



Huma Bhabha

Art in America, November 2010
(author: Steel Stillman)

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Art in America

Huma Bhabha makes strange and compelling work-sculpture, drawing, photography and prints-that engages the arts and histories of many world cultures. The authenticity of her expression is matched by few artists in this cut-and-paste era. Born in 1962 in the sprawling Pakistani port city of Karachi, she came to the U.S. in 1981 to go to art school (she has a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design and earned an MFA from Columbia University in 1987), but she has maintained strong ties to her native land and returns there annually to visit.

Though trained in two-dimensional mediums, Bhabha is perhaps best known for her sculpture, which she began exhibiting in 1993. Like organisms aspiring to higher forms of life, her works have evolved, in the years since, from vaguely biomorphic floor pieces into assemblage-based masks, heads and full-length figures that often reside on elaborated plinths. Admired for many years primarily by other artists, Bhabha became more widely known when successive versions (2002, 2005 and 2006) of an untitled prostrating figure made of clay and swathed in black plastic were exhibited in New York and London.

Bhabha works within an essentially figurative idiom, using conventional types-the bust, and the walking, sitting or reclining human figure-as the metaphoric basis for an art that, like science fiction, reports and warns at the same time. The ragged look of her forms is intriguingly deceptive. Her sculptures, for instance, are often compared to ruins-as if they had merely fallen apart-when, in fact, they are meticulous fabrications, constructed from the distressed bric-a-brac that piles up around her studio's periphery. A more apposite fiction would describe Bhabha's work, whether in two or three dimensions, as having been improvised by some lone survivor of an unspecified catastrophe, reflecting on what has happened and on what may yet be.

*Bhabha has exhibited in the U.S. and abroad since the early '90s. This year, her work was featured in, among other surveys, the Whitney Biennial and the 14th International Sculpture Biennale in Carrara, Italy. In November, she opens two exhibitions in New York-sculpture at Salon 94's new space on the Bowery, and large-scale drawings on photographs at Peter Blum Gallery in Chelsea. Her sculpture *The Orientalist* (2007) remains on view in New York's City Hall Park until Dec. 3, as part of the Public Art Fund's exhibition "Statuesque." [See A.i.A., Oct. '10.]*

Since 2002, Bhabha has lived and worked in a loft building in downtown Poughkeepsie, N.Y., with her husband, the artist Jason Fox, whom she married in 1990. Her studio is one flight below their living quarters; we met there twice in early August, surrounded by works in progress.

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STEEL STILLMAN Were you interested in art as a child?

HUMA BHABHA I was-from a very young age. My mother was an artist. Although not a professional, she'd been quite prolific before she married, and her artistic nature was a strong presence in our house. There were art books all around, and she would help me with projects. I particularly liked drawing and painting, and began, in high school, to think about becoming an artist myself.

SS How did you wind up going to RISD, and what did you study there?

HB There were few good art schools in Pakistan, and my father, who was a businessman, offered to pay for me to study abroad. He rather liked the idea of my traveling-we had taken some long trips as a family when I was growing up, and he had been to the States many times. At RISD, I majored in printmaking and took painting classes. I wanted to learn a variety of skills. By my last year I was adding three-dimensional objects onto my two-dimensional work.

SS Did you go directly to graduate school?

HB No, I went back to Pakistan for nearly two years after graduating from RISD in 1985. My father was ill and died the following year. When I came back to go to Columbia, I was making paintings, but instead of canvas I worked on found wood and metal, focusing on formal qualities-on shape, space and color. During my second year, I began working as an assistant to Meyer Vaisman, and I continued working for him after I graduated. In many ways that was a better education than being at Columbia had been-I got to see how a professional artist worked, and I began going to galleries more and meeting people in the art world.

After Columbia, I shared a studio downtown, near Canal Street. I was experimenting with plastics, foam rubber and spray paint, and with an assortment of objects that included feathers and panty hose. I never studied sculpture in school, so everything I made came out of trial and error. Gradually the pieces became larger and more organic-looking-like mutated creatures with enamel-painted, skinlike surfaces-and started moving onto the floor. By 1992, I knew I was making three-dimensional work. And the following year, when I showed several of these floor pieces in a two-person show with Jason at Kim Light in L.A., they looked like extraterrestrials that had just landed.

SS I recall some masks from the mid-'90s that seemed informed by science fiction.

HB I'd always been interested in horror and science fiction movies. I remember watching *Star Trek* as a kid and later being influenced by *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Then, as my work developed and I realized it had affinities with David Cronenberg's films or the "Alien" series, I began investigating science fiction more intensively. It became clear that the issues that genre deals with-the state of the world, the future and the fate of human beings-paralleled my own interests and sensibility.

