



SALON 94
FREEMAN'S

ART WORLD

NEW WORK HUMA BHABHA

Huma Bhabha

"I don't start out with a political agenda... but at the same time I don't censor or edit the work if those meanings begin to appear"



1 **Untitled** (2005), mixed media, (installation view), dimensions variable

2 **Athos** (2006), wood, clay, wire, styrofoam, metal stud, acrylic paint, 195.6 x 71.7 x 74.9cm

3 **What Becomes Ashes** (2005), mixed media, 8.3 x 177.2 x 49.5cm

4 **Untitled** (2007), C-print, 101.6 x 152.4cm

Opposite: **They Don't Speak** (2007) wood, acrylic paint, clay, styrofoam, wire, 25.4 x 48.3 x 74.9cm

HUMA BHABHA is primarily a sculptor, using unlikely materials such as styrofoam, discarded wood and wire to fashion figures which suggest both burnt-out images from war zones, and phoenixes rising from the ashes of destruction. Steeped in the long history of sculpture, her work is an investigation into the troubling nature of humanity. In her recent series of photographs and photogravures, Bhabha – currently based in the US – reflects on the landscape of her native Pakistan, suggesting the poetry in ancient and modern ruins. *INTERVIEW: Ben Luke*

What is the origin of the name Bhabha?
It is from Gujarat, India.

Do you travel to Pakistan regularly and how important are your roots there?

I travel to Karachi every year, and would like to be able to visit twice a year. My immediate family lives there, so my roots are deep.

Your recent photogravures are based on photographs. Where did you take them?

My family's house in Pakistan is near the city beach. The photos were taken a little further away from the developed area. I wanted the beautiful desert landscape as a backdrop; also I did not want any people in the photos.

What are the platforms that recur in the photogravures and some of the drawings?

Karachi is a very large spread-out city on the Arabian Sea. It has a desert climate and arid vegetation, very beautiful in the way that undeveloped areas can be. The actual city seems to be under constant construction. There are a lot of unfinished foundations, which I realised could work well as plinths for imaginary monumental sculptures. The idea of the urban ruin was also fascinating to explore, as if Robert Smithson's industrial sites of Passaic [New Jersey, USA] met the lost wonders of ancient times.

Describe your photogravure technique...

Photogravures are photo-etchings. I took the black and white photographs and then drew on them with Indian ink. They were then scanned and exposed on to an etching plate which picks up every mark you make. The combination of the photographic detail and the drawing is translated into a different medium when printed with a rich black ink.

Do the photogravures relate to the photographs you take of your sculpture?

They relate in terms of the landscape, but I see the photogravures as more romantic and turbulent and about drawing. The colour photographs are more cinematic – the

sculpture functions as an actor in different locations – with more humour. I also see them as relating to the history of artists, such as Brancusi, who use the documentation of their work as another genre.

Feet are a recurrent image in your work. What is their significance?

Feet operate on so many levels of meaning. They can be naturalistic, they can be stylised, they cause you to imagine the missing body, they can be static or in motion, they're ruins or evidence. Shelley's *Ozymandias* gives a perfect image of how I see the feet in my work. [In Shelley's poem, King Ozymandias' desert-bound "vast and trunkless legs of stone" bear the famous legend "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"]

Any specific sites you have in mind?

Not really. I look at a lot of images of ancient sites and sculptures but the work is just as much influenced by the ruins that are being created every day by war and environmental destruction. I'm interested and saddened by how constantly ruins are being freshly born.

Do your figures and heads relate to actual faces and bodies – or your own?

No, they come from looking at a lot of sculpture of different sorts and then they just develop organically as I construct them. Sometimes I use my or my husband's proportions to determine sizes.

In both their improvised feel and their imagery, your sculptures recall Picasso's. I love his work... he was one of the first European artists to be strongly influenced by African art. I'm also influenced by African art and Picasso's use of it.

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How would you describe your approach to materials in your sculptures?

On one hand my use of materials relates to artists like Robert Rauschenberg and the history of assemblage and found objects. But I also see the use of discarded materials

relating to how, in places like Pakistan, everything is used or saved; whereas, in a place like America, almost everything is discarded once it is no longer brand new.

Is your Muslim background present in your work?

My *Untitled* (2005) sculpture, depicting a prostrate figure covered by a black garbage bag with clay hands and a trail of rubble, can be read as an expression of humility, submission or adoration. I came to see it as a monument; not to any specific incident, but to the general wave of death throughout the Islamic world as a result of recent wars.

How political is your art?

I don't start out with a political agenda, nor do I censor or edit the work if those meanings begin to appear. I read the news and try to follow events in the world, so I think it is quite natural for my interest in politics to filter through into my work. But that is not a starting point. It usually starts with: "How do I keep this from falling over?"

What does living in Poughkeepsie, north of New York, bring to your outlook?

Living in Poughkeepsie has been very positive for me, once I got used to being here. There are no distractions – all you do is think about and do your work. Plus it is very beautiful.

What do you read and does it affect your work?

The last book I read was called *Angkor: An Essay on Art and Imperialism* (1971) by Jan Myrdal and Gun Kessle. It explains the reasons behind certain physical styles in the history of [Cambodian ruins at] Angkor and the effects of imperialist thought on such sites.

Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?

The Night Watch [1642] by Rembrandt. *Exhibition: 2008 Emerging Artist Award Exhibition at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT, US, 14 Sep–8 Feb 2009*

CV

Born 1962, Karachi, Pakistan Studied: Columbia University, New York; Rhode Island, School of Design, Providence, US
Lives and works: Poughkeepsie, US Represented: Salon 94, New York; ATM Gallery, New York; Peter Blum, New York



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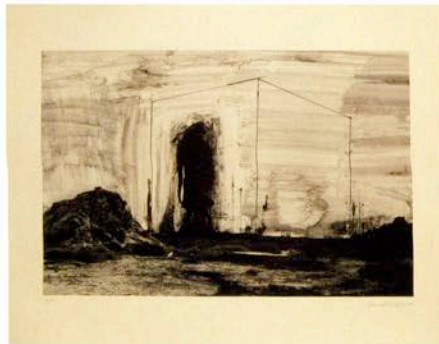




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Above **Reconstructions** (2007), photogravures (from a portfolio of 16), 75 x 93cm
Opposite **The Orientalist** (2007), bronze, 104.1 x 83.8 x 177.8cm



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