

Huma BHABHA

Beware treading the quiet streets of Poughkeepsie, New York: for here be monsters. DORIAN MAY tracked down their more welcoming creator

Photograph by WILLIAM HERFORD

One would never suspect that the commanding, candy-coloured “creature” sculptures, some of which have lived atop of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in the Whitney and the Saatchi among other important collections, were brought to life by Huma Bhabha in her expansive, brand new studio, a former firehouse in the time-worn city of Poughkeepsie, New York.

Surprisingly petite and soft-spoken in contrast to the monumental and sometimes demonic-looking subjects of her artwork, Bhabha studied as a painter and then taught herself to sculpt. She crafts her latest pieces out of cork, an axe and a saw among the more archetypal tools of her trade. In her studio, you might find her putting the finishing flourishes to each creation while blasting Blondie for one statue and T-Rex for another. Her creations come alive and reveal their individual personalities with a great deal of thought, engineering a mosaic of historical, tribal and political messages.

“I don’t believe in borders or nationalism,” explains Bhabha. “I don’t make stuff out of being from somewhere or gender. I make what I want to make while feeling a responsibility to bear witness to what is happening in the world.”

Growing up in Karachi, Pakistan, Bhabha discovered her love of art through her mother, a talented amateur artist who took the family on trips to museums all over the world. “I think the first visit was to the Parthenon when I was nine. For some reason that sticks very clearly in my mind.”

She left Pakistan for the States, where she attended Rhode Island School of Design and then Columbia University

for a Masters in Fine Art. She says a year abroad studying mostly classical sculpture galvanized her own vision of figurative form. While her work is rooted in this tradition, and formal in proportion, her love of science fiction also wields a visible influence on her style.

“I spend a lot of time when I’m not working watching cheesy sci-fi and horror movies, and I love black-and-white film. I think that gives a cinematic element to my work. But also I’m inspired by Picasso, Bacon, Giacometti and Rembrandt, who was always a favourite from a young age. His later painting *The Night Watch* is my favourite.”

Bhabha’s perfectly scaled sculptures stand strong individually as well as they do as members of the exacting army she is building. Her innovative use of repurposed materials such as styrofoam, cork, and wood on often multi-gender sculptures offers each viewer an opportunity at a unique and abstract observation. “I like the fact you see the sculptures here as original,” she explains. “While you understand the historical and contemporary influences that guide me, I’m pleased you can see this is my hand.”

We peer up at the first work she has completed in her new studio space. He is a nearly 10ft-tall relief sculpture of a warrior she will name before sending it off for installation at the Carnegie International Contemporary Exhibition. He is looking back at us intensely, silently participating in the conversation.

Bhabha says all of her work speaks back to her. And what does this one say? “He is happy,” she replies, and smiles. □

Huma Bhabha, photographed on August 16, 2018, at her studio in Poughkeepsie, New York, in front of her sculpture *Memories of the Future*

