

Abbas Akhavan's exhibition *variations on a garden*, and a public art project to be realized in 2016, are made possible by leading support from Partners In Art.



BIOGRAPHIES

Abbas Akhavan's practice ranges from site-specific ephemeral installations to drawing, video, sculpture and performance. The direction of his research has been deeply influenced by the specificity of the sites where he works: the architectures that house them, the economies that surround them, and the people that frequent them. The domestic sphere, as a forked space between hospitality and hostility, has been an ongoing area of research in his practice. Recent works have shifted focus, wandering onto spaces and species just outside the home – the garden, the backyard, and other domesticated landscapes. Akhavan is the recipient of Kunstpreis Berlin (2012), Abraaj Group Art Prize (2014) and is currently shortlisted for the Sobey Award (2015).

Akhavan would like to acknowledge the support of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, and in particular Dr. Sophie Neale and Shahina Ghazanfar.

Francisco-Fernando Granados works in performance, video, drawing, and multidisciplinary critical practices. Granados has presented solo projects at the Art Gallery of York University, Toronto, Satellite Gallery, Vancouver, the Harbourfront Centre Studio Theatre, Toronto (all 2014), Katzman Contemporary, Toronto (2013) and the Queen Elizabeth Theatre, Vancouver (2011). Recent performances and screenings of his work include: The Art Gallery of Ontario, Inside Out LGBT Film Festival (both Toronto, 2015), Breaking Voices Boundaries, Houston (2014, 2015), MOCCA, Toronto and Defibrillator Gallery, Chicago (both 2014), among others. Granados' writing has been published in magazines and art journals including: *Canadian Theatre Review* (2015), *KAPSULA* (2014), *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* (2014), *Drain* (2014) and *FUSE* (2011). He is a member of the 7a*11d International Performance Festival Collective and teaches at OCADU and University of Toronto Scarborough. He lives and works in Toronto.

Georgina Jackson is the Director of Exhibitions & Publications at Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art.



Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art
1286 Bloor Street West, Toronto ON M6H 1N9 Canada
(1 block east of Lansdowne Station)
T 416.536.1519 F 416.536.2955

Director of Exhibitions and Publications: Georgina Jackson
Director of Operations and Development: York Lethbridge
Lead Preparator: Danielle Greer
Curatorial Assistant: Katie Lyle
Gallery Administrative Coordinator: Liana Schmidt

Board of Directors: Joseph Banh, Joseph Borowiec, Meagan Campbell, Rochelle Chung, Miles Collyer, John Hampton, Lili Huston-Herterich, Rebecca Houston, Charlene Lau, Vanessa Runions, Michael Salem, Tamira Sawatzky, Kristen Schaffer, Jessica Vallentin, Negin Zebbarjad

Mercer Union acknowledges the support of its staff, volunteers and members, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Arts Council and the City of Toronto through the Toronto Arts Council.

Cover image: Abbas Akhavan, *Study for a Monument* (detail), 2015, Cast bronze, cotton fabric, dimensions variable. Photo: Nikolaus Steglich, Starnberg. Image courtesy: Abbas Akhavan and The Third Line, Dubai.

978-1-926627-34-2 Printed by Sonicprint.ca © Mercer Union, the artists, the authors, 2015

SONIC PRINT_{CA}

To receive future publications by mail and many other advantages, become a member of Mercer Union.



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada

PUBLIC PROGRAM

ADMISSION IS FREE TO ALL EVENTS AND ALL ARE WELCOME

LECTURE AND DISCUSSION:

with Sabah Alnasser

Saturday 19 September 2015, 3PM

Sabah Alnasser is the Professor for Political Science (Middle East Politics) at York University, Toronto, prior to that was a Lecturer of Political Science at the J.-W. Goethe University, Frankfurt. Born in Basra, Iraq, he writes and speaks frequently on Iraq, Gaza and the Middle East.

ARTIST TALK

Wednesday 14 October 2015, 7PM

Artist Abbas Akhavan in conversation with Francisco-Fernando Granados and Georgina Jackson.

