



Huma Bhabha: Facing Giants
Brooklyn Rail, June 2021
(author: Susan Harris)
1/5

BROOKLYN RAIL



Installation view: *Huma Bhabha: Facing Giants*, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York. Photo: Dan Bradica.

Huma Bhabha: *Facing Giants* is a tour de force of new sculptures and painted and drawn collaged works on paper that expands upon and distills Bhabha's 30-year passage in transforming common and discarded materials into powerfully expressive testaments of the human condition. Carving, cutting, constructing, casting, chiseling, modeling, layering, and manipulating, Bhabha utilizes her hands and intuition to create a panoply of hybrid and otherworldly beings that attest equally to their making and being.

Huma Bhabha: Facing Giants

Brooklyn Rail, June 2021

(author: Susan Harris)

2/5

Walking from the outside world into the voluminous, ground floor gallery, visitors instinctively slow down, if not halt entirely, to take in the dramatic tableau. Presiding over a gathering of six other sculptural personages of different scales and typologies is *Prime Traveler* (2021), a nearly eight-foot-tall bronze, hieratic god/goddess/monster whose stillness and formidable gaze summon visitors to enter and bear witness to the congregants' individual and collective stories. Fashioned from Bhabha's signature materials of cork with its naturally eroded, prehistoric appearance and Styrofoam, a modern environmental pollutant, *Prime Traveler* is cast in bronze, preserving every detail, mark, and characteristic of the original. In the same genre, *Amy* (2021) and *I Can Hear Everything You Think* (2020) seem to rise and assume form out of their dark, earthy foundations into which Bhabha carves and transmutes into body and legs, respectively. She crowns the cork with Styrofoam blocks that she chisels and inscribes with lines and marks to articulate facial features, buttocks, breasts, and arms on which she sparingly applies lines and color.



Installation view: *Huma Bhabha: Facing Giants*, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York. Photo: Dan Bradica.

Huma Bhabha: Facing Giants

Brooklyn Rail, June 2021

(author: Susan Harris)

3/5

These refined, intersex beings contrast with *Soft Touch* (2021) and *Listen to What I'm Not Saying* (2021), domestically scaled and vigorously modeled heads in plaster and clay whose roiling, agitated, flesh-toned surfaces convey their inner anguish. Small, sunken spheres for eyes, smaller holes for nostrils and ears, and an indentation denoting a mouth are meager preparation for the large, gaping aperture with wires and other indeterminate matter on the "back" of *Soft Touch* that evokes the agony of Munch's *Scream* or a head blown open. Bhabha's distressed and disfigured sculptures bring to mind Leon Golub's scarred and corroded canvases of colossal heads and monsters that he literally scraped with meat cleavers and solvents to replicate the effect of violence upon the bodies and psyches of victims and perpetrators throughout time. Bhabha's hybrid creatures, like Golub's flayed and mutilated heads and torsos, are sites of intersection between human exteriority and interiority laying bare the forces of power and pain to which people have been subjected eternally. Both artists are deeply and ethically invested in the human image and scour the historical continuum of figurative representation for inspiration. Bhabha acknowledges a vast and eclectic range of influences on her art including sci-fi and horror films, ancient architecture, Egyptian seated figures, ancient Greek statuary, the broken remains of the colossal Roman Constantine, the ancient Greco-Buddhist sculpture of Gandhara, Indian and African sculpture, Picasso, Giacometti, Dubuffet, Rodin, Rauschenberg, her birthplace of Karachi, Pakistan, holocausts throughout time, and the untold acts of horror and cruelty in contemporary times perpetrated against powerless, marginalized, and disenfranchised peoples.

An assemblage of more intimate, uniformly scaled sculptures cast in bronze and drawings greet visitors on the second floor. The installation seems to channel numerous styles and themes from art history and prompts consideration of the relationship between Bhabha's drawing and sculpture. Not related in any literal way, the drawings and sculpture exist and develop side by side. Bhabha has been carving lines into cork and Styrofoam that are insistently drawing, and she draws on sculptures with oil stick, spray paint,

Huma Bhabha: Facing Giants
 Brooklyn Rail, March 2021
 (author: Susan Harris)
 4/5

and nail polish (check out the pink toenails on *Receiver* [2019] in the next room). Conversely, she has said about the lines and marks in her drawings which are largely intuitive and improvisational, “I am carving into the images that I draw on, such as photos of landscapes or calendar images of wolves.”



Installation view: *Huma Bhabha: Facing Giants*, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York. Photo: Dan Bradica.

The new drawings are evocatively layered visages with vibrantly colored grounds and painterly passages of pastel and acrylic, variously meandering, purposeful, and aggressive lines and marks, and cutouts of animals from wildlife calendars. The interpenetrating features of animals and humans—alternately emphasized or obscured by bold gestures of color and line—posit a convergence of nature and mankind. Francis Picabia’s “Monster” paintings and “Transparencies” from the 1920s and ’30s come to mind with their layered juxtapositions of human forms and natural landscapes drawn from disparate sources and overdrawn with sinuous lines that suggest psychic projections of inner worlds.

Huma Bhabha: Facing Giants
 Brooklyn Rail, May 2021
 (author: Susan Harris)
 5/5

Seeing Bhabha's drawings through the field of her sculptures calls attention to formal and psychological correspondences, say, between *Shadow Gang* (2021), the creature-assemblage of constructed, modeled, and found parts unified by its overall white surface and the beautiful, demonic head in profile suffused in a white, diaphanous, painterly veil, or between the pockmarked *Hollow Triumph* (2021) ravaged with holes and the ferocious, mask-head baring animal teeth surrounded in saturated, hot pink. So, too, do the shifting contours that one experiences as a moving animation of line walking around *Poet* and *Rosebud* (both 2021) with their active, Medardo Rosso-like, contour-dissolving surfaces correspond to the forceful, black lines circumscribing the tender, rust-colored, "leopard" head that seem to be resolving the three-dimensional form before our very eyes.

Bhabha's inventory of humanity culminates in two monumental sculptures and four works on paper in the gallery's Stone Room. Standing without a base directly on the floor, the majestic eight-foot-tall *Receiver* actively shares the space with its visitors. *I Know*, a seven-foot-tall dark and ponderous cork rectangular stela, carved in relief and set into an architectural niche, is reminiscent of Matisse's "Back" series which are radically reductive bas-reliefs set into a wall. The nearly seven-foot-tall drawings, meanwhile, underscore the magnitude of Bhabha's enterprise in the scale and boldness of her process with which she seamlessly merges animal, human, and natural kingdoms. *Huma Bhabha: Facing Giants* heralds Bhabha as one of today's most important figurative sculptors and solidifies her place in the history of 20th and 21st century sculpture. Her cadre of fierce, haunting, and dignified figures elicit empathy and grace in the beholder, making possible the imagining of a new kind of humanity.