

Art  
INCONVERSATION



SALON 94

# HUMA BHABHA with Elyse Benenson

Elyse Benenson - Contributor  
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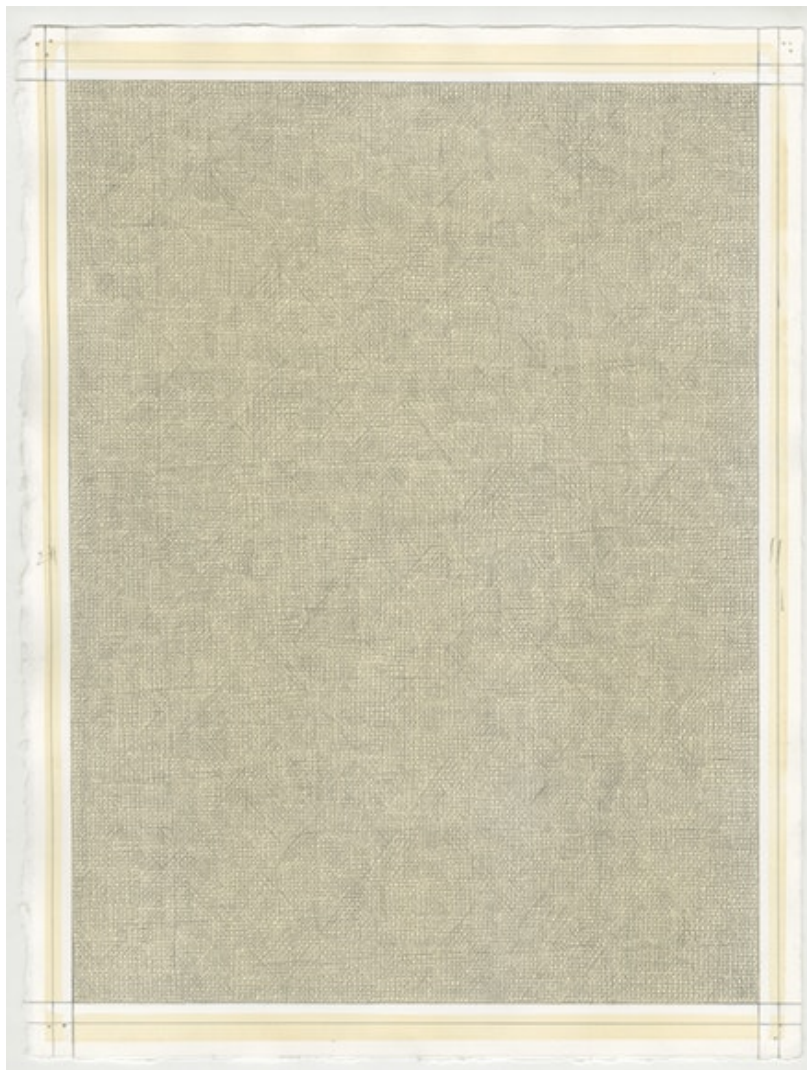
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Installation view of Huma Bhabha: *We Come in Peace*, 2017, the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Hyla Skopitz.

On the occasion of Huma Bhabha's site-specific installation *We Come In Peace* at the Met's Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Roof Garden, the sixth in a series of commissions for the outdoor space, and her fourth solo exhibition *With A Trace* at Salon 94, which includes a sculpture, a suite of photo-drawings, and a series of studies on paper relating to *We Come In Peace*, Rail Publisher Phong Bui and artist/contributing writer Elyse Benenson drove up to the artist's studio, where she lives and works with her partner, the painter Jason Fox, in Poughkeepsie, New York.



Portrait of Huma Bhabha, pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

**Elyse Benenson (Rail):** In all the other interviews I've read about you, none of them mentioned your early childhood experiences. I know, for example, that your mother was also an artist, and I wonder, did she shape or inspire you to become an artist at an early age?