IN SADDAM'S SHADOW:

screening and discussion with Waleed Nesyif

Tuesday 20 October 2015, 7PM

A screening of *In Saddam's Shadow* (2013), followed by a discussion with Iraqi filmmaker and writer Waleed Nesyif. Nesyif has been involved in several award winning documentaries including *Shocking and Awe*, a Deep Dish TV series, *I know I'm not alone* (2006), *Blackwater's Youngest Victim* and *Heavy Metal in Baghdad* (2007) among others. His personal filmography includes several short films such as *Yearning* (2011) and *In Saddam's Shadow*. He is currently working on a feature length documentary titled *Where Once Stood Gods and Men*. Born and raised in Baghdad, Nesyif lives in Toronto.



Olivia Plender, *Google Office*, installation view, Taipei Biennial 2010, Taiwan.

SPACE: Olivia Plender

12 September 2015 – 15 January 2016

The fourth artist to create a commissioned work for SPACE, Mercer Union's billboard project, is Olivia Plender.

Olivia Plender's research-based practice interrogates the ideological framework around the narration of history and, more recently, changing attitudes to education and value. Her 2010 installation, titled *Google Office*, in the Tapei Biennial, Taiwan, interrogated the commodification of knowledge and social relations that has taken place within post-Fordist service based economies; the collapse of the distinction between work and leisure

and the new identity of the entrepreneur. Use of the *Google Office* was subject to a contract - parodying the intellectual property release agreements, which today seem to pervade every possible site of potential knowledge production, from internet social networking websites to universities. By reading the contract viewers gave up the rights to any new knowledge produced within the space, which subsequently became the intellectual property of Taipei Biennial. Equipped with games and free wi-fi, the *Google Office* was frequently occupied by people genuinely playing or working, seemingly unaware that they had become performers in the piece.

Recent solo exhibitions include: MK Gallery, Milton Keynes, Arnolfini, Bristol and CCA, Glasgow (all 2012), Gasworks Gallery, London (2009), and Marabouparken Annex, Stockholm (2007). Her work has been included in group shows including: Le Quartier: Centre D'art Contemporain De Quimper, France (2014), Henie Onstad, Oslo, (2013), Malmö Art Museum (2013), Hayward Gallery, London, Folkestone Triennial, Kent (both 2011); Taipei Biennial (2010); Tate Triennial, Tate Britain, London (2009); Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt (2008); and Tate Triennial, Tate Britain, London (2006), among others. She lives and works in Stockholm and London.

SPACE is a series of commissioned works for the billboard space on the side of Mercer Union which began in the spring of 2014. Previous contributing artists include: Liz Knox (CA), Giles Round (UK) and Walter Scott (CA).



FORUM: Lief Hall

Mythology, Gender and Cyber-virtual Identity in Pop Music Performance

Tuesday 15 September 2015, 8PM

Please note this event will take place at Propeller Coffee Co. 50 Wade Avenue (just around the corner from Mercer Union off of Lansdowne Avenue).

Lief Hall's lecture/performance will interweave storytelling, video collage, live performance and the artist's own musical compositions to explore how mythology, science fiction and virtual embodiment affect the creation of gender identity within popular culture. Pulling from Judith Butler's notion of 'gender performativity' and Donna Haraway's 'Cyborg Manifesto', the lecture will explore how performative space is re-shaped through technology, and the integration of cyber-virtual identities. Looking at the work of contemporary female pop stars such as Lady Gaga, Nicki Minaj, Hatsune Miku and Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, Hall explores how the narratives created in pop music play an important role in the creation of contemporary mythology.

Lief Hall is a composer, singer-songwriter, director/choreographer and creator of opera, musical theatre, video and installation. In 2005 Hall completed her BFA at Emily Carr University, and has since presented work at VIVO Media Arts Centre, Simon Fraser University (both Vancouver, 2012), Or Gallery, Vancouver Art Gallery, and 221A Gallery, (all Vancouver 2013). Hall was previously the vocalist for Vancouver no wave punk band 'Mutators' (2007), a vocalist for the improvisational trio 'Glaciers' (2009), and one half of Canadian 'femme noir' pop duo MYTHS (2012). Her most recent EP *Transform* (2015) marks a new direction in her solo musical work, creating dark electronic pop, which merges the experimental dance music with layered vocal harmonies, exploring themes of love, identity, and fear in a post-human world.

FORUM is a monthly series of talks, lectures, interviews, screenings and performances at Mercer Union. Free as always. Please check the Mercer Union website for details about our upcoming FORUM events.

