



*Huma Bhabha : ICA - Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston
Artforum, 2019
(author: Dan Adler)
1/2*

ARTFORUM



View of “Huma Bhabha,” 2019. Photo: Charles Mayer Photography.

Drawing on more than two decades of work, “They Live” was Huma Bhabha’s largest survey to date. Curator Eva Respini deftly highlighted the artist’s remarkable range of temporal and spatial reference points—from the primeval to the present; from Cuzco, Peru, to Karachi, Pakistan—while focusing on her imagery of the body. Together, the selected pieces expressed complex critiques of what it means to become “civilized” and to civilize others—and attended to the damage inherent in both processes. Although Bhabha leaves her work open to multiple readings, Respini framed those questions, to some extent, within the legacy of colonialism, invoked in the works’ titles and figurative elements.

In the first gallery stood the six-foot-tall bronze *The Orientalist*, 2007, featuring an enthroned figure on a plinth. Prior to casting, Bhabha combined mundane materials—a chair, lengths of wood, some clay and chicken wire—to represent, in a fragmentary fashion, a corpus with shabby limbs and battered bones. Signs of abuse abound: A hole has been punctured in one foot, for instance. Despite its partial appearance, this

Huma Bhabha : ICA - Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston
Artforum, 2019
(author: Dan Adler)
2/2

personage has a visceral and imposing presence, enhanced by a mask (of death? of battle?) that bears an exceedingly menacing smile. And yet all associations remain speculative: One may never know who or what this imagined artifact (mis)represents. The wall text, thankfully, did not settle the matter.

While the title of the striking assemblage *Tupac Amaru*, 2010, does suggest a context—referencing an Incan indigenous monarch at the fore of sixteenth-century resistance to Spanish colonizers—here Bhabha veered from literal depiction to explore the multiple methods of making, adorning, and arranging to approximate “body,” “skin,” or “flesh.” Delicate gestures reward the attentive viewer: Within the work’s armature are offerings of little seedpods and a small green dog tag. A phallic horn sticks out with comic prominence, recalling the genitals of Jimmie Durham’s satirical *Self-Portrait*, 1986. And like Durham, Bhabha plays with expectations about authenticity in representation. Processes and rituals in themselves may be her primary interests, or the artist might be aping sacralization to mock the very concept of doing justice to anyone’s memory. With all of its totems and giant heads, Bhabha’s work is ultimately about the idea of the monument—conceptually and materially, across history. Her series of photogravures, “Reconstructions,” 2007, drove home this point, depicting large structures, studies of feet, and sketches of standing or prostrate figures against washy backgrounds that suggested an immense scale. Still, despite its formal range and narrative complexity, her project may never measure up to the enormity (and diversity) of what has been lost. Perhaps this is why she is constantly compelled to deconstruct, literally and metaphorically.

Indeed, many of her monuments are abstractions. With its prominent tire tread, the sculpture *Road to Balkh*, 2015, may reference Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage’s *Automobile Tire Print*, 1953—the record of a Model A Ford’s path over twenty glued-together sheets of paper—but such similarities seem superficial given the haptic importance of the large, flat bed of road beneath the rubber in Bhabha’s work. Her concoction of clay, cork, nail polish, and pigment came across as a bruised site of accumulated conquest; this notion was enhanced by the sculpture’s title, which refers to a strategic bit of territory on the Silk Road that has been cruelly contested for centuries. The physical imprint of the vehicle registers the impact of oppression, the brutalization of all those who were simply in the way, on the long path to Progress.

By laboriously (and often comically) processing tragic events through the lenses of natural and artificial materials, Bhabha ensures a careful balance of poetic and political resonance that resists communicative clarity.