**Huma Bhabha:** My mother, Sitara Bhabha, was a very talented amateur painter. Before having the two children, my brother and I, she was a lot more prolific. But yes, she did encourage me to draw and make paintings throughout my childhood. And whenever we would travel, we would all go visit museums. Both of my parents were very supportive.

**Rail:** How did you manage to go to RISD (Rhode Island School of Design), and why there and not another school?

**Bhabha:** I got accepted to RISD for painting and printmaking, and thought it would be a good school for me so I decided to go there. RISD was a great experience, especially being able to spend my junior year in Rome, Italy,

which was incredible and life changing.

**Rail:** What were the things you saw in Rome that moved you the most?

**Bhabha:** The Forum, The Capitoline Museums, St. Teresa in Ecstasy, to mention a few, but art and history are all around and underneath you.

**Rail:** After having graduated from RISD in 1985, and before attending graduate school at Columbia University, you went back to Karachi (Pakistan) for a year and half.

**Bhabha:** Yes, I had to go back because my father wasn't well, and because my student visa had ended.

**Rail:** What did you do for that year and a half?

**Bhabha:** I painted at home. My paintings at that time were very influenced by my interest in Suprematism and Constructivism. They were abstract and geometric.

**Rail:** Do you still go back and visit Karachi regularly?

**Bhabha:** I still go every year, for a few weeks instead of a few months, as in past visits. The city is still primarily a horizontal city with a population of approximately 20 million. There has been a lot of construction in the last several years and I have photographed and documented the area near the city beach which shows up in a lot of my drawings on photographs.

**Rail:** Were you exposed to reproductions in art books that you saw as a child that had a strong impression on you? Many artists didn't have direct access to museums in their upbringing.



Installation view of Huma Bhabha: With a Trace, Salon 94.

**Bhabha:** My mother had five or six art and art history books at our home. I remember there was one on Greek art, one on European art, and one on Indian sculpture. My art teacher in high school introduced me to Fauvism, Cubism, German Expressionism, and Rembrandt. The trip my parents took me and my brother on when I was nine to Athens to see the Parthenon was the most memorable.

**Rail:** Where you had an early exposure to ruins . . .

**Bhabha:** Yes, but also sculpture and painting. The whole experience definitely stays with you.

**Rail:** But don't you think one of the strong characterizations in your work is the patina of time that associates with the images of ruins? Did that occur to you at the time?

**Bhabha:** No.

**Rail:** When did you truly feel you had first made your mature or breakthrough work?

**Bhabha:** My first body of work from the early 1990's I would consider mature and in 2000 I made a sculpture titled Centaur which I consider a breakthrough.

**Rail:** Can you describe your preference of the materials you work with? And how have they evolved over time?

**Bhabha:** I had little money and had realized early on a connection to found and cheap materials. I started using Styrofoam, panty hose, enamel paints, plastic bags, egg crate foam in the early 1990s. It was in 2000 that I had to give up my studio on Broadway below Canal Street which I was sharing with another artist. It was 400 square feet and had no windows. I could no longer afford the rent, so for a while I was working in Jason's studio. But major changes took place when we moved to Poughkeepsie in 2002. My studio was the closed-in back porch. It was also quite small. It's interesting how, when you are in different situations, especially with transitory ones, certain changes that occur in your work are due to the necessity of needing to work.

**Rail:** However, much bigger or smaller spaces do dictate the scale of things.

**Bhabha:** Absolutely, but I believe you can make good work anywhere and that scale has nothing to do with it being good or bad. I didn't really start working big until 2007.

**Rail:** Now you are working on the biggest scale you have ever worked on, especially with this commission by the Metropolitan Museum; how would you describe the feeling of changing your materials from impermanent matter to now casting your sculptures in more traditional and permanent material such as bronze?

**Bhabha:** Actually, one of the early bronzes I made was in 2007. From then until now I have done maybe six or seven bronzes, though they vary in size—some are small, others are relatively big. But yes, I'm sensitive to why and how I work with the materials at any given time. Working in bronze is solely based on practical reasons, one being its association with art history and its nature of durability. Bronze can be installed outdoors and you can make an edition. I also like how bronze feels and ages. As for *We Come In Peace* (2018), I made the two sculptures to scale in my studio and then they were sent to the foundry to be cast into bronze. Both sculptures were made in separate parts which were assembled at the foundry. In the past I was always thinking of how to get sculptures through the door, so having parts that come together is a good solution.

