

In 2011, Abbas Akhavan gave an interview to *Reading Art*, an online blog, where he discussed his exhibition *2nd May Day* at the Convenience Gallery, in Toronto. The title of the exhibition was a direct reference to the federal election that was taking place in the country that year on May 2, and to the fact that the opening of the exhibition was on that day. Also resonating with the history of the International Workers' Day, *2nd May Day*, although not overtly political, brought the reality of an event that happened in the past within reach of a political process happening in real time. The exhibition addressed the border space between art, reality and everyday life and the production of narratives through art. Noting that the nature of his practice is committed to investigating such in-between spaces, conceptually positioned between art, society and the everyday, Akhavan explained that hierarchical understandings between art and life made no sense to him.

"I'm not interested in tricking the viewer but in getting them to read it as non-art so they'll read it as *real*, so it's about bridging the gap, in sort of a historical nostalgic way, like art that looks like life."<sup>1</sup>

This was not the most revealing part of the discussion, however. Addressing a piece he had made specifically for that exhibition, which included buckets of flowers on the side of the street, and others tied up on a pole, Akhavan added that,

"The work is made to be read as art and hopefully as something beyond it, for example the piece with flowers, there's something about memorial accidents or accidental memorials..."<sup>2</sup>

Explaining further his attitude toward art-making, Akhavan insists, "I am not against art but I am totally against the spectacle of it. I am interested in the lowness of the work. Often I am not interested in high tech. For this kind of work, it is important that, like Martha Rosler says, you don't use a video camera to its full capacity, you use the media for your own purposes and not the other way around... My interest is in the specific situation."<sup>3</sup>

These remarks reveal a considerable amount about Akhavan's way of thinking. Crucial in this respect is that Akhavan thinks of his practice as an intervention as well as a form of interpretation of complex realities. In his approach, art, reality and everyday life are entwined. As he emphasizes, it is about things sharing properties rather than being distinct and separate. His words also show that his search for meaning or his idea of meaning consists of establishing relationships, opening up lines of enquiry and questioning what to others can be the most accepted, commonplace of things. Akhavan understands that a deeper investigation into everyday conditions can reveal vital realities where ideas can emerge. Elsewhere he has said, "I am interested in the collision of elements that are already there."<sup>4</sup>

Akhavan is not dealing with an autonomous production but with art forms as sets of assemblages that become part of the world, not only of the gallery space. He often explores the rhythms and temporalities of exterior conditions, which can refine ideas and serve as an entry point to the production of discourses. Instead of conducting a practice where the artworks and their capacity is limited within the walls of the gallery, he opts for possibilities to work in other directions, considering alternative spaces where the natural, the social and the political communicate a more pluralistic and inclusive form of practice. He sees most of his production as an intimate process which can ultimately establish a direct connection to a location. The lack of a studio practice and his extensively nomadic approach to art-making serves as a catalyst for the generation of ideas that are constantly new and relevant to their exact context, but also to a moment in time and a specific space. This is a large part of the artist's ethos.

"When making work on-site, I tend to gravitate toward materials or concerns that are contingent upon a location, an economy, an architecture, or some very minor patterns that surface within the social fabric. The qualities that inform the work are almost always incomplete, in that their engagement, unlike a body of paintings from a studio, often require the feedback or just the eyes of the local viewers who are often well informed about my concerns within their environment."<sup>5</sup>

Discussing his project for Villa Stuck, he insists:

"The show at Villa Stuck is kind of an environment as opposed to a group of works. There will be a lot of empty spaces and there will not be any labels at all, any visual didactic information."<sup>6</sup>

This approach reveals a desire for openness, the ability to produce forms with a certain level of intuition, but also works that remain incomplete, establishing therefore a conceptual framework of continuity. These aesthetic qualities structure Akhavan's approach to exhibitions as well. Open-ended and receptive, his exhibitions move beyond the notion of intervention or installation. Additionally, the aim of his work, which is evident in Villa Stuck, is to propose pathways for thinking about concepts such as freedom, vulnerability, power relations, society and the institutional establishment. Particularly striking is a work specifically devised for this exhibition, which is installed on the top level of the gallery space.

