



SALON 94

BEAUTIFUL/ DECAY™

Interview: Huma Bhabha



Huma Bhabha is not unlike a medieval alchemist, transmuting discarded materials into works of art—morphing civilization's dusty detritus into works of stunning beauty. They freely collapse ideological mores, the annals of history, contemporary art, yet transcend concretized fact or fiction. Instead, they resurrect their charred faces, standing as relics from a near distant future, or war-ravaged effigies to a post-apocalyptic past. This practice of temporal and physical shape-shifting seems to be both esoteric and playful at once—Bhabha notes that “turning lead into gold, or at least trying...is more interesting than just using gold.” Her visceral effigies are perhaps best described as “anti-monuments;” her works, in their materiality, do not desire permanence—rather, Bhabha formalizes their very transience through her use of ephemeral, corruptible and humble materials.



SALON 94

SL: Can you describe your creative process, from the inception of an idea, to the decision to fabricate a sculpture, and the construction process?

HB: You develop some sort of routine, but at the same time I try to keep it fluid, and many times trying to build a structure that will stand up is the backbone physically and conceptually.

SL: In a recent text, you stated you are interested in creating “landscapes of human debris.” Can you expand upon this idea?

HB: I'm not really interested, but that seems to be a result of formal necessity and the anguish of current events.



SL: Your practice of incorporating, as you stated, “humble, discarded materials”, such as red clay, chicken wire, paper, Styrofoam, burlap, etc., into your works call to mind the endeavors of medieval alchemists, transmuting common metals to gold by way of science, chemistry, and a little bit of magic—in this case, the detritus of civilization into artworks of stunning beauty. Can you elaborate on your choice to incorporate these specific sorts of materials, and how you feel they function as a part of the works’ connotative qualities?

HB: I like the idea of alchemy.... turning waste into value.... spiritual value? Financial value? Turning lead into gold, or at least trying is more interesting than just using gold.



SALON 94

SL: In many pieces you expose the artifice, or structure of the works, such as leaving chicken wire clearly visible, which is typically used as an internal matrix. It's an interesting choice to lay bare the process of the sculpture - how do you conceive of this tactic?

HB: Seeing the chicken wire is like when in a Godard movie Belmondo turns and talks to the audience.

SL: What's your process like as far as gathering materials, and how did you begin working in this fashion?

HB: Walking... Keeping an eye out for dumpsters... Poverty.

SL: Your works pull in references to an incredibly divergent array of topics. You span decades, geography, collapsing and expanding icons and images ranging from war-ravaged Greco-Roman statues, Indian sculpture, Constructivism, Picasso, the elegance of Giacometti, sometimes within single works. This practice calls to mind a particular postmodern hybridity, increasingly relevant in our rapidly globalizing, information culture. What would you say you turn to for inspiration in creating your works- what epochs or pieces or images inspire you?

HB: I think great artists have always been what we call postmodern... I like how De Kooning described art and its history as a big pot of soup that you serve yourself from when you need to.

SL: Some critics have described your strategy to be a kind of "neo-primitivism" or as a counter-endeavor to the Modernist project. In many ways I feel your works, in some ways, pay homage to the tropes of Modernism, yet are distinctly different in their approach and connotations. How do you feel about these terms being used in reference to your works—do you think it applies? And how do you conceive of your works within that loaded concept of "modernity"? (If at all.)

HB: I think those terms are potentially limiting... strategically commenting on modernism is dated and boring, but I'm obviously influenced by art that is described as modernism... but my process seems to leave it in such a battered state that it becomes un-familiar.

SL: In some ways your pieces are more "anti-monuments" than monuments, given the fragility and ephemerality of their materials, in some ways challenging the linear progress of history. How do you feel your works function with relation to the notion of monument, and memory?

HB: The idea of monument and death is the ultimate raw material of art.

SL: I was extremely struck by your work "Untitled," which depicts two hands peeking, as if prostrate, from what looks like a black enclosure with a tail trailing out. This image to me connotes both feelings of reverence, devotion, futility, but also violence and war, as if the subject was being dragged in a body bag. Where did the inspiration for this piece come? What are some ideas you have regarding the aesthetics of this piece?



S A L O N 9 4

HB: It began as a sculpture inspired by keeping clay wet and then... like a conceptual Golem it soaked up my political residue.

SL: Congratulations on recently winning the 2008 Emerging Artist Award from the Aldrich Contemporary Museum. I read you will be debuting a new piece there, called Bumps In The Road- a sort of ominous, helmeted like figure on a unstable looking plinth. Can you talk about this newer piece?

HB: The piece started with the idea of a stage which also acts as a plinth which is made of 2 sections, and the 2 figures (one on each section) quickly developed a comic relationship...one is almost all head the other all legs...walking down a road like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza... I wanted the sculpture to have that sense of almost cinematic movement that you see in Rodins' "The Burghers of Calais".

SL: For those interested in learning more about your works and their context—can you recommend texts, exhibits, artists, and musicians to explore?

HB: Seamus Heany, The Count of Monte Christo, Robert Fisk, Kim Jones, The Bourne Identity (Book & Movie)

SL: What other projects are you currently working on?

HB: A horizontal sculpture made up of 2 sculptures which make up a reclining/sleeping figure... drawings on color photos & portrait drawings with pastel.

SL: Where can we see your work in the coming months?

HB: Group shows, art fairs, and a show in Paris in the spring.