage in order to emphasise the location and the relationship between the works and the viewers. Obviously this is not a unique approach because plenty of artists have used similar methods in their works.

The green screen invokes a one-point perspective to be captured by the camera lens, but in an installation you can go around it. At Chisenhale, you saw what wasn't made for the eyes or the camera - lumber holding up a backdrop. The colonnade on the green screen also reduces in quality as one moves towards the back of the gallery, like extras versus the stars at the front of the stage. This is also an economy of filmmaking - you don't need as much detail at the back of the set. We live in a time of manicured images, digital illusionistic spaces and so on. In the recent works you mentioned, I'm interested in making digital images into something that is analogue - physical spaces through which we can walk and experience time.

The works mentioned are not site-specific, but I waited a while in order to show *cast for a folly* in the US and *curtain call, variations on a folly* in England. Both are reconstructions of certain sites. They have similar titles. I'm trying to render them as self-conscious sculptures, objects aware of their performance as placeholders, like follies. I try to distance them from any claims to authenticity.

What draws you to the folly as a concept?

When I was a young art history student I saw a slide of a painting of people walking in a garden amid what looked like Greco-Roman ruins. Once the professor explained the concept of follies, I was taken by the idea that you can make something fake to have real feelings

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you used to call it blue sometimes, 2022, installation view, Mount Stuart House, Isle of Bute

about. It is kind of like acting. You can go to a theatre or a cinema and cry watching an actor embody a character that has nothing to do with their own lived experience. The actor is a placeholder, conjuring a feeling that we come to share. I think follies have similar ambitions. Invoking the folly is a method of rendering the sculptures as self-conscious objects. Follies have transparent ambitions. They are theatrical and ornamental - not a habitable piece of architecture, not quite a sculpture, not a monument, not a ruin, but made in the image of one. I think that there is a lot of potential within those limits.

Your sculptures often relate strongly to images: *cast for a folly* is based on a single photograph, for example, while an internet search for the Arch of Palmyra brings up almost as many images and videos of the replica as it does of the real thing.

Yes, but I am interested in sculpture and installations. As far as the image is concerned I am trying to see how one can stretch a single picture in order to reveal what



cast for a folly, 2019, CCA Wattis Institute, San Francisco

came before and potentially after. At Chisenhale, the green screen and the reconstruction of the colonnade was a way to heighten the theatricality of the new Palmyra Arch that was replicated in marble, flown to London and presented as a free-standing image against the destruction of cultural heritage. My cinematic tropes are hopefully ways of providing longer, wider and more critical perspectives on what has fallen out of place and context.

Something similar happened in *cast for a folly*. During the opening of the exhibition, the lobby of the looted Iraq Museum, replicated in the Wattis, was gradually populated by Americans. As the sun set and the space darkened, we were transported into another time and place. In a sense, we were standing in another museum experiencing a stretch of time that was outside the original image.

Your most recent residency was at Mount Stuart, an aristocratic home on the Isle of Bute. In many respects, the neo-Gothic house and ornamented grounds could epitomise the folly. How did you engage with this location?

The property has many rivers and streams. I spent a lot of time watching water run and fall. After a while, talking to the gardeners on site, I learned that the natural-looking landscape was highly constructed. Almost all the streams had been built or rerouted in order to make them more scenic or to imbue them with religious narratives. So I constructed a pond-less stream in the crypt titled *variations on a folly*. Closely influenced by what was around me, the stream runs for about 11.5 metres. It sits on five sheets of plywood held up by scaffolding. The work is not just about the



Bray for Cello, 2017

ambition of creating an impressive water feature, however, it is more like a skin graft, a cross section of the landscape outside, recreated inside along with local plants and botanical labels, identical to those on the property. As with the rest of the works in the show, I wanted to use the stream as a lens to bring focus back to the house and the surrounding landscape. The piece shifts the location of a traditional folly. Instead of a false ruin in the garden we have outside elements constructed into an ecosystem in the interior of the house. As we keep diminishing, mistranslating and destroying natural elements, constructing a river inside felt akin to creating a ruin of 'nature'.

The river is accompanied by the 2021 sound piece you used to call it blue sometimes, part of which involves the sound of people experiencing colour, possibly for the first time. How does this interrelate with its setting?

I took audio from YouTube videos in which colour-blind people try on glasses that enhance and partially correct colour-vision deficiencies. You hear their emotive responses to seeing vibrant colours for the first time. Their experiences of seeing gardens are interspersed with a voice recording that talks about the naming of birds. The script for the audio, which I wrote a while back, is about how birds are named after the people that have 'discovered' them - which is about legacy-building rather than the science of ornithology. It's all somehow about misreadings and projections, and the inability to see what is before us. Like the landscape and the streams, the birds too have been recast and misnamed to honour specific humans.



curtain call, variations on a folly, 2021, installation view, Chisenhale Gallery, London

The 20-minute audio piece is available for download via a QR code. It takes you from the crypt to a tropical glasshouse, the pavilion, at Mount Stuart's kitchen gardens. To get there you pass by a few rivers and streams. The audio piece has bird songs and atmospheric sounds that overlap with the surrounding landscape. We installed transparent dichroic film on the large glass windows of the pavilion. This is also called *you used to call it blue sometimes* - I consider both elements to be one work. In the tropical glass house, the window film casts different colours that change based on the angle of the sun and your movements. While I was there, I noticed that the visitors mimicked the audio piece, saying, 'it's so pink, this part is yellow' and so on.

