

Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative
But a Storm Is Blowing from Paradise:
Abbas Akhavan on Plants, Bronze, and “Studies”

My name is Abbas Akhavan. I am a multidisciplinary artist, and a lot of my work is site-specific, or residency-based.

The work [*Study for a Monument*] is part of an ongoing series of plants. Part of me entered this work with a kind of naiveté, thinking “Oh, I really like horticulture, I like plants, I’m going to Kew Gardens to look at their plant life.” I did go to Kew Gardens, I met some plant researchers, and horticulturalists. And I realized that, in fact, horticulture or plant life, is a remarkably complex, convoluted discourse, an area of research that you just can’t enter on a whim. I actually learned a lot about plants, in an unexpected way, in that, since I sculpted these with wax, I realized, as I was making the work, I would understand the anatomy of the plant so well, subsequently to being in such close range to it. The plants in real life are very, very small, and I’ve made them much larger, to be of a monumental scale. That upscaling also was a reference to the body, so the thistle is the size of a human head.

So I learned a lot about sculpture, and ways of negotiating, for the first time ever, a material like bronze, wanting to understand how bronze behaves, both in its obedience and its disobedience, trying to create controlled accidents, and then realizing that plant life resembles bronze, if you allow bronze to deteriorate from its determined path.

So these plants are stand-ins to address certain politics. Part of me started to make this work because as I was reading the news, there was this tearing down of this Saddam Hussein monument. Bronze was a huge part of his self-mythologizing. I’ve been really interested in materials that have a historical place at the beginnings of civilization, like ceramics, textiles, bronze, and copper, which all have roots in the weaponry, shelter, and vessels. My objective, at least, wasn’t to make another bronze sculpture that looked like a monument. There’s a relationship to these materials that might be more instinctual or alchemical.

The work is meant to show bronze in a transient way—that was part of the reason for showing the plants on sheets. I wanted them to look like confiscated goods, or weaponry when it’s confiscated. Some of them look like knives, and some of them look like grenades or land mines. At the same time, the reference is partially to mass burials. As humans, we have a very sensual or physical relationship to bed sheets, so the bronze is in intimate vicinity to the body—both of the viewer, and also they become more bodily looking.

The objective is to have people come and look at it in a way that mimics the way they embody their bodies in their daily routine, the way you would look at somebody’s grave kneeling down, or you would look at an accident, or the way you would encounter a garden, potentially, even. I didn’t want them on pedestals or on the wall. There’s a kind of bodily memory to walking around these objects.

A lot of my works are called studies because I think that undermines the idea of expertise, in that nothing is finished, nothing is complete, and everything has the potential to be something better or something different. I think there’s something kind of fruitful in that moment of being more open-ended, in every respect, in my practice.