With special thanks to **propeller coffee co.**

IN STUDIO: Laurel Woodcock

Friday 25 September, 7PM

IN STUDIO: Katie Bethune-Leamen

Thursday 29 October, 7PM

Join Mercer Union for an intimate view of Woodcock's and Bethune-Leamen's studios and current practices. Refreshments will be served. Free for Sustaining Members and above; open to other members and select non-members for \$25. Space is limited. RSVP to York Lethbridge, Director of Operations, at york@mercerunion.org or by calling 415.536.1519.



Katie Bethune-Leamen, *PYHIAHP*, neon, 2015.

Laurel Woodcock's work in situational art, video, photography, sculpture and editions make use of everyday objects and contexts to shed light on language and perception. A large portion of her studio practice explores the problems and possibilities of language, its formal and connotative qualities and malleable meanings. Her work has been exhibited widely in Canada including the Power Plant and the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver and internationally in the United States, France, England, Spain, Egypt and Scotland. She completed her BFA at Concordia University and her MFA at NSCAD.

Katie Bethune-Leamen works in sculpture, installation and video. Based in Toronto, her recent solo exhibitions include: YOU WIN! (february) (8-11); Hologram Tupac. Other Things. ALL-ONE! (OpenStudio); Shiny, Object, Person. (AGO); group exhibitions include Northern Exposure (Art Gallery of Nova Scotia), and More Than Two (Let It Make Itself) (The Power Plant). Recent and upcoming residencies include Fogo Island Arts, SIM (Reykjavik, IS) the Residency of the Americas (Darling Foundry, Montreal), Canada Council for the Arts International Residency (Paris), and NSCAD. She is a 2015 recipient of a Chalmers Fellowship. She holds a BFA from Concordia University and MFA from University of Guelph.



Abbas Akhavan

variations on a garden

15 September – 31 October 2015

Opening Saturday 12 September, 5PM

The Trace of Hostility

The papery porousness of the inside of the house reminds her that this is not her home. Not really. She has lived here for almost five years but remembers her foreignness every time she walks around the corner, from the living room to the kitchen, as she runs her right hand along the wall looking for the light switch. Waves of high-pitched whistles that pierce through the cold glass rattle the window frame as she puts the kettle on for tea. Half-open blinds sway with deceptive softness. The slats pick up highlights but cast no shadow. Even in the relative comfort of this refuge after the fortune of upward social mobility, the trace of systematized hostility shapes the edge of the wound that has healed over.

Every once in a while, a dull bang: perhaps a young tree branch knocking on the window, or one of the garbage cans falling over. She turns her head. *The Global News* weatherman reads the official wind warning as a digital glow casts shifting, abstract colour fields on the recliner in the other room. Perhaps an inappropriately abstract thought for an old piece of furniture given to her by Inland Refugee Society when she moved into her first basement suite eleven years ago. That humid shithole by Metrotown Station she still blames for her allergies.

The weatherman says a low-pressure system will move across the South Coast tonight. Ahead of the low, south to southeast winds 60 to 80 km/h have developed...Winds will ease late overnight as the low moves into the interior and weakens. Another bang. The kettle is on but will take some time, so she walks back to the living room. She turns off the television and picks up the stapled photocopies of that speech she could not find in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* That speech, “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence,” she had to print off the Internet. She goes over the same paragraph, underlined and highlighted:

Here is the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence, when it helps us to see the enemy's point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves. For from his view we may indeed see the basic weaknesses of our own condition, and if we are mature, we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition.¹

Why is the enemy always a he? It's too late to re-read the whole thing and the kettle is desperately whistling in torturous harmony with the wind outside. She decides against tea, turns off the stove and the light, and comes back to the living room to sit in her usual, awkward position. It will make her left knee hurt tomorrow. She opens the laptop. YouTube knows the familiar keywords; completing her thoughts in purple sans-serif typeface.

In the pixelated footage pirated from the Reuters archive, the event is edited together in a two-minute-and-eighteen-second clip. The Saddam statue stands, raising its right arm up above its head with an open palm. Three men in civilian clothing on top of the base try to secure a rope that hangs loosely around its neck. The shot widens to show more of Firdos Square as a crowd forms. Below, a man with a sledgehammer pounds the base. Another bang. She mutes the laptop and keeps watching. A tank moves closer as more people gather. Two soldiers clad in dull, light brown fatigues climb towards the head of the statue on the tank's ladder. One civilian remains at the base, waving his arms wildly from behind the ladder. The soldiers wrap the statue's face in a U.S. flag; arms rise from the crowd, fingers pointing and waving side to side as if saying: don't, move it over. A man surrounded by two journalists holds the 1963 version of the Iraqi flag, the one without the takbir in Saddam's handwriting between the green stars. A quick shot of the crowd shows a couple of people clapping.