Looking at science fiction movies and comic books, I realized that the artists making them were using African masks and the art of other times and cultures to develop their characters. So I began buying cheap plastic masks and using them as armatures for much more elaborate masklike sculptures that eventually incorporated papier-mâché, modeling paste and found objects.

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These were followed, in the late '90s, by a series of more intimate sculptures, tabletop-scaled personal shrines, made out of found materials and objects that I painted over or altered. The shrines had a figurative, almost landscape quality that anticipated my more recent work-but it hadn't yet occurred to me that I could construct them in a more open, less finished way.

SS How were these works received?

HB Nobody seemed interested in the masks or the shrines-they were rarely exhibited and none sold. I'd take my slides around to galleries, and they'd be returned the next day. In a way, the lack of response at that time was liberating: I could do whatever I wanted.

SS Then, in 2000, you had a breakthrough.

HB I'd been looking at a lot of Rauschenberg's work when *Centaur* just sort of happened. There was a chair in my studio that I'd been considering for a sculpture, and there were a number of white Styrofoam mannequin heads lying around; so I stuck a head on the chair, thinking I'd construct something around it, and hung my jacket on the back to get an idea of what to do. It looked perfect just as it was.

Of course, I sat and thought about it for a long time and got other people's reactions. *Centaur* was very different from what I had been doing. But it felt strong, and it referenced other kinds of art that I liked; so I decided I would try to continue working in that way. My process had always had a beginning, middle and end. Now, I realized, I could just stop when I noticed something interesting. This discovery changed my work-by leaving things more open and raw, I was leaving more places for the viewer to enter.

SS When did you begin working with clay?

HB At the end of 2001 I went to Guadalajara with Jason and Chris Hammerlein. Jason and Chris were working on sculpture projects and I was just tagging along. One day, while Chris was working with clay, I started playing around with it and made a sculpture of a foot.

When I got back to New York, I bought some clay for myself, and experimented. Eventually, I decided to make a reclining figure. I was working on a table, and began with the hands, keeping the rest of the clay covered-and moist-under a black plastic garbage bag, as I'd seen Chris do. I was trying to figure out the torso, when it suddenly dawned on me that the black garbage bag was itself a sculptural element. The war in Afghanistan had just begun, so the resemblance to a body bag-or to a Muslim praying-seemed undeniable.

SS It sounds like this piece came together in a moment, the way *Centaur* had.

HB Exactly. The table remained as an element and I gave the torso a tail, which in the first version was a wire with a small disco ball attached-but there was no need to layer any more onto it.

SS You've described this untitled sculpture [2002, 2005 and 2006]-which was first shown at Momenta Art, in Brooklyn-as something of a memorial to the victims of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

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HB When I begin a piece, I'm working as a formalist-that is how I make decisions and establish relationships. I construct an armature, and work out issues of size, strength and complexity. Other references don't usually pop up until I start adding clay or paint, and then I have to decide whether to heighten or suppress them. As I work on the pieces, I'm aware of them in a very abstract way-I mean that literally and figuratively-and I go back and forth between things that I know I'm referencing and things I'd like to reference. Viewers won't necessarily make the same connections, but I want them to have the pleasure of looking at something that calls other things to mind.

SS In the last six years your sculptures have become more vertical. The figures, which you sometimes refer to as characters, have risen up and often stand, becoming at once animate and architectonic. How, for instance, did *Sleeper* [2005] come about?

HB I made *Sleeper* when I was working toward my second show at ATM Gallery in New York. I wanted to make a kouros. The base for *Sleeper* is a found drywall box, with neither top nor bottom, probably a base for a sink, which I turned on its side. I built the figure up from the bottom, using scraps of wood as an armature, and adding Styrofoam and wire until it felt strong enough to begin adding clay. *Sleeper* was important because, as I was covering it with clay, I felt confident enough to leave the armature showing at the back. With its feet stuck in its base, the sculpture reminded me of how movie mobsters put their enemies in cement shoes and sent them to "sleep with the fishes."

SS The following year you made *Man of No Importance* [2006], a head that is also a body, tottering along on a rebar cane. In it you use Styrofoam packaging-made to cocoon material goods-to structure and house the human.

HB That sculpture was the third of an ongoing series of large walking-head pieces inspired by Picasso's roughly 4-foot-tall *Head of a Woman* [1932] at MoMA. The front of *Man of No Importance* is covered with clay, and is a weird cyclopean portrait; the scale shifts in the back, and suggests the ruined interior of a classical building. The Styrofoam armature is stacked as if it were the stone of some enormous monument; and inside, completing that illusion, is a small clay figurine.