**Rail:** You worked on three separate parts because the height of the standing figure would have been too tall for the studio?

**Bhabha:** Yes, I could not see it fully assembled. It was very exciting when it was put together at the foundry. There was a surprise element to see it come to life the way it did.

**Rail:** The prostrate figure seems to be from a 2005 version, except the stooping back in the new version appears to be higher, not as low to the ground as the older one.

**Bhabha:** I'm glad that you noticed the slight differences in the different versions. This is the fourth iteration of this idea of the prostrate body covered in black plastic. I also photographed this sculpture in different environments as an edition of photographs in 2003 and 2005. This image is very important to me. It evokes all kinds of references towards the notion of worshipping, submission, obedience and is a monument to the unnamed victims of our present endless wars.



**Rail:** To the women and children who are often the targets of violence, especially now with the crisis in Syria.

**Bhabha:** It's a monument to all the unnamed victims since the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and then Iraq. When I was asked to undertake this commission, I wanted to make it as a monumental installation that in some way requires a lot of space between it and the surrounding space on the roof, so that the standing and bowing figures would amplify all sorts of interpretations or readings from the viewers' perspectives. Even though they're together, they are two different kinds of sculptures.

**Rail:** One is standing proud and erect and the other is bowing toward it, creating an immediate and visceral power on both sides.

**Bhabha:** That's what I'm hoping to convey, to broaden the fullest potential of what the image can generate to the viewer's mind between the two figures.

**Rail:** It's important to be able to walk around the sculpture and have a different experience from different angles and perspectives. Plus, to see the different treatments of the surfaces, including the painted gestures and the drawing lines, etc. is a joy.

Huma Bhabha, *We Come in Peace*, 2017. Painted and patinated bronze, 164 x 48 x 48 inches. Photo: Hyla Skopitz.

**Bhabha:** The patina and all the markings were made to look identical to how they appear in the originals. In other words, the various materials such as foam, cork, wood, and plastic look as real in their natural forms. In fact, the morning of the installation before the

opening, Shanay Jhaveri (Assistant Curator of South Asian Art, Modern and Contemporary Art) told me that some of his staff said he needed to remove the plastic. (Laughter)



Huma Bhabha, Benaam, 2017. Painted and patinated bronze, 55 x 180 x 58 inches. Photo: Hyla Skopitz.

**Rail:** So cool! They reference the history of sculpture, as well as the unique exploration of materials, and time, past, present, and future, because of your interest in science fiction—be it the imagination of Philip K. Dick or J.G. Ballard, or David Cronenberg, etc.—the artworks appear as actors in an absurd, existential, and surrealistic play.

**Bhabha:** Certainly in this instance! I immediately thought of the roof as a stage, or being an amphitheater, partly because of the tall buildings around it on all sides with the sky right above, and partly because it also refers to the SummerStage in the park. Above all, it's so interesting for me to see the different forms of sculpture that I made, in a whole new and other context where they didn't have a relationship previously. But yes, they can be thought of as actors, or visitors who come from somewhere else, and have just landed on the roof. Hence, the title, We Come in Peace.

**Rail:** Where does that exact title come from?

**Bhabha:** I am aware there are many movies that reference the idea of “I, we, they, etc. come in peace.” In this case, I was thinking, “How does one think of these two figures?” One is a five-headed hermaphrodite which bears the

name of the installation and the other is titled “Benaam” which means unnamed or without name in Urdu.

**Rail:** However I or others read it, we’re bounded in our responses to the ambiguous space caught in between many detectable sources of images—I should say images of menace. I wonder if the title *We Come In Peace* is an attempt to make it less fearful for the viewer.

**Bhabha:** Possibly. To me, it’s very natural as there are personalities within each character as within each of us, and we can be quite scary.

