



Huma Bhabha's Extraterrestrials Land In New York
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Otherworldly sculptures warp the spaces and histories they occupy, in shows at Clearing and Salon 94, and for the Met Roof Garden commission

Installed above the Metropolitan Museum of Art's imported bedrooms, ceilings and tombs, above its vitrines and containers full of old porcelain, jewels and weaponry, above Athena Partheonos, *Ugolino and his Sons and the Temple of Dendur*, and above its archives, where 5,000 years of art and objects have been categorized by period and style and are preserved within the museum's holdings, Pakistani-born Huma Bhabha has, for this year's Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Roof Garden Commission, staged 'We Come in Peace', an unsettling, post-apocalyptic confrontation between two extraterrestrial entities. These enormous bronze sculptures warp the public space they occupy and comment on the histories they stand upon, claiming the Met itself as their pedestal.

The first of these is the titular *We Come in Peace* (2018), a twelve-foot tall, weather-beaten golem. The figure is brooding, its brittle surface textured with gashes and scars. Its blue torso is marked with various asterisks, like ritualistic markings that shape and contour the creature's multi-sexed frame. A yellow swath of paint stains one of its knees: does this idol kneel, as the draped, bowing figure across from it does? As the many eyes that surround its head – cocked, buggy or gouged out – survey New York City's skyline, I want to ask, What does it want to see?

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Huma Bhabha, *Moment to Moment*, 2013–14, installation view, C L E A R I N G, New York, 2018. Courtesy: C L E A R I N G, New York/Brussels

Opposite Peace lies Benaam (2018), an 18-foot long, prostrate, Sphinx-like figure. (Its title means ‘unnamed’ or ‘without name’ in Urdu.) Unlike its many-faced counterpart, Benaam’s face and most of its body is covered with a glossy, black, tarp-like shroud. Two gnarled hands protrude from the front, evoking a scene of prayer or surrender. From the other end, rubble resembling fecal matter, bones and industrial waste extend past Benaam’s shroud, as if the figure was slowly creeping toward its counterpart while leaving behind an abject trace. Bhabha’s spare, minimal installation leaves the rest of the Met’s terrace empty, intensifying the drama between these two figures.

Bhabha, who now lives in Poughkeepsie, NY, is known for her grotesque, semi-figurative sculptures, which she creates out of industrial waste and found material. Originally made with air-dried clay, cork, plastic and Styrofoam, these two sculptures were crafted by the artist to scale before they were cast in bronze. Like Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* or Freud’s *Prosthenesengott* (Prosthetic-God), ‘We Come in Peace’ cobbles together various historical styles and traditions to collapse the bridge between eastern and western art production, and in its doing so, inverts the pulpy sci-fi visitation implied by its title; we come up to these ‘otherworldly’ sculptures, and within them, find multiple entry points into our own political and environmental ‘others’: the Islamic other, the mutilated other, the discarded other.

‘We Come in Peace’ is one of three shows currently on display in New York. In ‘With a Trace’ at Salon 94’s Upper East Side location, Bhabha presents five large-scale photo-drawings alongside several studies on paper for the Metropolitan commission, as well as an early version of *Benaam*, titled *Untitled* (2006). An untitled third exhibition at Clearing, also just a few blocks south of the Met, includes abstract sculptures and drawings made between 2013 and 2015.

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Huma Bhabha, *Untitled*, 2006, clay, wire, plastic, paint, 1.1 x 2.4 x 1.5 m, installation view, Salon 94, New York. Courtesy: Salon 94, New York

For the five photo-drawings at Salon 94, each *Untitled* (all works 2017), Bhabha used images of places she's lived – Poughkeepsie, Bhopal, Kauai, and her hometown Karachi, Pakistan – as backdrops for ink, acrylic paint and oilstick faces. Behind these large, distended heads, their appearance irresolute, almost animal and biomechanical, lie desolate fields of dirt and desert, their hues stained with color and in some areas seem warped or dissolving. Growing out of the gouged eye-sockets of one figure are ripe nuggets of marijuana; caked within the mouth of another is a mound of dirt. Neither apparition or alien, nor skull or helmet, these giant psychedelic renderings keep you guessing as to what constitutes a face or an identity.

At *Clearing*, this mode of questioning continues. In *Moment to Moment* (2013–14), two slabs of what seem like light, aerated Styrofoam are stacked one upon other and hang at eye level. Like *We Come in Peace*, however, the appearance of fragility is contradicted by its actual material – these are not found pieces of foam but rather white, lacquered bronze. In the center of the gallery lies *Snakes* (2013), a sculpture made of rubber tire and metal. One tire braids around another; both lie flat on the floor, their busted treads facing up. Standing above these two shredded reptilian belts, you get a sense of the intensely terrestrial nomadism and the abraded forms of embodiment that continue to inform Bhabha's suggestive, intensely visceral universe.