



Abbas Akhavan

Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery,
University of British Columbia,
Vancouver, Canada

How sustainable is the current moment? 'One Hundred Years', Abbas Akhavan's exhibition at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at the University of British Columbia (UBC), asks the audience to suspend both belief and their sense of time. The show of installations by the Montreal and Berlin-based artist, who will represent Canada at the 2026 Venice Biennale, considers the fictions and mechanisms that shape our subjectivities. In so doing, it reveals ways in which imposed binaries, both natural and constructed, are foundational to the structure of the art world, which instrumentalizes such divides to sustain looping narratives.

Entering the room, one emerges onto a stage shared with several human-sized *Monstera deliciosa* plants (*Studio*, 2025). In light of its role as a visual motif in the works of Henri Matisse and a companion in his studio in the 1940s and '50s, the plant may evoke a notion of the artist's atelier as a romantic space of creation tinged with cultural exploitation. At the same time, the seamless curve uniting floor and wall recalls the film or photographic studio, places that ask for a certain degree of consensus. Liminal spaces throughout the exhibition – the green screen, the back room, tangles of exposed wiring – suggest that artifice

comes to life in the service of certain narratives, and not the other way around.

In the front room, a spiral of fountain pipes, typically concealed underground, is not only exposed but connected to an enormous chiller that keeps the pipes' fluid contents in a frozen state. The piece, *spring* (2021/25), was created during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and, in a sort of meta-state, kept on ice until now. Akhavan often works with fountains and gardens as dubious narrators of public life. In another installation, *LOOP* (2023/25), a water feature made of stacked rocks rests on a green screen, as pristine as a copy-and-pasted image suspended in an eternal loop. Four writers were asked to respond to the work; when I visited, a small stack of newsprint sheets featured the text 'Untitled Water' by Marina Roy, an artist and writer who taught Akhavan when he was a student at UBC. Roy's essay speaks about water pollution and the devastating environmental effects of damming, but it also draws parallels between circulatory and metaphorical systems. While Roy's reflections may evoke yet another narrative, they more intriguingly reveal another kind of 'loop' – reading through the text, one spots forms and patterns of thought that now also circulate through Akhavan's work.

In the middle room, a large screen plays surveillance footage from several Canadian zoos (*Zoo*, 2025); during my visit, the video featured an adorable family of bats swinging enthusiastically from various contraptions. We project onto animals because they can't speak, and certain animals make frequent folkloric appearances as carriers of human qualities. On the floor, in the shadow of the screen, rest two taxidermized animals: a fox and an owl from the artist's 2014 series 'Fatigues'. While they are sustainably sourced, their bodies are suspended in an aestheticized state between life and burial, echoing another work: a replica of the gargantuan, teetering cake from the 1959 animated film *Sleeping Beauty*, complete with real icing and candles (*One Hundred Years*, 2025). According to the legend that inspired the exhibition title, when the princess fell asleep, the entire village followed suit for 100 years. The part of the story that was stripped away in the Disney version speaks to a kind of solidarity, yet Akhavan's unsteady structure evokes a precarious vigil. For the story's protagonist, when a world of predetermined narratives is suddenly disrupted, the suspension of time becomes both a curse and a form of endurance.

— Xenia Benivolski