For this exhibition, Akhavan investigated the different layers and components of the space of the gallery. Villa Stuck is a shell designed in classical architectural style, which carefully conceals the existence of the *Fin de Siècle-Gesamtkunstwerk* cosmos on the one side, and the contrasting, almost hygienic refinement of a contemporary gallery space on the other. The contemporary

space, originally constructed by Franz von Stuck as his Atelier Wing in 1914–15, is actually a space within a space, a fully fitted, walled enclosure, which administers its function through its complete disconnection to the fundamental elements of the building itself and in extension of the city where it belongs. Akhavan has taken the radical decision to open up some of the gallery windows, halt the climatic control and forgo some of the light features. The exhibition will effectively acquire the time and rhythm of the exterior, and the experience of it will be susceptible to natural environmental changes, such as alterations in light, wind and temperature.

The sudden emergence of external conditions amplifies the transparency of the site and the nature of building as a container of an aesthetic investment. On the top floor of the wing, a piece on the domed ceiling begins at the threshold of a previously boarded window, titled *Study for a Painting* (ill. p. 64). It looks as if parts of the building have been engulfed in smoke, from a fire raging on the outside. The imprint of this is visible across the ceiling. A combination of paint and burnt ashes has been applied on the surface of the domed ceiling, giving the impression of a sort of an emergency unfolding, in the fierce aftermath of a fire. It is a compelling sight, which focuses attention simultaneously on both the interior and exterior. The implied movement indicates that the trajectory of the flames have an inward motion. As if the city is on fire, a state of emergency dominates the entire exhibition. From this point of view, the story becomes more subversive and the expositional narrative can be seen to unfold in a different way. In such a context, the space of the museum forges its meaning as a safe haven where artworks have been brought together in order to be protected. Akhavan seems to be returning to more complex questions and approaches, which form the core of his corpus. Politics and conflict and the current condition of the world have been central themes in his output. His experience of warfare, military hostilities and their aftermath has been manifested in his work in the past, often in intensively monumental and seductive forms.<sup>7</sup> Never though have these concerns become imprinted in such a magnitude onto the surface of a space, a space which is of course also loaded with meaning. However, there is something else here, something rather ambivalent in the whole arrangement.

Akhavan began thinking about this work a long time ago, while researching images of war online and particularly looking into the consequences of military interventions. Captivated by the sense of urgency and the incredible force of a crisis of such proportions, I believe he extracted a rather independent morphogenetic dimension. The hyperbolic overdrive identified in his research material functioned as a vector or rhythm to question particular elements related to abstractions of social and cultural

order. Going beyond the apparatus of war but still maintaining a sense of its time, its rhythm, its space, its body and its color, the piece signifies a reversal. It marks a new form, the production of a new environment and a new culture. This new culture, as a system comprised of its individual parts, includes the combination of the entire exhibition space and the artworks that synthesize its makeup. Amplifying the notion of the museum as a harbinger of new ideas and relations, the reversal of a monstrous and uncanny situation produces the domain of potential for refuge. The duality and combination of extremes, is a methodological tool, which the artist has explored in a number of other works, such as *Makeshift Objects* (2008–ongoing) and *Study for a Garden* (2013, ill. p. 104).

