Abbas Akhavan: *cast for a folly*

By Maddie Klett

Installation view: Abbas Akhavan: cast for a folly, CCA Wattis Institute, San Francisco, 2019. Courtesy the artist; Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver, and the Third Line, Dubai. Photo: Johnna Arnold.

In the cavernous front gallery of the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco, Abbas Akhavan has reconstructed the eerie scene of the National Museum of Iraq's lobby after its looting following the American invasion of the country in 2003. The artist pulls this scene from one image in a series of widely circulated Internet photographs of the event's aftermath. It depicts the lobby's high windows lighting dusty furniture and empty vitrines. Two figures with their backs to the photographer are surveying the room, and an official portrait of Saddam Hussein hangs on the back wall.

Adding to the sense of barrenness in that original image, I was the only viewer of the new work, cast for a folly, when I went to see it on a quiet Saturday. As I walked through I kept comparing a small black-and-white print of the image in the show's handout to Akhavan's three-dimensional rendition. In his reconstruction wooden chairs become folding chairs, rubble becomes foam blocks, a stone lion becomes a sculpture of the animal carved in cob soil, and the door at the lobby's back is painted the bright hue of a green screen. The liberties the artist takes with these departures suggest the inevitable discrepancies of his feat, as the objects in the original can only appear to be something, and only from the single viewpoint of the

photographer—which is indeed the view one sees entering the gallery's front doors. As I turned after walking to the opposite end of the space, I discovered that the backs of the erected window beams, tables, and benches are hollow. Like the title's reference to an architectural folly, the structures are literally hollow.

All history is a reconstruction, so what is the value in Akhavan creating an unfaithful rendition of this photograph? It signals how an image presents an opportunity to point to how something was and as a result how it is. In 2005, the authors of Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War wrote that the image of the Twin Towers falling after the attacks on September 11 became one that the American state could not exorcise. It was proof of their humiliation and spectacular defeat and it pushed the effectiveness of image warfare to its end. Still, the media proliferation of that image has left it hard to remember the trauma of what it depicts, leaving cavities—like those in follies—in popular memory, ready to be filled with narratives that serve today's political and military endeavors. Cavity is indeed a central term in the curator, Kim Nguyen's, introductory text.

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The images of the museum's looting were ripe for U.S. instrumentalization in response to 9/11's terror. They visualize failure, of a museum not performing its primary function of preserving and safeguarding art and artifacts deemed valuable to a nation's identity.

Museums are one ingredient for a healthy state and, as a result, they have their own complex politics regarding what objects are acquired and exhibited and how these serve the interests of government regimes or private donors. It is important to note that this exhibition would not be shown in most museums in its present state. The cob soil the artist used for the central lion sculpture contains bugs, mold, and other living beings that would contaminate a collection, and the dirt would need to be baked, steamed or otherwise fumigated before installation. Like the image of the looted lobby, Akhavan's work threatens the notion that museums, and the objects they care for, will last forever.

The historical closeness of the photograph's event and its circulation as one piece of a far-reaching war signals the universality of Akhavan's project, as we are all complacent in the power structures that instrumentalize such images. Nguyen writes:

"Pillagers, plunderers, conquerors, pirates, looters, robbers, aren't we all? Under the guise of care we possess, we control, we manage, we dominate, we colonize—these are the foundations of freedom."

Museums originated as places for imperial powers to collect and produce knowledge, and today's arts institutions continue to hold this power; under the "guise of care," cultural workers are the gatekeepers within them. Akhavan concluded at a recent talk: "I make work to wake up and not hate myself," and considering this statement in light of this new work, the presence of contradiction in how the artist, and everyone else, must navigate the often problematic, opportunist infrastructure that governs contemporary life is both comforting and troubling. As Nguyen suggests, contradiction is present in the lives of individuals just as it is in museums and the Bush administration's rush to enter the war in Iraq because of alleged "weapons of mass destruction." Perhaps a more generous form of freedom comes in recognizing it, as Akhavan attempts by building out the holes and slippages of one image.