**Rail:** True, we all are capable of being good and evil at any given time. In any case, do different personalities correspond to different parts of the body that are made of different materials?

**Bhabha:** Yes, from the lower abdomen down to the legs and feet is made of cork; the torso and the head are made of Styrofoam.

**Rail:** I am curious about your choice of stratifying the Styrofoam on top, and the cork at the bottom.

**Bhabha:** The color of the cork is dark brown, which is the color of the ground, the earth. And the color of the Styrofoam is light blue, which is the color of the sky. The head is pink and colorful like the sun. I’ve worked with these two materials for a long time, partly because I really love their colors. The challenge was how to replicate and maintain the exact colors and surfaces in the bronze as in the original. I think the result is quite stunning.

**Rail:** Do you normally draw sketches or studies for sculptures before you make them, like you did for the Met rooftop?

**Bhabha:** Not really. I’ve always done my drawings on photographs or on paper as an independent activity, but in this case, it’s a commission so it required a different approach. It included a written proposal. I made several site visits to the rooftop, before making this series of drawings with watercolors and charcoal on paper.

**Rail:** They’re relatively light and lyrical compared to your drawings and collages on photographs that most of us are familiar with, especially with images of heads, mostly in frontal views, and on some occasions in profile. They’re hybrid images of human and animal heads. I was doing a lot of research on Karachi and learned that there are a lot of stray dogs there. In fact, I saw some terrible photographs of masses of dogs that had been intentionally poisoned by the city as a way to control their population.

**Bhabha:** It’s a very inhumane way of solving the problem. I love dogs and animals in general. Several years ago, around 2010, I began to add collage elements to the drawings, from calendars with images of dogs, wolves, and wildlife.

**Rail:** There is really a strong juxtaposition between these intense faces, some parts are drawn, others from photographic reproductions. Sometimes they appear to be sweet, funny, etc. Other times they can be fierce, menacing, and whatnot!

**Bhabha:** I think by colliding these elements together in the same space, I have to figure out ways to release certain subconscious images inside of me by drawing on top of them as a way to disrupt and unify these images at the same time.

**Rail:** The notion of beauty and ugliness, as with humor and tragedy, among other pairs of opposites, is usually separated by one strand of hair.



**Bhabha:** I agree.

**Rail:** How do you mediate the formal elements and the intuitive sides of your work?

**Bhabha:** I'd say a lot of my decisions are very formal in terms of the overall configurations of the images. But the mark-makings are for the most part intuitive and improvisational.

**Rail:** Can you describe your drawing process as an independent activity?



Huma Bhabha, *Untitled*, 2015. Ink and collage on color photograph, 80 x 50 inches. Courtesy Salon 94.



Huma Bhabha, *Untitled*, 2014. Ink and collage on color photograph, 61 1/4 x 43 3/4 inches. Courtesy Salon 94.

**Bhabha:** First of all, it's a way to generate a repertoire of images which can be fed into the sculpture. Secondly, it's very meditative especially when I'm working on three or four things, going back and forth between them simultaneously. I can explore the images very spontaneously. Whereas with sculpture, it requires a lot of planning, structurally especially, when you're working with fabricating the work into bronze as with this installation at the Met.

**Rail:** Your admiration and fascination with various sites of temporary construction and destruction is a well-known fact at this point. How has it changed over time?

**Bhabha:** I'm not aware of how it has changed over time. But I still find them as innovative and beautiful sites. The idea of creating, building something and then taking it apart fascinates me both as a mental image and a physical object. When I initially started taking photographs of these sites in Karachi I noticed interesting nuances on how temporary shelters were made in those construction sites. I was looking at these constructed shelters under which the workers and guards would take a lunch or tea break. I just admire how resourceful and inventive they were. I find them very beautiful.

**Rail:** I like the metaphors you've created as though they're parts of your own alchemy, turning lead into gold, or the physical body into solar energy, and so on.

