



SALON 94
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OCTOBER 4, 2010

FALL ARTS PREVIEW *Art*

The New York Observer | 4



Body of Work

A Pakistani artist's dark totems mark the fall season *By Paul Laster*

At her first solo show in New York, in 2004, Huma Bhabha showed sculptures and photographs that a *New York Times* critic championed as "not like any recent art I can think of." Her most recent solo show in New York was three years ago, dubbed at the time by *New York* magazine "a tour de force of ... post-apocalyptic dreams." This November, Ms. Bhabha is braced to take on the city once again, with shows at two galleries. Peter Blum Chelsea will display her hand-altered photographs, and, at Jeanine Greenberg Rohatyn's gallery Salon 94 Bowery, Ms. Bhabha will exhibit new sculpture. Both shows open Nov. 17.

In the art world, the flavor-

of-the-month is an accepted phenomenon. But Ms. Bhabha, a standout since P.S.1's Greater New York exhibition in 2005, has continued to see her fortunes rise with international solo shows and inclusion in this year's Whitney Biennial. Best known for raw, figurative sculptures of fragmented bodies—think disembodied, almost sinister, heads and feet—assembled from detritus and clay, the artist mixes elements of Eastern and Western art with influences from pop culture and science fiction. "When I first saw the work, I was taken by her use of modest, everyday materials to make something both ritualistic and contemporary," said art dealer Ms. Greenberg Rohatyn. "She can interpret the image of a face to make it look like it belongs to the tradition of Picasso but

also comes out of a horror film." Growing up in Karachi, "I used to like drawing the figure," said the artist from her Poughkeepsie, N.Y., art studio. "I remember seeing Van Gogh's paintings and drawings of shoes and was influenced by him. I also remember being very impressed by the Colossus of Constantine in Rome. The whole body is broken up into separate parts. When I first started drawing feet I was actually thinking about it. ... It's as if the sculpture had broken and just the feet remained. It was like a figureless body. The body had disappeared or something had happened to it and only the feet were left." She was born in Pakistan in 1962; her mother was an artist and her father was a successful businessman. She



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243 BOWERY

moved to America in 1981 to attend art school at Rhode Island School of Design, where she received a B.F.A. in 1985 and later returned to earn an M.F.A. from Columbia in 1989.

While she returns annually to Pakistan, in some respects she took to Western culture immediately. "I watch a lot of movies and television," said the artist. "I like a lot of horror and science fiction films and the idea of monsters. You look at whatever inspires you." After marrying a former classmate, artist Jason Fox, the artist stayed in the states and started experimenting with sculpture—a medium that she had not favored in school, but soon came to master.

Influenced by Greek, Egyptian and Indian works, Ms. Bhabha aimed towards an intuitive earthiness, where things always look a little gritty. "I look around and know that there are devastating things going on, environmentally and man-made," said the artist. "If one is aware of things other than oneself, I don't think you can avoid it."

Who are her artistic inspirations? "I look at a lot of Picasso [who taught me] it doesn't matter if things look a little dirty. It just adds to the intuitive way that I'm approaching the drawing," she

said. "I enjoy doing portraits. If you look at Expressionism, you see a lot of use of the head—artists like Basquiat and Picasso. I look at whatever few art books I have and there's a lot of art history."

But few of her art-historical choices have been discussed as much as her unusual choice of medium. She explained: "The choice of materials for many years came from not having a lot of money. New York is a marketplace where people throw out everything. I've been using different kinds of found material for a long time." But why Styrofoam? "I've been using Styrofoam since I first started making sculpture because it's very light, but also sturdy. I don't know how to weld and I'm not such a great carpenter. I basically work the way that I can do everything by myself. I like using Styrofoam because it's easy to handle. I can carve it. I can stack it. I find it a very interesting medium. It's almost like soft marble."

At Peter Blum, the artist will show large-scale photographs that are altered with ink and collage. The photographs are mostly landscapes from Karachi, where she visits her family every year. Without a specific plan in mind, she draws figures—especially

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heads and feet—on top of the photographs, which sometimes get completely covered.

At Salon 94 Bowery, Ms. Bhabha will exhibit new sculptural works. Cobbled-together pieces from diverse material like Styrofoam and deritus, these assemblages poetically address the fragile state of 21st-century humanity. Asked if her vision is really post-apocalyptic, Ms. Bhabha answered, "Not really. I think we're living in the apocalypse now."

Huma Bhabha's new work is on view at Salon 94 Bowery (243 Bowery Street), Nov. 17–Dec. 23, 2010, and Peter Blum Chelsea (526 West 29th Street), Nov. 17, 2010–Jan. 15, 2011.



Jim Campbell's *Scattered*