

ARTnews

SUMMER 2010

The World's Top 200 Collectors

Tips on How to Catch an Art Thief

Untangling the Salander Mess

Huma Bhabha: Where Pharaohs Meet Mad Max





THE ARTIST AND THE SUBJECT, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALLERIE, NEW YORK

an
no
w
in
G
an
"L
gr
fo
tu
ev
ci
—
H

IN HUMA BHABHA'S sculpture *My Skull Is Too Small* (2009), featured in this spring's Whitney Biennial, two figures are poised at either end of a narrow wooden pedestal. One is masklike, with three sets of apertures that seem to stare from a crumbling clay face; the other is more like a totem, with a hand sprouting from the top of a charred blocky form. Although they look like archeological relics, these constructions are assembled from modern materials such as Styrofoam, aluminum, and chicken wire.

"I think of it as a boat, with these two figures going to the other side," says Bhabha, 48, the diminutive Pakistani-born

Where Pharaohs Meet Mad Max

Raw brutalism and
gritty humor underlie
Huma Bhabha's
antiheroic monuments

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

artist. She is sitting in her Poughkeepsie, New York, studio, near a sculpture of a giant finger on a pedestal and piles of wood scraps. "It has a relationship to the *Raft of the Medusa* in idea, and even physically," she says, referring to Théodore Géricault's painting memorializing shipwrecked passengers and crew struggling between death and survival. Her wooden "boat," smooth as a Donald Judd box yet marked up with graffiti, could also suggest a packing crate, a coffin, or a plinth for a monument. Like all of her fragmented figurative sculptures, which come out of the tradition of assemblage, this one evokes the wounded and war torn. Bhabha has erected a decidedly antiheroic monument to human frailty.

Hilarie M. Sheets is a contributing editor of ARTnews.



ABOVE Portrait of the artist.
OPPOSITE In *My Skull Is Too Small*, 2009, the figures resemble archeological relics but are composed of modern-day junk and suggest the struggle between survival and death.



ABOVE *The Orientalist*, 2007, posed as an Egyptian pharaoh, is on view in "Statuesque," at City Hall Park in New York through December 3.

OPPOSITE TOP The large hands extending from *Untitled*, 2006, were made from air-dry clay, which Bhabha experimented with in Mexico.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM *Bumps in the Road*, 2008, with its giant decapitated head and disembodied wooden legs, speaks of war and poetry.

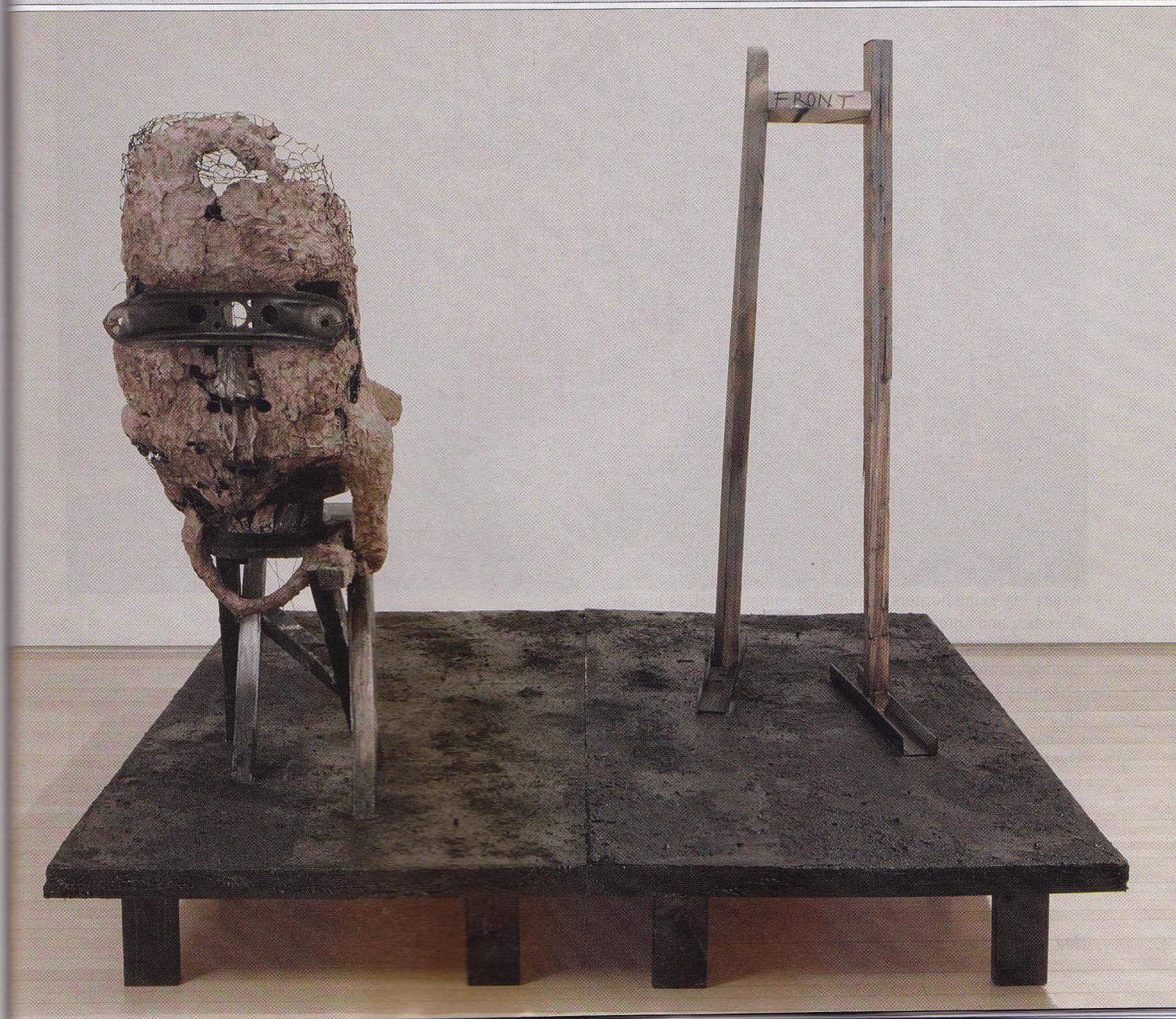
"It's a piece about aging to a certain degree," says Gary Carrion-Murayari, cocurator of the biennial with Francesco Bonami. "There's this sense of the body under duress, and there's the hand that emerges, which you can read as either anguish or hopefulness. It's the ambiguity that's really interesting. She calls forth a lot of evocative images in her sculptures, but it's not heavy handed."

