



Huma Bhabha

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(author: Gilda Williams)
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Among the paradoxes in Huma Bhabha's extraordinary sculpture is that although it feels fully in sync with our times—politically uncertain, historically self-conscious, formally experimental—the work transmits great timelessness. The three untitled, totemlike figures, 2010, that were in the front room at Stephen Friedman Gallery seem as ancient as anything ever erected on Easter Island. Solid, stony presences with roughly pitted surfaces that suggest hours of laborious masonwork, these partially blackened idols are mostly made of cork, pointing to an unexpected fragility: Were these monoliths to tip over, they would crumble. Bhabha's art is rife with such paradoxes. She obviously works with extreme care, declaring her sculptures finished only when every detail is resolved with precision, but her attentiveness is at odds with the material instability of the final product. Nothing feels rushed or thoughtless, yet her sculptures—beaten, burned, frail—nonetheless feel doomed.

Bumps in the Road, 2008, which dominated the second gallery, is an unforgettable work. Occupying a raised, rough metal plinth, like a low table, are two contrasting figures—or is it a single bizarre body, violently chopped in two? The left seems all head, the right all legs. The legs are unadorned wooden planks, positioned to mimic a Giacometti-like striding man, sliding on two metal beams like long ice skates—no bumps in the road for this skating, headless figure, then. On more shaky ground is the mesmerizing second character, whose grossly enlarged head is painstakingly worked in brown papier-mâché, though it looks like it's made from delicately wrought spitballs. The surface is cracking up, exposing pitiful bits of chicken wire that strain to hold it together—like Pangaea slowly breaking up on this odd, potato-like planet. Close inspection reveals that this unearthly head carries beneath it two shapeless arms and grotesquely spindly legs; phallic, pipelike eyes protrude invasively while sagging ears extend about a foot in length. A lot of care has been given to crafting this creature, though certainly not in an attempt to render it beautiful. The impression is of some all-seeing, all-hearing, pensive being, but a glimpse at the back reveals this deformed

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mastermind as hollow. His cranium is void, replaced by a strange, angular architecture; whether classical or modernist, this Styrofoam construction lies in ruins. This monstrous figure is strangely filled with historical reflection and gravitas, yet it is materially weightless and would be utterly unstable were it not for a couple of overconstructed steel “crutches” keeping it upright.

Materially and conceptually, everything in this work comes across as salvaged from wreckage, whether in the scrap materials or in the return of antiquated art-historical questions, such as modernism’s debate between figuration and abstraction. Overlaps in time and an abiding sense of imminent collapse suggest Smithson’s entropy, but the resulting forms—the enormous misshapen head, for example—recall Georg Baselitz’s early pulped and bruised lumps of humanity. Who could have imagined, even just a decade ago, an exciting contemporary sculptor bringing together Giacometti, Smithson, and Baselitz? The standing figure’s wooden hip bone declares **FRONT** on one side, **BACK** on the other; whether it stands at a juncture between time or space is uncertain. Bhabha claims that one of her principal concerns is ensuring her works won’t fall over; in fact they stand erect—like animated beings, not just occupying our space but sharing our historic, political, and artistic conundrums.