SS Your largest piece is still . . . *And in the track of a hundred thousand years, out of the heart of dust Hope sprang again, like greenness* (2007), whose title is a quote from *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. It was conceived as an installation for Salon 94's Upper East Side space, with its curved wall of windows opening onto a landscaped townhouse garden.

HB I had seen a photograph of Rodin standing on a platform in his studio, with broken and unfinished pieces scattered around-everything all white and raw-looking. So I decided to make a large, low plinth with figures on it, thinking that it would look like my studio if my studio were a sculpture garden. My approach to the piece was to put it together out of components-doing on a larger scale what I do to make individual figures.

I began by working on the base, gradually building it up with leaves, newspaper, sand and paint. The more I worked, the more dark and eroded-looking it became, like the terraced ruins of an ancient city, with perhaps another one, or more, underneath. I wanted the two figures to face away and be different from one another, each with a back and a front that seemed incompatible with the other side.

SS It had a distinctly theatrical feel.

HB The plinth functions as a kind of set for these two characters-seemingly frozen in time and space-linging around the remnants of what might have been a campfire or a bombed-out site.

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SS Where did the idea of making carved cork figures come from?

HB In 2008, a stationery shop in Poughkeepsie was selling off rectangular slabs of cork covered in old wrapping paper that had been used to prop up displays. Cork is a seductive material-similar to Styrofoam but organic-and soft and easy to work with. The first pieces I made were busts, with carved, double-faced heads emerging from blocks of black-painted, burned-looking cork. I'm now making larger cork sculptures, whole figures with faces on each of the four sides. Often these works can look prehistoric and cartoony at the same time-and their demonic humor relates them to my earlier masks.

SS You've now made several sarcophaguslike sculptures, similar to the one you showed last spring in the Whitney Biennial. I particularly like *1,000* [2009], in which what appear to be two separate sculptures-a head and a reclining torso made out of tree branches-sit atop a homemade-looking box that could be their container.

HB Actually not everything would quite fit, but it is important that it looks like it all could. The whole piece is modular, and quite unlike a sarcophagus in that you can dismantle everything, including the box, and put it back together. When I made it, I'd just come back from my yearly trip to Pakistan, and the painting on the bottom refers to the kind of graffiti you see there, where the walls are used as message boards. Unconsciously, I may have had the idea of messages between the living and the dead on my mind-which is one way of thinking about art.

SS Until December, your seated bronze figure *The Orientalist* will be on display in City Hall Park. Facing the mayor's office, with its back toward Wall Street and the ruins of the World Trade Center nearby, this figure is a compendium of sculptural elements-feet, torso and head monumentalized, sitting in an ordinary chair, as if wasted by unspecified horror.

HB I was thinking of an Egyptian seated figure. I made it the way I make most of my sculptures-using Styrofoam, wood, metal, wire and clay-knowing that the original would be destroyed to make the bronze. The challenge was to convey the character of these different materials using only their textural attributes. *The Orientalist* is very much a cyborg, with a masklike face that reminds me of the monstrous portrait of Dorian Gray. And giving it that title seemed to link Oscar Wilde's metaphor to Edward Said's critique of Western hubris.

SS What led you to start drawing on photographs?

HB I hadn't done much drawing since the late '90s, and then, in 2007, Peter Blum asked me to work on a series of prints. I decided on photogravures, and, during my next trip to Pakistan, I took lots of black-and-white photographs, mostly of stalled construction sites and desert landscapes near the sea.

When I got back home, I made enlargements, and began drawing on them with pen or brush and india ink. I started out with feet, which in the context of the photographs looked enormous-as though they belonged to giants or were close-ups of monumental sculpture. But I also made drawings that showed figures in architectural settings or reclining in barren landscapes, as well as drawings that were more abstract.

SS Since finishing that portfolio, *Reconstructions* [2007], you've continued drawing on photographs, many taken in Karachi. Using them brings that part of your life, and that landscape, into the foreground of your work.

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HB That landscape is a part of me. But I've started taking pictures here, too. What's most important is that the photographs not be too specific, so that I can alter or keep whatever I need.

SS The photographs do for your drawings what the plinths do for your sculptural figures—they become the setting for implied narratives.

HB As with the sculptures, there is never a particular narrative; that is something you have to make up for yourself. I give you clues, but my own interests stay in the background. What I love about the photographs is that they provide so much information, and my role is simply to add more.

SS You weave the fictional into the given; and, for a viewer, it's exciting to be in doubt about which is which. Last week you were working on a large color photograph of a marble quarry at Carrara; over it you'd drawn an enormous head in such a way that details in the landscape served also as features of the face.

