



## Huma Bhabha

*Huma Bhabha Does Rodin Meets Mad Max*  
The Village Voice, December 2012  
(author: Christian Viveros-Faune)

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Bhabha steps into MOMA P.S.1.

Cruise up to the sunken plaza at Rockefeller Center and you'll see one triumphant version: Paul Manship's 1933 recumbent metal statue of Prometheus holding a 24-karat flame. Behind him a line from Aeschylus is carved into the granite wall: "Prometheus, teacher in every art, brought the fire that hath proved to mortals a means to mighty ends."

The Greek Titan who defied the gods (and was then chained to a rock to have his liver mauled by an eagle for eternity as punishment) has held a special place in the human imagination. A timeless meme of the quest for knowledge, tragic striving, and the recidivist nature of human hubris, the Prometheus myth resurfaces wherever and whenever world-endangering crises set in.

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Back in the time of the Romantics, Lord Byron and Mary Shelley used the Prometheus story to allegorize the mayhem provoked by the French Revolution. (The subtitle of Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* is *The Modern Prometheus*.) More recently, Ridley Scott recast the grisly classical tale in even gorier sci-fi Hollywood garb. But few artists in any medium have addressed the bathos and pathos of Promethean overreach with the strength of the Pakistani-born American sculptor Huma Bhabha. Her junkyard figures made from everyday materials—like primordial clay and 21st-century nonbiodegradable trash—convey both natural entropy and man-made destruction with a power that appears, to coin a phrase, modern-day mythical.

Bhabha's sculptures—some 30 of which are on view at MOMA P.S.1, along with another 20 of the artist's often brutally expressionistic drawings—do a number on the generally modest expectations surrounding much contemporary art. Her first solo museum exhibition, this robust effort gives the lie to the idea recently expressed in print by one influential young LES dealer that emerging artists can't be bothered to make grand statements today. An existentialist of the postmodern-skeptical variety, the 50-year-old Bhabha (her sculpture only gained commercial and institutional traction after a New York gallery show in 2004) instead makes work that pursues the goals of ambitious artists everywhere. Hers is a rare species of mesmerizing bravura 3-D art that, at once, addresses her medium, its history, and the fundamental issues—aesthetic and otherwise—that assail our own chronic *whatever* age.

No doubt, Bhabha's vintage-looking figures prove her main strength. Her sculptures compost historical archetypes like Greek kouroi, Dogon masks, and the sort of modernist statuary exemplified by Alberto Giacometti, while ultimately taking their cue from Robert Rauschenberg's 1960s-era combines—those cool-hot threshers of imagery that so ably represented what W.H. Auden called "the age of anxiety." Assemblages rather than paintings or sculptures per se, Rauschenberg's early work, like Bhabha's, turns principally on its additive, combinatory qualities. To wit, a working definition of the term "assemblage": a collage-like technique for creating three-dimensional compositions from found objects that, while retaining reference to their original components, often acquire new personal or sociopolitical meaning—depending on the artist or context in question. With Rauschenberg, the radical impulse was always to seize the world. With Bhabha, the world is captured, but largely through history.

Bhabha's reliance on the whole of art history (the current art world is generally loath to admit the value of contemporary artists referencing work before the 1960s) fills her creations with a magpie quality that actively encompasses a range of civilizations. Walking through rooms of her hybrid homunculi can recall the Met's Egyptian rooms or its ancient Near Eastern holdings. Yet at their best, Bhabha's rough-hewn, freestanding figures and plinth-supported busts suggest both old-timey golem lore and Philip K. Dick futurist ruins. (Creation stories and HAL from *2001: A Space Odyssey* also come to mind.) This artist's expansive art metaphorically contains centuries; her abject materials, meanwhile, repeatedly point to present and future environmental disasters.

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Starting with the first two works in the courtyard entrance to the museum, Bhabha's sculptures achieve a timelessness that's key to the appeal of their recycled, Rodin-meets-Mad Max aesthetic. Arranged like sentinels, the artist's painted, eight-foot-high cast-bronze anthropomorphs stand guard before the gates of Queens's main temple of contemporary art. Confected using materials including Styrofoam, cork, clay, chicken wire, and scrap wood, her male hominid resembles several Black Fridays' worth of stacked electronic packing. Bhabha's female figure, on the other hand, features far more fearsome traits. Titled *God of Some Things*, her cork-dark breasts and gorgon's face remind us that, before matriarchal societies gave way to more recent patriarchies, women confidently slung the sword as well as the 'gina (consider, for instance, Ishtar, goddess of war *and* love).

Inside the museum, Bhabha's phantasmagoria takes on smaller but no less robust dimensions. One room, for example, presents as many as five sculptures, including *Ripley*, a deceptively simple totem made up of two white Styrofoam blocks with Magic Marker features; its recesses hide a newsprint image (of a young man) like a secret talent. Another gallery features one of the show's standouts, *There Is No Killing What Can't Be Killed*. A blue Styrofoam head on a blackened cork base, it's the kind of hulking apparition likely to give even adults nightmares. And finally, there's the exhibition's title work, *Unnatural Histories*, which the artist places front and center in one of the show's largest galleries. A two-part sculpture made from her unusual mélange of cast-off materials (including scrap paper, metal, plastic, burlap, lace, feathers, and a radial tire), it presents Predator's face and Alien's tail in the guise of a single non-sustainable, landfill-larded creature.

It's Prometheus by way of Constantin Brancusi and chain saw carving (Country Music Television's *Chainsaw Gang*, eat your heart out), and another excellent example of how Bhabha manages to represent contemporary man's tragic flaws by making art from our own toxic leavings.