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VULTURE

Canines to Cannabis in Artist Huma Bhabha's New Show By Sarah Trigg



"It's an old firehouse, so this is probably where the fire engines were kept and washed," said Huma Bhabha as we roamed into her expansive studio in Poughkeepsie, New York. Born in Karachi, Pakistan, in 1962, Bhabha has lived upstate for 13 years. She occasionally teaches at Bard College in the summer MFA program, but the appointment wasn't the reason for landing in the region. "It was because I knew somebody who had moved here who was an artist. I started teaching at Bard much later. I've been here about 13 years." After completing her MFA at Columbia University, Bhabha lived in New York for 13 years before abandoning it owing to rising real-estate prices. About living outside the gravitational pull of the city, Bhabha confirmed, "It's a shock but you can manage it!"

Bhabha's studio floor and walls were covered in brick tile — a pattern the artist covered with paper and stepped on while working to create a frottage effect for several works on paper in her **current exhibition** at Salon 94's downtown galleries, on view until June 28.

Although this show focuses on Bhabha's two-dimensional work, the artist is best known for her grotesque yet monumental sculptures born out of ancient tribal artifacts, German Expressionism, and popular science-fiction influences such as those in her **recent exhibition** at MoMA PS1 of otherworldly figures appearing in a state of decay.

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In her current exhibition at Salon 94's Bowery location, the rubber-sole patterns of Bhabha's treads repeat in the bronze *The Escapist* (2013) of three loosely braided tire tracks that lay flat near the feet of *Constantium*, 2014. The latter — a figurative, totemic bronze — stands guard as you descend into the subterranean, high-ceilinged gallery, a.k.a. her tomb. Originally carved from cork, the figure's lines and crevices are deeply crenulated. Crude chalklike marks indicate humanoid features such as eyes and breasts. But hair, or maybe a swath of tentacles, covers where a nose and mouth would be — a look that references tribal masks, veiled women, and a Chewbacca/Pac-Man in equal parts.

The sculpture's base was cast from an object a friend had given her — a hinged, cabinetlike object. "I hadn't even thought of this part as being part of the sculpture. I just wanted to place it on a higher surface, and this was lying around my studio. I liked the complication of the chain. It opened up another aspect to the work," said Bhabha about the thread attached to the door's lock which drapes up over the figure's head and around her neck — part adornment, part a tethering to an underground world that this bronze no doubt has keys to.

The second half of the exhibition, around the corner and inside Freeman Alley, features two-dimensional works of Bhabha's drawings with collaged photographs. From afar, the works are color-saturated portraits of animalistic yet alienlike heads that upon closer inspection reveal photos of dog breeds and wolves sourced from Hallmark-esque calendars and cannabis hybrids lifted from the magazine *High Times*. The unusual juxtapositions say: Would not some future anthropologist deem our pot-smoking and internet obsession with frolicking puppies as significant cultural rituals? We certainly clock an inordinate amount of time at both. But the works also point to perhaps that dogs should be treated, now, as the spirit animals they are.

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Back at Bhabha's studio, Constantium's sister — the artist proof of the series — had taken up permanent residence in Bhabha's backyard. Taped above Bhabha's drawing table, photos of wolves were interbreeding with images of silverback gorillas, a Sigmar Polke, and a Gauguin, among other ephemera. "I've been doing drawings with wolves as collage material for about two years now," said Bhabha. "These are kind of just there — I'm not going to use them. I just like looking at them. I like using animals. I was using some wildlife and before that — Jack Russells." I asked if the one on her table was her own Jack Russell, Duncan, who had just joined us. "No, this photo was from a calendar. Even for the ones that have wolves in them — they are also from a calendar." Both in Bhabha's exhibition and in her studio practice, you could sense a slippage, an easy transference, between popular culture and the visual language of mythologies past. "I like dogs, and wolves, and animals, and werewolves," she stated.

The sculptural materials that Bhabha manipulates into abstractions of bone, flesh, and organs were all at hand. Towering by the studio entrance, Styrofoam forms awaited their next reincarnation. Along the opposite wall, a selection of cut wood rested in a curated row, and, nearby, a collection of various metal scraps mingled inside a basin. "Ever since I've been making work, I've been collecting objects and using them to add to the work. So, it's always sort of a bit of an assemblage." While most of the objects are found, Bhabha remarked that often people save interesting pieces to give to her.

I spotted a wood figurine on her table. "It belonged to my parents, but it's not an antique or anything. I always liked it, and now I'm aware of how much my work relates with African sculpture." I asked when her first encounter was with that visual language. "I think the first time I saw a really amazing, beautiful, and dense exhibition was at the Museum of African Art when it used to be on Broadway [at the site of the former New Museum] many years ago. A friend of mine was working at arranging the space." I asked if her work revealed the influence shortly thereafter. "No, I wouldn't say that. You realize it a bit later. It took a while."

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I asked Bhabha a bit about her process. "I make a lot of decisions while I'm working on a piece. Even though you conceive of everything beforehand, you let it play out. So far, the changes have been for the better. You realize at a certain point where something is going or not." Bhabha prefers to work alone with no assistants — aside from a few tasks needing a hired hand. "When I'm working on pieces, there is a lot of time spent looking and figuring things out, and I can't work with another person hanging around."



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Next to the bronze figure in the back terrace, animal skulls were piled in a chair: “I used to work at a taxidermy place between 2002 and 2004. When I first moved here, that was my job. These are the skulls they didn’t want. Usually they keep more exotic skulls like certain cats or baboons. Hunters like those as trophies. But these are antelopes, which they normally don’t care for. The animal skin is stretched over a form made of hard foam, so the actual skull is not needed. My job was sculpting the eyes, noses, and mouths that were eaten away by the tanning process. I have used some of the skulls in my work — maybe two or three.”

A weathering heap of car tires rested next to the skulls. “The tires I’ve been using for the last three years. About an hour from here, there’s a tire recycling plant and you can pick up all kinds of tires. Some friends and two of my brothers have given me some. They’re a material, and it’s good that they can be kept outside. Soon I’ll be cutting these up.”