Independent curator Bob Nickas knew Bhabha's work from group shows in the '90s, but he saw it in a new light after her first New York solo show, at ATM Gallery in 2004. "Certain work is only going to really resonate in a certain moment, and in a time of war you feel all those cracks and fissures and the pathos of Huma's work," says Nickas. "She's lived here a long time, but she's from a place that's in increasing turmoil. It's not just Pakistan; it's a certain part of the world, a certain reality. That's always been reflected in her work. She's really on the cusp of this political-poetical object."

As a curator of the 2005 edition of "Greater New York," Nickas chose Bhabha for the show, and in 2006 he brought Museum of Modern Art director Glenn Lowry and Salon 94 owner Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, among others, to see her second exhibition at ATM. Salon 94 now corepresents Bhabha, whose sculptures sell for between \$20,000 and \$65,000. In November, she will present her new sculpture at Salon 94, with a concurrent exhibition of large-scale photogravures at Peter Blum Gallery in New York. She is also one of several artists mining the lineage of figurative sculpture included in the show "Statuesque," organized by the Public Art Fund, at City Hall Park in New York through December 3. Her bronze seated figure there, *The Orientalist* (2007), is described as "an Egyptian pharaoh meets Mad Max" by director Nicholas Baume.

BHABHA, WHO WAS BORN and raised in Karachi, never studied sculpture. She did, however, paint and draw as a child, encouraged by her mother, a talented amateur artist who always had art books in the house. Intent on going to art school but with few options close to home, Bhabha moved to the United States when she was 19 to attend the Rhode Island School of Design. It turned out to be a good fit. She studied printmaking and painting there, graduating in 1985. After returning to Karachi and getting a visa, Bhabha came back to the United States to earn her master's degree in art at Columbia University. There, she met her husband, the artist Jason Fox, and graduated in 1989. She's been based in New York ever since, although she returns regularly to Pakistan.

While at Columbia, Bhabha says, she was influenced by Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray; she began adding collage to canvas and pieces of wood, creating relief-like constructions. After graduating, she rented a small studio downtown, abandoned painting, and started experimenting with found and bought objects, including feathers and Styrofoam, which she affixed to fabric. "I was watching a lot of horror and science fiction," says Bhabha, who was particularly influenced by David Cronenberg's early films. "I liked the creatures and raw look of the special effects. The idea of puppets and the element of mutation became very much a part of my work." Over the next decade, she showed her figurative forms, often covered with fabric and painted over with enamel, in several group shows at Feature in New York, among other venues, and had one solo show at Kim Light Gallery in Los Angeles



in 1993. Yet she felt her work was largely under the radar.

The year 2002 was a turning point for Bhabha. She and Fox moved from Manhattan to a renovated building in downtown Poughkeepsie, an hour and a half outside the city, so they could have more room to work. (She still uses junk that she salvaged from the landlord as he was fixing up other apartments in the building.) With the luxury of space, she began making larger, human-size works. "Maybe as a result of working for so long in a really modest, intimate scale," says Nickas, "when she scaled up, she ended up having a very good eye for detail."