HB That image was taken as a horizontal, but when I started working on it I rotated it to vertical, to make it less obvious. And, as I do with other photographs, I used color inks to lend a Technicolor quality, and collage to create spatial insets. Sometimes these choices are made for formal reasons, but they can have associative echoes as well, like the little George Clooney picture that's in another of the new photo-drawings.

SS You've also shot staged, unaltered photographs of finished sculptures in particular settings. For instance you've taken photographs of feet sculptures on the beach, and more provocatively, you shot a version of the prostrating garbage-bag sculpture in a Moorish-looking courtyard in Mexico.

HB I think of these as being cinematic-like film stills. They are indebted to Brancusi's use of photography to extend the narrative range of his sculpture, and to early Cindy Sherman.

SS In the last few years you've begun again to make pastel drawings, which was something you did a lot of in high school.

HB Who knows why these things come back, but they do. This time I'm making imaginary heads, but, of course, they refer to all the things I'm interested in—ancient sculpture, Fauvism, Picasso, African masks, Expressionism, German Neo-Expressionism, Basquiat and so on. I enjoy making them and find them humorous in the way I find monsters from comics and movies humorous.

SS The fact that they are all faces relates them to your sculptures and creates a weird mirroring effect: we look at them and they look back at us.

HB It does sometimes feel as though the monster were looking back at you. Maybe they are all self-portraits.

SS Thinking about your work as a whole, it's clear that your curiosity spans a wide range of cultures and geographies, yet your access is always through art or images.

HB My core subject revolves around the figurative, and whenever I'm stuck I look for references all over the place. I'll look at books on Greek or African art, or on Rembrandt, or I'll notice a photograph in the newspaper of two people sitting a certain way. There is no hierarchy in my looking; the question is only whether something fits, whether it solves the problem at hand.

SS In a lecture last spring at the New School, you showed a slide of a spread from a Karachi newspaper; on one side was an image from the war in Afghanistan, and on the other, a picture of an ancient sculpture. The mash-up of past and present looked like the kind of future described in Philip K. Dick's novels.

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HB I love the dark humor of Dick's fictional worlds. A lot of what he was writing about seems to have come true. Many of his books deal with how industrialization and post-industrialization affect his characters' sanity, and his questions about where reality begins and ends remain pertinent. Having come of age during the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, I quickly realized that there were always other, possibly truer explanations for what was going on than whatever was in the newspapers or on TV. I think that's why it was so great to find-first in science fiction movies, and later in reading Dick-not just a way of fantasizing but a way of thinking.

SS You've said that the themes of your work are war, colonialism, displacement and memories of home, and that these are eternal themes of art in all cultures.

HB My work is all about visual things from different places. Having spent periods in Pakistan, in New York City and now here in Poughkeepsie, I sometimes feel like a nomad, carrying myself from one setting, one landscape, to another.

In many ways my work is quite traditional. Art has always been a response to circumstances, whether in one's own situation or in the world as a whole. These days, the global is local-and globalization is the new colonialism. These themes are eternal because, as human beings, we haven't been able to get beyond them.

SS Some writers have related your work to the mid-20th-century modernism of Giacometti or Dubuffet, and have wondered if it isn't reactionary. Clearly there are similarities between that work and yours, but the differences, like the differences between the two eras, seem important. In the '50s the threats were big, unitary and out there; today they come in all sizes, are multiple and everywhere. You may be using the grammar of existentialist modernism, but you're using it as one element in a multiplicity of allusions and procedures.

HB I don't feel like I'm redoing modernism. I'm making a completely different kind of hybrid, a composite in which all the elements are recognizable and separate, but somehow make a whole. There is nothing ironic or cynical in my choices; all the references-whether to Giacometti, pop culture or Cambodian statuary-are sincerely made, and are responses to the world we live in today.

SS Why are there so many feet in your work?

HB Three images come immediately to mind: the advancing feet of kouros, a simple step that signified movement and a major advance for figurative sculpture; the painting of van Gogh's shoes, which I've loved and tried to emulate since I was young; and a memory of a movie from years ago, in which one of the characters was blown up, leaving only a pair of sneakers with little bits of bloody bones sticking out.

SS Whether in the physical humor of your figures' poses or in the unanticipated color relationships among their materials, there is surprising beauty in your work.

HB My goal is that each work should be intense in its presence, and aggressively attract the viewer. I'm very interested in beauty, but like it best when it's unexpected. Karachi, for example, is not a beautiful city, but occasionally you will notice something as you are driving around-like an impromptu construction shack made out of found planks of wood-that can take your breath away. Sometimes beauty is a matter of taking the time to appreciate something in a different way, or noticing connections where you hadn't seen them before.