



## Huma Bhabha

*Huma Bhabha: Unnatural Histories, MoMA PS1*

This is Tomorrow, November 2014

(author: Catherine Spencer)

1/2

**this is tomorrow**  
Contemporary Art Magazine

The title of Huma Bhabha's exhibition at MoMA PS1, 'Unnatural Histories', contains and undoes its opposite, exposing the dubious claims to veracity and objectivity made by so-called 'natural histories', and the strategies of display and valuation through which such histories have been woven, particularly within the context of Western museology. Bhabha's figurative sculptures range from full-bodied standing figures to busts and masks resting on plinths, each a conglomerate of materials and cultural allusions. In one respect, Bhabha's project enacts a post-colonial levelling, fusing African sculpture, Greek Kouri, pre-Columbian carvings and post-1945 European expressionism to reflect knowingly on the arbitrary nature of classificatory boundaries, while underlining how objects and images have always migrated across such divisions.

The powers of hybridity course through the exhibition, stemming in part from Bhabha's acute but playful awareness of multiple sculptural traditions. The texture of the totemic figure 'There is No Killing What Can't be Killed' (2012) is as velvety black and porous as the rock of an Easter Island figure, and as volumetric as the hacked wood of a Georg Baselitz. Closer inspection reveals it to be painted Styrofoam, which while referencing mass production, the shipping of packaged goods around the world in a globalised economy and environmental threat, also has a sculptural pedigree of its own, having been a medium of choice for artists such as Henry Moore in the fashioning of maquettes. In this respect, the location of 'Unnatural Histories' at PS1 is particularly appropriate, as if constituting a 21st century update on MoMA's seminal 1961 exhibition 'The Art of Assemblage', which named the process of sculptural bricolage and invention which Bhabha deploys so effectively.

Yet emphasising this element of Bhabha's works makes them sound slightly sententious when they are not: their humanistic intent feels genuine, but deliberately *recherché*, cut through with wit and humour. The first work which greets visitors to the show, and which shares the exhibition's title, is a case in point: 'Unnatural Histories' (2012) consists of a pink, flesh-like excrescence draped ectoplasmically over a schlocky armature of Styrofoam blocks. This creature trails a strip of rubber, embossed with a network of tyre-treads, which spools out behind it over a wrack of debris. This irreverent seriousness is further underlined by Bhabha's secretion of a photo cutout of a man within the skeleton of her creation, one hand of which points out at the viewer in a move that complicates definitions of the recognisably 'human'.

*Huma Bhabha: Unnatural Histories, MoMA PS1*

This is Tomorrow, November 2014

(author: Catherine Spencer)

2/2

The traumatic reference of works like 'Unnatural Histories' might be bodily, psychological and environmental, but it is also the mediated trauma of science fictions that thrill as much as they horrify - the result of an apocalyptic imaginary in which a blasted future is anticipated through the lens of an ancient past. The two-dimensional works complimenting the sculptures at PS1 comparably mine science fiction's (often anthropologically and ethnographically informed) fantasies about belonging and the creation or destruction of worlds. Several 'Untitled' works (all 2012) see Bhabha overlay photographic remnants with acrylic paint in forms that unite Moore's atom heads with the crown of Darth Vader's helmet, or an inhabitant of the 'Planet of the Apes'. These works on paper in particular relate Bhabha's work to abstract-figurative explorations of existential trauma and threat to the human body in the years after the Second World War, but they also reflect the way in which these fears have been explored - and enjoyed - through cinema, television and comics.

Bhabha's work is not without its moments of pathos, however. The baroque textures and amalgamations of most works in 'Unnatural Histories' contrast with the much starker construction of 'Untitled' (2007). Two clay hands protrude from one end of a mound of thick black plastic, confirming the overall impression of a supplicant body kneeling inside a bag. At the other end of the bag-shape lies a little scattering of dirt, as if during its process through the black sack bodily form has been eroded. The piece, part of a series that brought Bhabha to increased critical attention during the 2000s, powerfully unites references to body bags and torture with prayer, worship, submission and oppression, so that 'Untitled' becomes a charged site for reflection on the complex interrelation of geopolitics and belief.

'Untitled' might equally reflect the longstanding threat to, and challenges of, the humanist project, through its explicit focus on the question of what is considered human, and what is defined as non-human. It is in the asking of this question that Bhabha's engagement with cultures of display and her heterogeneous approach to materials acquires particular force, given that attacks on other individuals and cultures have often been justified by defining the other as 'sub-human' or 'non-human'. This is a driving dynamic behind colonial and neo-colonial enterprises that has imprinted itself on museological and artistic understanding, but it is one that Bhabha constantly turns back on itself throughout 'Unnatural Histories'.