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"Other Forms of Life" at the Contemporary Austin

With her mysterious and compelling artwork, Huma Bhabha puts us face to alien face

BY SUMAIYA MALIK, SEPTEMBER 14, 2018, ARTS



Jhukarjodaro by Huma Bhabha

I first came across the work of New York-based modern artist Huma Bhabha earlier this year when my friend Zarmeena invited me to see an original print of Bhabha's that she had acquired at the Contemporary Austin gala. Excited about her purchase, she insisted that the work would draw me in, as Bhabha had grown up in the same city I had – Karachi, Pakistan – and she, too, had spent most of her adult life in the U.S.

When I laid eyes on the large print in Zarmeena's living room, I was taken aback. It seemed to be a close-up image of a grotesque alien face – something quite unlike a traditional living room piece. I was shocked at how uninviting the hollow features of the serpentlike extraterrestrial cyborg were. And as if it wasn't already ominous enough, the creature stood in front of a patch of water in a thick jungle, like it was hunting for prey. I stared at him and he at me as if I were his next target. I wanted to run away, but I didn't. Instead, I remained rooted to the spot, intrigued, bewildered, curious, and afraid. The alien had touched something deep inside me, and I was trying to figure out what it was.

Was this creature my reflection? Was it a reflection of my past or of the society I was dealing with? I could see the familiarity of Bhabha's backgrounds that my friend thought would resonate with me. Embedded in the jungle in layers upon layers were signs of a place I had visited long ago. I began to understand why Zarmeena loved her purchase. "Huma's art is raw, in your face. It makes you feel vulnerable and question humanity," she said. There was definitely a connection.

Once home, I began researching Bhabha, eager to know more. I found that although Bhabha trained as a painter and printmaker at the Rhode Island School of Design and Columbia University, she thinks of herself as a sculptor; that she moves effortlessly among sculpture, painting, photography, collage, and prints; that she is currently making waves on the national contemporary art scene, one sign of which is that she was commissioned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City to create an installation for its Roof Garden series.

(I also discovered that my soon-to-be-college-freshman son found Bhabha's work to be "cool" and that my mother knew about Bhabha even before me. The artist was making an impact on more than one generation.)

To my delight, I learned some of Bhabha's art would soon be shown at the Contemporary Austin. The exhibition, "Other Forms of Life," opening Sept. 15, is a survey of her work from 2009 to 2016 and includes seven figurative sculptures, seven large-scale photo collages, four works on paper, and a suite of 10 prints that will all be displayed at the Jones Center Downtown, as well as a large bronze sculpture, God of Some Things, that will be displayed on the grounds of Laguna Gloria. Julia Hendrickson, the curator of "Other Forms of Life," has had Bhabha on her radar since 2011, before the artist's career began skyrocketing.

"She is a very introspective, quiet sort of person. Very thoughtful, but with a good sense of humor," says Hendrickson. "You will see that when you spend time with her work."

I can see that Bhabha's art, while monstrous looking and emotionally stirring, still touched at whimsy. But such is the power of the work that it seeps into your psyche. Looking at more of Bhabha's pieces, such as We Come in Peace, the installation at the Met, I felt the fear one feels while watching a horror film.

I felt afraid of the prints, too, but in these I found layers I identified with. In them were the sea, the foliage, and the architecture that reminded me of my childhood city: of Sea View Beach in Karachi, of the coastal palm trees, of the city's half-constructed, abandoned relics of buildings. But Bhabha's prints change the original images into something new, like life. Her artistry transforms the known into something completely different.

Bhabha's work is mysterious, sometimes showing subjugation, sometimes supplication, adoration, or even facing your own demons. "She is pulling other places in [too]. She is a creative, contemporary woman trying to express herself," says artist and educator Susan Reed, who is thinking about using Bhabha's work as an inspiration for an art project at St. Andrew's High School this fall. Reed is especially fascinated by Bhabha's collages, in which animals are a subject.

Dogs and wolves show up sometimes in the eye sockets of Bhabha's alien forms and sometimes hidden in the layers. She is drawn to them especially for their deep sense of perception. She hopes that humans caught up in today's fast-paced lifestyle will once again familiarize themselves with the art of looking.

Perhaps Bhabha has achieved success in familiarizing the viewer with this art of deeper understanding. In my case, I see Bhabha's art in Zarmeena's living room with my mind's eye even now, days after the first encounter. I see my own reflection hidden deep inside it, and it shakes me up.

Whatever Huma Bhabha hopes for and aspires to with her work, the artist is calling attention to the harsh reality of what life is all about and making an appeal to the viewer to recognize not just the world on the outside, but also the demons within ourselves.



God of Some Things by Huma Bhabha

“Other Forms of Life” will be on display Sept. 15, 2018-Jan. 19, 2019, at the Contemporary Austin – Downtown, 700 Congress, and Laguna Gloria, 3809 W. 35th. The artist will be present at the opening party on Fri., Sept. 14, at the Jones Center. For more information, visit www.thecontemporaryaustin.org.

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