



Huma Bhabha

The Nifty 50, Huma Bhabha, Sculptor
The New York Times, February 2010
(author: Jonathan Fischer)



When the Pakistani-born sculptor Huma Bhabha won the Emerging Artist Award from the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in 2008, **The Times** called her “the artistic equivalent of a magpie” — which was really a couth way of saying that Bhabha is the art world’s most exciting Dumpster diver. She creates **her works** — grotesque, often entropic figures that can suggest paranoia and trauma — using construction materials and found objects: a shaft of piping, say, or a sinewy, wooden chair. Frequently, she’ll simply grab whatever detritus she finds on the street.

“It kind of goes back to not having so much money and not having so much space,” says Bhabha, who is 47 and has only emerged in recent years as an in-demand artist. “I always worked with light materials — a lot of fabric, Styrofoam. And it’s cheaper to find materials. For the sculptures, it’s a challenge but it’s still kind of working. And if I need to get something,” — like, in a store — “I’ll get it.”

Bhabha, who was born in Karachi, recently returned from one of her yearly visits to Pakistan. Her work will appear in the **Whitney Biennial**, which runs Feb. 25 through May 30. Bhabha’s efforts are often interpreted through a political, internationalist lens, because of her provenance and because of the images she sometimes conjures. (Take her prostrate figure kneeling in a trash-bag burka, for example.) Even her most orderly works appear to have survived an art-museum shelling.

But Bhabha, it turns out, considers herself more of an intuitive formalist. “I don’t work in a thematic way. One sculpture leads to the next,” she says. So when observers mine her work for messages, they’re mostly projecting. “People see a political element to the work. It’s not my intention. It’s not didactic or specific. They see more than what I initially had in mind,” she says. Instead, she meditates on new ways to work around the tactile challenges of sculpture-making. Whatever else might influence her work — Classical and African sculpture; Picasso, Giacometti, Daumier and the German Neo-Expressionists; the sci-fi dystopias of Philip K. Dick — is a byproduct of the creative process.

Bhabha lives in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., with her husband, the artist Jason Fox, and she immigrated to the United States in the ‘80s to attend the Rhode Island School of Design, and then Columbia. She started out studying painting and printmaking but organically gravitated toward incorporating found items into assemblage-style works. Quickly, she abandoned painting altogether. “The stuff I was doing was on the wall,” she says. “But eventually it grew off the wall and onto the floor.”