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APR 11

Review: Huma Bhabha/Rhona Hoffman Gallery

Drawings, Sculpture, West Loop

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RECOMMENDED

Huma Bhabha's sculptures and collages at Rhona Hoffman Gallery seem like untimely ruins of contemporary culture. Although best known for her sculptures, it is Bhabha's collages on display here that chiefly create this sense of dislocation between past and present. The foundations of Bhabha's collages are photographs of abandoned construction projects in the desert landscape of the artist's hometown of Karachi, Pakistan. The landscapes in Bhabha's photographs appear stretched and twisted, an effect attenuated by streaks of ink lapping over the images. Bhabha's collages are grungy and frenetic. The conflict between man-made development and nature is vividly rendered: the sun-drenched landscapes are awash in hot pink and neon orange better suited to billboards than pastoral scenes. The spontaneity and density of Bhabha's collages speak to the upheaval of the landscape depicted in the underlying photographs.





Similar conflicts appear in Bhabha's sculptures, but are less resolved. Bhabha's sculptures, made of man-made materials like Styrofoam and chicken wire, are inspired by ancient Greek sculpture and African masks, both traditionally created from natural materials. There is tension between the old and the new in Bhabha's making of figurative sculpture from industrial found materials. "Jhukarjodaro" (2011), a massive foot that initially appears to be a remnant of an ancient sculpture, is actually sculpted from chicken wire and clay. In "Ripley" (2010), two parallel holes bored into two stacked Styrofoam boxes tacitly suggest the chest of a male figure. Borrowing on the tradition of figurative sculpture, Bhabha displays the abstracted figure on a wooden pedestal. Yet Bhabha's sculptures have only a slight connection to their references, especially compared to her collages that are so informed by a specific landscape. By contrast, her sculptures are placeless, or, as she describes them, "nomadic." And unlike Greek sculptures and African masks that monumentalize an individual or mark a ritual, Bhabha's sculptures are largely self-referential. The pedestals that form the base of Bhabha's sculptures contribute to this interpretation of the work because they distance the sculpture from the viewer and separate it from the gallery. The sturdy wooden pedestals also mask one of the most surprising qualities of Bhabha's figures, especially displayed in a commercial gallery—their relative impermanence since they're made of recycled materials that appear cobbled-together and precariously perched.

Bhabha's works, particularly her collages, serve as ominous reminders that, even in an age of rapid technological advances, whole landscapes and cultures can quickly be turned to ruins when the disaster of war or environmental catastrophe strikes. (Regan Golden-McNerney)

Through May 14 at Rhona Hoffman Gallery, 118 North Peoria.

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