Bhabha also figured out how to build solid armatures so her

realized this large mass wrapped in black with two hands emerging from it was already a figure, and she decided to keep it in this raw form. "It looked like someone kneeling down in a praying position," says Bhabha. "It also functioned as a body bag. That was when the war had started and a lot of people were, and are still, dying in Afghanistan and Iraq."

Bhabha liked the way it looked just lying on a table, and she exhibited it that way at Momena Art in Brooklyn in 2002. She reworked the piece at a larger scale on a white plinth, with a trail of rubble coming out the back, and presented it in the "Greater New York" show, after which she was



figures could stand, after a decade of making sculpture that was largely reclining. That came in part from her day job working for a taxidermist in the nearby town of Rhinebeck, where big-game hunters would bring animals such as buffalos, baboons, and antelopes to be preserved as trophies. "I learned a lot about how to attach things and how to make them strong," says Bhabha, who worked on finishing the animals after they had been stuffed and also made elaborate dioramas. "My own work got a little bolder."

That same year, she took a formative trip to Mexico, where she was introduced to clay. Bhabha didn't know how to work with the material and didn't want to have to fire it, so she decided to experiment with making a figure out of air-dry clay. She completed two large hands first, but was struggling with the bulk of the body, which she covered each night with a black plastic garbage bag to keep it moist. At some point she

The chillingly titled *1,000*, 2009, with graffiti running across the coffinlike base and its shattered figures, suggests the idea of 1,000 deaths and counting.

commissioned by the Saatchi Gallery in London to create another. "The piece is a monument to all victims—the men, women, and children who die every day," she says.

CLAY CONTINUES TO PLAY a prominent role in her sculptures, pressed into chicken wire to form a kind of skin or modeled into body parts to animate stacked pieces of wood and Styrofoam. "As soon as you put the clay on, this thing is just alive. It's constantly looking at you," says Bhabha, who cites Rodin and Giacometti as important influences. The stylized, archaic posture of her standing figures calls to mind the Greek

kouroi as well as Indian and Egyptian sculptures, and their primitive expressions nod to African art and Picasso. "I think it all looks beautiful together," says Bhabha, who also likes to incorporate futuristic elements. She is a huge fan of science fiction and watches a lot of movies and television in the relative isolation of Poughkeepsie, and she listens to rock and reggae on the radio. "Art should be entertaining on a certain level, which has a lot to do with the grotesque and funny faces." Indeed, beneath the raw brutalism of her work is a gritty humor. In her 2008 piece *Bumps in the Road*, for instance, a giant decapitated head sits on a platform next to two disem-

In Bhabha's photograph *Untitled, a C-print from 2007, her sculpture of feet resembles the remnants of an ancient monument in the desert.*



bodied wooden legs that look like an old mismatched couple.

Bhabha likes to summon the idea of the sarcophagus. "A lot of sculpture is made for religious or funerary reasons, and I'm drawn to these kinds of objects," she says. Her first version of a sarcophagus was *Cargo Tomb* (2005), a small horizontal figure with clasped hands lying on a plank. A spill of shiny white enamel over its clay face emphasizes its classic Egyptian profile. Yet viewed from behind, it reveals itself to be two-faced, like so many of Bhabha's works, with the wrinkly-looking gray clay morphing into an elephant head with a horn jutting out. "I like one thing leading into another," says Bhabha. "It starts

to look like cargo and also like what would be in a tomb."

The cinematic quality in her work is more pronounced in her photogravures, which she began making several years ago at the invitation of Peter Blum, who showed her first series in 2007. She began by taking photographs in and near Karachi, a flat landscape at the edge of the Arabian Sea. "There is a lot of construction in Karachi that is never completed and is covered in dust and sand," says Bhabha, who focused on the foundations of unfinished houses as well as the desert landscape at the beach. She blew up the plates and, using dark atmospheric washes of black ink, inserted imaginary monuments on those plinths and stretches of scrappy terrain.

Bhabha has photographed her own sculptures as well—including her praying figure and her two cracked clay feet—set within the desert landscape like actors on location. Shot from a low vantage point, the feet assume a monumental scale even

though they are only life-size in reality. Other people pointed out to Bhabha the relationship between that photo and Shelley's poem "Ozymandias," whose line "two vast and trunkless legs of stone stand in the desert" refers to what remains of a king of a fallen empire. Bhabha hadn't known the poem when making the piece, but she happily accepted it as part of the meaning. "I don't start out trying to tell a story about something specific," she says. "A lot of it is an intuitive response to the materials, what works, what doesn't work. But if certain things begin to look like something or allude to political things, I let it be. When that happens, it's good."