The soldiers tie a heavy chain around the statue's neck. A wide shot of the Square shows the space cleared of people. The tank has retreated as well. The low quality footage gives the monument the illusion of becoming animated, shifting slightly forward. From a closer angle, the chain noose is visible, attached to the tank, pulling. The hollow figure breaks at the left knee, quickly shifting from portrait to landscape. The horizontality of Saddam's toppled likeness seems ridiculous, as if offering a handshake to the crowd throwing rocks and rushing beneath. Another bang.

The space between the half-open blinds projects a flickering red light into the kitchen. She looks up.

— Francisco-Fernando Granados



Top image: Abbas Akhavan, *Study for a Monument* (2013-), Installation view at Villa Stuck, Munich, Germany. Photo: Jann Awerwerson. Image courtesy of Abbas Akhavan, Abraaj Group Art Prize and Museum Villa Stuck. Commissioned by the Abraaj Group Art Prize, 2014. **Bottom image:** Abbas Akhavan, *Study for a Monument* (detail), 2015, Cast bronze, cotton fabric, dimensions variable. Photo: Nikolaus Steglitz, Starnberg. Image courtesy of Abbas Akhavan and The Third Line, Dubai.

In ruins

On its summit are the hanging gardens, a wonder celebrated by the fables of the Greeks...So stout are the trees the structure supports that their trunks are eight cubits thick and their height as much as fifty feet; they bear fruit as abundantly as if they were growing in their natural environment. And although time with its gradual decaying processes is as destructive to nature's works as to man's... Tradition has it that it is the work of a Syrian king who ruled from Babylon. He built it out of love for his wife who missed the woods and forests in this flat country and persuaded her husband to imitate nature's beauty with a structure of this kind.¹

The story of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon was told and retold. This particular tale of endeavour, and devotion, was written by the Roman historian Quintus Curtius Rufus in the first century CE. Others recounted how its terraces could hold full size trees, shrubs and vines, observing how ingenious its irrigation system was, drawing water up from the river Euphrates in an otherwise barren land.² By the fifth century CE, Philo of Byzantium “the Paradoxographer” had inscribed the gardens as one of the Seven Ancient Wonders of the World.

And yet another image lingers. In the background of a 19th century etching of the Hanging Gardens, hovers the colossal structure of the Tower of Babel. Its story, told in The Book of Genesis, details the gathering of all of the people after The Great Flood, a monolingual humanity who began to build the tower to reach the heavens. However on seeing this enterprise, God confounded their speech so that they could no longer understand one another and scattered the people across the globe. From the Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder's iconic 16th century series of paintings to French artist Gustave Doré's etching *The Confusion of the Tongues* (1865), the story of this mammoth tower as the location of the dismantling of a singular shared language endures. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon and the Tower of Babel act as a symbolic force representing the alliance between humanity and nature and a place where language and people are one. The sources for these two stories are multifarious but locate their construction between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, in the ‘Cradle of Civilization,’ present day Iraq, near the town of Hillah, about 85 kilometres south of Baghdad.

As scholar Cornelia Vismann outlines the love of ruins has travelled throughout history, explored by historians, geographers and thinkers in order to shape our thought and belief systems. She elaborates, it “has generated various epistememes and disciplines: In the sixteenth century it informed philology, in the nineteenth century historiography and criminology,” shifting its status from “an allegorical one in the Renaissance to a literal, positivistic one at the beginning of the twentieth century.”³ For the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and the Tower of Babel, there exists no singular artefact, or present day ruin to visit. Any written testimony which endures was not contemporaneous. Liberating any material remains from their form, philosopher Giorgio Agamben takes ruins “in their discursive form as that which is and which is in language.”⁴

It was this same location, between the Tigris and Euphrates, where between 1983 and 1987 Saddam Hussein reconstructed the 600-room palace of King Nebuchadnezzar II (654-562 BC), who was responsible for those hanging gardens of ancient Babylon. While the Iran-Iraq War was waged, thousands of workers were imported from Sudan to lay sixty million sand-coloured bricks over present day ruins. The edifice was completed with many inscriptions, echoing Nebuchadnezzar. One announces, “In the era of President Saddam Hussein all Babylon was reconstructed in three stages, from Nebuchadnezzar to Saddam Hussein, Babylon is rising again.” And yet the palace sat empty.

