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Huma Bhabha's unnatural creatures

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In the days after a building is blown up or burned down, the remains are a mix of the expected – cinder blocks, metal pipes, beams – and unexpected – wooden boards, bits of cloth, a doorframe. They may be bent or charred but they're still recognisable, even ordinary, and because of this, they become a gauge of what is gone, something for the eye to hold onto in a mass of unfamiliarity. In some cases, the armature or facade remains, like a skeleton that doesn't decay. If these remains were to aggregate themselves into creatures, they would look a lot like Huma Bhabha's work.

New York's MoMA PS1 recently hosted Bhabha's 'Unnatural Histories' (2012–13), an exhibition of haunting sculptures and prints, where totemic women of blackened cork and styrofoam, busts of chicken wire, clay, animal skulls and horns, and assemblages of twisted gutter pipe populated the space. Many of them were set on Bhabha's own platforms of rough plywood that called to mind pine coffins. Mixed-media works, mostly of abstracted skulls, looked on from the background.

Bhabha's figures are futuristic and alien, tribal and ancient, all at the same time. They have linear brows and cyborgian wide-set eyes on skeletal faces, with animal horns and skulls for adornment. Materials, including an abundance of styrofoam, look scavenged and have a post-apocalyptic/prehistoric roughness. Their postures are generally statuesque and iconic, teetering on robotic, like objects of veneration from another time. They could have arrived by spaceship, or been dug up from the ground of a lost city. Either way, they look as if they've emerged from destruction: Bhabha's creatures are back from the dead – or, as one title attests, they couldn't be killed in the first place.

This article appears in excerpted form. You can read the entire article in ARTAND Australia's Spring 2013 issue.

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