**Bhabha:** It's quite true, in my own case as with other artists, because what happens in between lead and gold is simply far more interesting. I've always been drawn to the tension of two opposing interests. That's what provides the energy to bring them together, to solve the unsolvable, so to speak.



Huma Bhabha, *Untitled*, 2017. Ink, collage, acrylic paint on color photograph, 60 x 40 inches. Courtesy Salon 94.

**Rail:** Does it work to your advantage to not be formally trained in sculpture?

**Bhabha:** Yes, I think so.

**Rail:** You wouldn't be as experimental.

**Bhabha:** But then there are artists who were trained and know how to take full advantage of the knowledge for their growth. It's equally inspiring. Just to see how different artists respond differently to different materials is the most exciting thing.

**Rail:** I couldn't agree more. Were you raised religious? Or did you grow up with religious imagery?

**Bhabha:** I grew up in a moderately religious household and my parents were not conservative. Actually, they were quite liberal. And in Islam there is no figurative iconography. It's more abstract, decorative, and calligraphic.

**Rail:** It's the same in Judaism even though there is a lot of imagery. But you are actually not allowed to represent God, and so on. Do you assign gender to your sculptures?

**Bhabha:** It all depends. Sometimes you see just one gender, either male or female, sometimes one side is one, the other one is the other; sometimes they are both together.

**Rail:** Do you think they are especially relevant at this moment in time?

**Bhabha:** I've always been interested in images of hermaphrodites throughout the history of sculpture and they are very present in the culture of the Indian subcontinent. I was recently listening to Chelsea Manning give her first interview in which she described her intense and difficult experiences of being a soldier at war, experiencing war crimes, being imprisoned and tortured for being a whistleblower, and how horrific it was for her after she had come out as a transgender woman after she was sentenced to prison in 2010, and how she was treated for wanting to be known as Chelsea, rather than Bradley, an identity she connected to since her childhood. Obviously, I feel there shouldn't be any borders. People should be able to move freely wherever they want to go. In the same way, you should be able to be who you are. That is real humanity. Obviously, people with power will say it's so complicated, but it's not really. It's all about whom people want to control, and whom they want in power, and how that power is used.



Huma Bhabha, Untitled, 2017. Ink, pastel, charcoal on paper, 24 x 18 1/8 inches. Courtesy Salon

**Rail:** While reading your previous interviews, I noticed the term ‘post-apocalyptic’ occurred again and again. Do you get tired of hearing that association?

**Bhabha:** It’s fine because it just means it’s another reading of the work, which I don’t deny. Even though every time you turn on the news it gets closer and closer to that singular reading in terms of the weather, in terms of how people relate to each other.

**Rail:** So *We Come In Peace* is one way of proposing being different is a beautiful thing. Why are we so frightened by it?

**Bhabha:** Monsters are beautiful to some of us, depending on how we were informed by different experiences in our upbringing. For me, I have always had a passion for extreme visual imagery which responds to the horror and science fiction films I have watched.

**Rail:** You must have seen the 1951 film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* by Robert Wise, which was based on the 1940 science fiction short story “Farewell to the Master” by Harry Bates. Ed Halter, in his essay for your forthcoming catalog, mentions the film as one of your references. It’s so interesting because the film came at a time in American history, after the Second World War, when people were really frightened by a potential nuclear war. And here is this movie completely confronting the American public about the reality of the situation. These aliens arrive on earth, and they say, “We come in peace.”

**Bhabha:** Yes, they also say, “Don’t be afraid because we are different.” But the normal reaction of humans of course is to just attack them.

**Rail:** Or to contain them. What I find most interesting about the alien in the form of a humanoid is he initially appeals to the political community, in Washington, which immediately locks him up, because they fear him. Then he appeals to the scientific community, which is extremely helpful and understanding of his condition.

**Bhabha:** As long as it doesn’t get involved in warfare, which means money and power. It’s true that both the alien and the robot say, “Listen, we come in peace,” which was genuine when they said it, but the reaction from the humans was to be aggressive, which is part of human nature. It’s our perpetual struggle to overcome, always.

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