The Chisenhale work, *curtain call, variations on a folly*, incorporated an audio component of pink noise which, at least nominally, is also chromatic. Do you always conceive of your sound works with images, sculptures or settings in mind?

That's a nice connection between the works I did not think of. They are spatial, as all sounds are in one way or another. At Chisenhale, the audio was most audible when you stood in the one-point forced perspective of the colonnade. It was a low drone combined with a high pitch and pink noise. It had a hum, kind of like being on an aeroplane. I wanted to use pink as an invisible complimentary chroma to green. The sound was to cue people, like the green screen, into another landscape.

you used to call it blue sometimes is made for a walk in botanical gardens and parks. In another work at

Mount Stuart, a 2017 piece called *Bray for Cello*, a cellist comes to the grounds unannounced, performs a composition that oscillates between soft melodic moans to the aggressive braying of a donkey. You might hear it if you happen to be on the grounds. You experience it as a witness rather than an audience. I'm fond of the idea that the cellist might be performing and no one might hear it except for the donkey that lives at a nearby stable.

Why a donkey?

Donkeys are considered 'low' and cellos are 'high'. Also, cellists are weight-bearing musicians - pianists don't carry pianos around. Besides, when played properly, a cello can sound like a real ass. It's a nice way to conjure another animal on site, another misunderstanding.

The idea of the self-conscious sculpture is interesting when considered in relation to public monuments, especially given the attention some of them have received in recent years.

I started to look at monuments a lot when I first moved to Victoria back in 2001. I was really struck by the number of images of Queen Victoria and other imperial figures. Victoria, in British Columbia, is like a time capsule of what they think England was, or still is. When I moved to Montreal in 2003, I saw more monuments. And this was when the Iraq War was starting and I was watching the destruction of Saddam Hussein's bronze figures.

For *Study for a Monument* I wanted to make it all more horizontal. It is not an anti-monument. Rather, made in the tradition of funerary monuments, it commemorates plants instead of people.

I remember reading about monuments and often they were described as forgotten and overlooked figures. But we see them every day. In fact, it's in their overlooked-ness that they're remembered. They render themselves invisible not because they have become invisible - it's because we have internalised them.

In 2003, when I was a student in Montreal, I would go for walks at night and cover the heads of monuments with black pillowcases or garbage bags. I took pictures of them and turned the photos into postcards. Most of them were taken at night-time, and the figures looked like prisoners or executioners. Of course, the bags would be removed the next morning, so it became clear to me that these figures are not overlooked by everyone, they're constantly cared for.

I started to become interested in bronze while watching the egomaniacal monuments of Saddam Hussein being torn down. Monuments are often commemorating a place, a time, a person or a people. They are built like pyramids: plaque, plinth, plants, animals, human. For *Study for a Monument*, I wanted to make it all more horizontal. It is not an anti-monument. Rather, made in the tradition of funerary monuments, it commemorates plants instead of people.



slug, 2020, video, installation view, Mount Stuart House, Isle of Bute

Julian Stallabrass has discussed the Western media's de facto censorship of images of harm to civilians in Iraq, in contrast to its more explicit coverage of Ukraine. He argues that although such coverage is vital for indicating the war's costs and the targeting of Ukrainian civilians, such images also 'bring to mind how rarely Iraqi civilians received the same treatment, let alone had their names appear and their life stories told'. ('The Look of War', *AM*456).

Right now, *Study for a Monument* is showing at the Palais de Tokyo. The people I met, while complimentary, always remarked that the work reminds them of Ukraine. Although I think we all need to pay attention to what is happening in Ukraine, I often just said, 'No, it's actually about Iraq', because we're not talking about what happened in Iraq anymore. We are no longer talking about those who still live with the consequences and inheritance of that war. Those who live in ruins in the most literal sense, not ruins that people want (such as the Arch of Palmyra), but a wreckage they had to inherit. It goes without saying, but we can and should empathise with people and beings that don't look like us.

Is your work in any way commemorative?

I have to emphasise that, while we are talking a lot about people, politics, places and history, I am not an academic or in politics. I am often knee-deep in materials making sculptures that are as much about form as ideas.

But to answer your question regarding commemorations, yes, some of my works could be considered commemorative. However, digitally recreating the Arch of Palmyra in Trafalgar Square is certainly not a commemoration. It is certainly not about commemorating the cultural heritage of Syria. It is a trope, an opportunistic moment to make trophies and reveal them as monuments. The instabilities that facilitate the destruction of Palmyra or the looting of the Iraq Museum are the results of the wars we have witnessed and protested against. I'm not Iraqi. I am not Syrian. I am wary of making work about my expression of identity or biography. But I am looking back at some historical moments that feel close to me. As a young student, I was in Montreal at the protests against the invasion of Iraq. I recall us all hoping that maybe peace would happen if this many bodies walked the streets pleading opposition to war. Sadly, the protests did not work - at least not that time.

Abbas Akhavan's 'study for a garden' continues at Mount Stuart House, Isle of Bute, until 2 October. *Study for a Monument* is part of the exhibition 'Reclaim the Earth' at Palais de Tokyo, Paris until 4 September. *cast for a folly* is being shown at Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver, 3 June to 28 August.

Tom Denman is a writer based in London.