

December 17, 2010

1 Artist, 2 Shows, 2 Mediums, 1 Vision

By **HOLLAND COTTER**

Correction Appended

One of the most interesting figurative sculptors around, Huma Bhabha — born in Pakistan in 1962; now living in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. — recently began making large-scale photo-based works she calls drawings. And although her approach to both forms is similar, they've been separated in her two current solo shows, with sculptures at Salon 94 Bowery on the Lower East Side, and drawings with a few sculptures at Peter Blum Chelsea.

In sculpture she's developed a distinctive form of hand-worked assemblage. She pieces the figures together from low-tech, castoff materials — Styrofoam, chicken wire, duct tape — after which she does some cutting or carving and frequently adds modeled clay and touches of paint.

The results look like horror film versions of Greek, Indian or African religious sculptures, or like the detached tobacco-fiend heads and disembodied clodhoppers in [Philip Guston's](#) late paintings. Scary, funny and commanding, the figures seem to be simultaneously piecing themselves together and decomposing. The wit with which Ms. Bhabha uses materials has been underestimated, but you can see it in the new sculptures at Salon 94 Bowery, which are some of her most abstract so far.

They are also her most architectural. With its teetering stack of odd-size Styrofoam blocks, a piece like "H.Q." suggests a modernist high-rise that stands vertical almost entirely thanks to the support of two scrawny, clay-covered buttresses. A related but untitled piece brings to mind a cross between an apartment building, a columbarium and a kitchen refrigerator, and stands on a hollow wooden box, whose inside is painted, as if in a subterranean chamber, with a tangle of graffiti.

As a source for these images, Ms. Bhabha points to new buildings that go up in and around her hometown, Karachi, and then are abandoned before completion and left to disintegrate. In the photo-based work at Blum, we see pictures she has taken of these or similar structures, usually set in desertlike terrain, where they look like contemporary versions of ancient ruins.

And just as her sculptures are additive, so is the photographic work, with drawn figures introduced into each. Scaled so they appear to tower over the landscape, they bring to mind Egyptian colossi, Bamiyan Buddhas and giant versions of Kongo power-figures. At the same time, because they're just roughly sketched in black, they look insubstantial, even accidental, like shadows or spreading stains. Finally, just as she gives some of her sculptures a finishing grace note of paint, she covers some of the photographs with curtains of washy color, which, in the circumstances, looks toxic rather than beautifying.

In her sculptures over the last several years, Ms. Bhabha has created a highly distinctive visual universe, one that is most gripping when its various cultural references are fully absorbed and altered. This absorption feels only partial in some of the new figures, and the images in some of the photographic pieces feel simply layered rather than integrated and complicated.

Much of the work in both shows is dated 2010, which could point to the problem: overproduction in a short time. It wouldn't hurt if, at this juncture, Ms. Bhabha slowed down a little and — for sure — forgot about trying to fill Blum's ridiculously large Chelsea space. She's coming into midcareer, a period when a style can, without vigilance, turn into a set of moves.

She's proved herself too original and self-stretching an artist to let that happen, but taking some time now really to concentrate wouldn't hurt.

“Huma Bhabha: Drawings” is on view through Jan. 15 at Peter Blum Chelsea, 526 West 29th Street; (212) 244-6055, peterblumgallery.com. “Huma Bhabha: Sculptures” is on view through Sunday at Salon 94 Bowery, 243 Bowery, at Stanton Street, Lower East Side; (212) 979-0001, salon94.com.

Correction: December 20, 2010

In a previous version of this article, a credit with a picture of a construction by the sculptor Huma Bhabha misidentified the gallery that provided the photograph. It was Salon 94 — not Peter Blum Gallery, New York.