Unlike absent ruins or abandoned structures, another living depository of knowledge lingers. With the rising interest in plant taxonomy during the 19th century, scientific expeditions ventured across the globe to gather native species and bring them back to the centres of ever expanding empires. Collecting, deterritorializing, categorizing and growing; over 30,000 plant species from around the world grow at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, in London, today, while the herbarium holds over 7 million species, the largest in the world. Both living and dead, this depository traces a history of evolution, charting histories of generations of plant species, anatomy, systems and families. However as artist Marina

Roy articulates, an archive is “not only a repository of historical memory and artifacts for preservation and future knowledge acquisition. It captures a past violence-authority captured through fundamental naming, territorialisation, planting roots, the laying down of laws and rules of conduct, and documentation of exchange.”⁵

Within the archives at Kew sits six of nine volumes of the Flora of Iraq. Begun in 1960 by the Ministry of Agriculture in Bagdad, this project sought to gather and categorize over 3,300 rich and diverse species of flora native to Iraq's deserts, marshes, plains and mountains, in collaboration with the Royal Botanic Gardens. Although incomplete⁶, it is this archive and the resources of Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh that Abbas Akhavan used to trace endemic and native species from the salt marshes firstly destroyed by Hussein's Ba'athist government quelling the marsh rebels, and secondly by the Iraq war, in this fertile land near the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. Iris barnumea, Astragalus lobophorus and Campanula acutiloba among others were sculpted with clay, cast into wax, encased within plaster, melted and cast in bronze to be presented as charred monuments in pieces across a series of white cotton sheets on the gallery floor in Akhavan's *Study for a Monument* (2013-2015). Plant pressings within an archive containing endemic and native species are enlarged to bodily scale, while resisting verticality, they are gathered in a funerary tradition, as an act of commemoration. A monument in becoming.

In an earlier film work, *Ghost* (2013), excepted footage of returning US army troops to their families fades from image to white. Harrowing screams are heard, the spectre of trauma remains. Writer Elaine Scarry posits that it is pain that limits one's possibility to act or to create a world. She explores the effect of the body in pain and its relationship to the ability to speak, the effect of trauma on the body in both physical and conceptual form. As she states “you can watch language deteriorate. One's ability to say sentences, and then even one's ability to say words, disappears.”⁷

Michel Foucault outlines “let us say that history, in its traditional form, undertook to ‘memorize’ the *monuments* of the past, transform them into *documents*, and lend speech to those traces which, in themselves, are often not verbal, or which say in silence something other than what they actually say; in our time, history is that which transforms *documents* into *monuments*.”⁸ Excavating the tales of ancient Babylon, the Tower of Babel and the Hanging Gardens which at once exist and are absent, the garden lingers as both a symbolic site of labour and leisure, private and public, nature and humanity, but furthermore, as a site of sovereignty and war. All of these locations, stories and histories are variations on a garden.

— Georgina Jackson



Abbas Akhavan, *and after and after*, 2003/2008, Photograph, 8.26 x 10.16 cm. Courtesy of the artist and The Third Line Gallery, Dubai

¹ Quintus Curtius Rufus (active 1st century CE) referred to the writings of Cleitarchus, a 4th-century BCE historian of Alexander the Great in *History of Alexander* V.1.35-5.

² Strabo, *Geography* XVI.1.5, translation adapted from HL Jones, Loeb edition (1961).

³ Vismann, Cornelia. 2001. “The Love of Ruins,” *Perspectives on Science*, Volume 9, Number 2, Summer 2001, p.196.

⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵ Roy, Marina. 2013. *Study for a Glasshouse: Abbas Akhavan*. Peel Art Gallery, Brampton.

⁶ Governmental changes led to the project's cessation in 1985, but it commenced again in 2011.

⁷ Geddes, Jennifer L. and Elaine Scarry. 2000. “On evil, pain and beauty: a conversation with Elaine Scarry.” *The Hedgehog Review*, Summer 2000, p.79.

⁸ Foucault, Michel. 1989. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Routledge, London, p.7 and 8.

¹ This speech was delivered by Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4 1967 at Riverside Church in New York.