Large bodies of Akhavan's work are the result of his explorations and concerns with the natural and the artificial, ecology and society. Gardens and plants as forms, boundaries, agents in social and political systems, carriers of systems of beliefs and signification have appeared widely in his work. It was, therefore, without much resistance that he was seduced by Villa Stuck's artist's garden. The artists' garden includes a series of sculptures, copies of busts of prominent Greek philosophers, politicians, emperors and tragedians, such as Alexander the Great, Pericles, Alcibiades, Homer and Aeschylus. The sculptures, set in concrete and stone, adorn the perimeter of the south part of the garden. These striking figures, characterized by an ancient monumentality and with the patina of time sunk on their surface, are a constant reminder of an order, a lineage, a system of thought and a language that still defines our lived experience. Akhavan has installed an additional bust, a kind of uninvited guest to the party. This new sculpture, titled *For the Birds* (ill. p. 110), has no discernible characteristics, it is not necessarily an enlightened individual, a leading thinker or a mythical king, conqueror and diffuser of civilization. I enjoy the idea that this bust can not be identified, that this fundamental identification of human nature becomes meaningless. On top of the bust, the artist has positioned a dove, a rather playful element to the otherwise severe tone of the sculpture garden. The sculpture brings to the surface questions related to the loose thread of ideas such as security, threat, human intervention and control that seem to define parts of the exhibition. The bust breaks down the order of the garden, almost like an alien form, a virus of sorts, infiltrating the calm coexistence of a manicured landscape and the heavyweights of a cultural, intellectual milieu, the forefathers of Western civilization. It makes me think of systems of control, contemporary borders and their practical implementation. At a time when contemporary society experiences permanent fear, and technologies of control are able to access even deeper into the most intimate, personal characteristics—from genetic material to the analysis of facial traits—and considering the twenty-first century no-

madism of human flows, dispossessed as the result of war, this sculpture is far more than a punch in the face of normalcy and the garden's romantic order. It is obvious that the mechanics of reinvention of new existential co-ordinates is a point of reference in this instance. The maddening transformation of processes, territories and domains that we experience, central to the other works in the exhibition, are perfectly summarized in this subtle yet powerful gesture. This work can be seen to signify, possibly the strongest proposition in the entire presentation of works in this exhibition. It seems to demand the question about how we can go about constructing another life surface, other possibilities for affective spaces, even other existential territories? How do we reinvent our post-modern, post-industrial, post-human deserts without defending tradition and historical legitimacy? The dove becomes a symbol of subversion and hope.

Both artworks, almost bracketing the entire exhibition or sitting uncomfortably at the extremes of it, are powerful manifestations of the current of the world and simultaneous questions relevant to contemporary politics. Two ideas resurface constantly in my mind in relation to them. What is our commitment to history and what is our response to the highly precarious level of destruction we encounter constantly? These are questions that are omnipresent in this exhibition and through these works. Akhavan, throws these questions out there, turning them into forms, ideas and aesthetics.

Returning to one of the artist's quotes at the beginning of this essay: "the work is made to be read as art and hopefully as something beyond it," I am tempted to believe that the exhibition in Villa Stuck marks a breakthrough in Akhavan's work, showing his further expansion into themes and subjects that relate to space and lived experience. The particular combination of artworks, produces a space that nurtures ideas, a space for debate injected with political meaning. The two works I discussed here convey the complexities of "being in the world," a concern of existential importance, a strategy and a mode for working. The clarity of forms and the complexity of concepts, testifies to Akhavan's progression into a mature world of ideas.

1 "An Interview with Abbas Akhavan," *Reading Art*, May 24, 2011, <http://www.readingart.ca/blog/?p=1245> (accessed May 16, 2017).

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 "Domestic Nature—Abbas Akhavan in Conversation with Antony Downey," *Ibraaz*, issue 4, January 24, 2013, <http://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/57> (accessed May 16, 2017).

5 In conversation with the author, part of a not yet published monograph on Akhavan's practice.

6 In conversation with the author, Thursday, May 11, 2017.

7 I am thinking here of two of Akhavan's projects in particular. The first is the artist's 2012 exhibition *Beacon* at The Darling Foundry in Montreal and the second is the ongoing project which began in 2013 titled *Study for a Monument* (ill. p. 102). Both projects included large-scale sculptural forms that reflected or alluded to certain notions of monuments or monumentalization.