

Welt am Sonntag, May 11, 2014

WELT *am* SONNTAG

ART MARKET

11 May 2014

Onwards into the Past

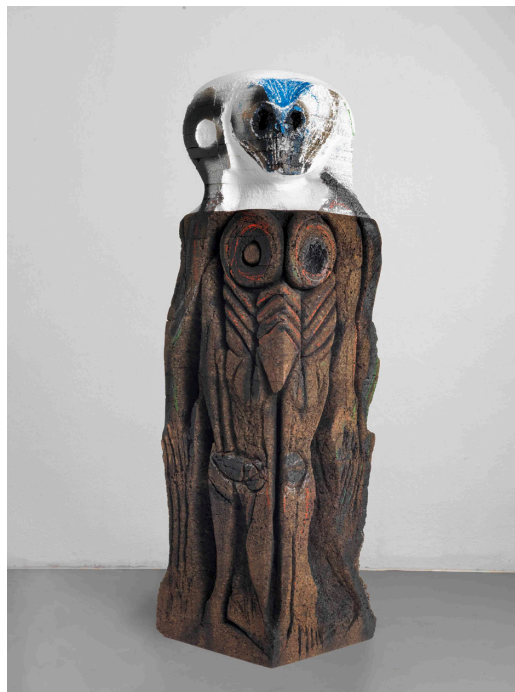
The Berlin gallery VW presents the newest works of the Pakistan-born US-artist Huma Bhabha. An encounter

By Marcus Woeller

Archetypes need traction. Not without reason have ancient Egyptians set their pharaoh sculptures on heavy chairs or arranged them weightily onto the floor. The feet parallel, static on pedestals. The Kouros of early Greek sculpture already puts one foot before the other. But is otherwise also of little dynamic figure. The Terracotta Army of the First Emperor of China proved eminently steadfastness for hundreds of years, and also the stone Moai on Easter Island did not fall over. The Pakistani artist Huma Bhabha stands in this tradition: Archaic form and disturbing presence mark her work, with which she opened a brilliant show for the Berlin Gallery Weekend.

The sculptures stand robust and grave. Like totems of a forgotten cult they raise full attention. Instinctively they remind of statues of antiquity, but are simultaneously futuristic. Beyond time, fallen into this gallery space. "They recall the feeling of a time travel," says Bhabha, looking up to the plastic "It's Me", which by two to three head lengths towers above the artist, like a reincarnation of Imhotep from the classic film "The Mummy". "Ironically the Egyptian antiquity has often acted as a model for Sci-Fi worlds. Past and future are obviously very close together."

Huma Bhabha was born in 1962 in Karachi. For her studies, she moved to New York City. She now lives with her husband, artist Jason Fox, in the small town of Poughkeepsie on the Hudson River. She feels connected with the U.S.- American land-art artist Robert Smithson: "He has directed our attention to places that are no longer perceived as such in the general perception." Smithson went on a photo tour through the industrial no-man's land in New Jersey in 1967. The "Monuments of Passaic" became part of art history. "It looks similar in Karachi. Smithson teaches us to look at places more differentiated and to recognize their beauty. But not only beauty, but also



Timeless sculptures made out of cork and polystyrene. Huma Bhabha, "It's Me", 2013

Courtesy: VW (VENEKLASEN/WERNER), Berlin

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depth.”

The combinations of apparent oppositions also determine the choice of the material of her sculptures. She combines polystyrene with cork: whilst the former was as a thermoplastic foam only notified for patent under the trade name Styrofoam in 1950, the later is used since thousands of years for very similar material properties. Both are made up of air-filled cell structures, lightweight, stable and easy to edit.

Bhabha picks up her polystyrene-findings from the street, she discovered the cork in a shop closure: “I know of no other artists who work with cork”, she explains without hiding the pride, to have, so to say, secured a key material. “For me it is a very original and innovative material.” She combines the white and brown foam into lithic sculptures since four years. On the four sides body shapes are cut as reliefs, the heads formulated plastic. “I am fascinated by archetypes - figurative forms that belong to the collective visual knowledge,” says Bhabha. “They stand simultaneously for the beginning and end.”

This becomes also apparent when touching the sculptures. What looks like a slowly dissolving piece of Styrofoam packing is sometimes hard and cold and indestructible. During her time as a guest of the American Academy in Berlin last year, Bhabha came up with the idea to have some objects cast in bronze and found in the Foundry Noack the congenial partner to realize this idea. A square Styrofoam plate with concentric grooves and rectangular holes must have once anchored something in a box. Now it stands as a white-painted bronze on a pedestal, grinning sardonically. A swift swing with the spray can has left the impression of a skull. Here Bhabha shows her quality as an artist who sees an image already engraved in the found object.

Bhabha has also been influenced by the German neo-expressionists. “These paintings were always a kind of a harbor for me,” she says and recalls the “Heldenbilder” by Georg Baselitz. “They gave me self-confidence: I am an expressionist! But to me it is of course about other content!” This is mediated quite directly in Bhabha’s work. She turns the heavy pathos of the Neo-Expressionist into a vague feeling of another charging. And for that, she works with many references: Constantin Brâncuși as well as Markus Lüpertz, Blade Runner and Darth Vader. She watches a lot of TV documentaries, reads Utopias by Philip K. Dick and has a penchant for horror movies. “I want to connect a lot of different items with each other! Historical references, the history of sculpture, contemporary ideas of figure. I digest all these influences to a certain extent”

Such digestive processes are also revealed in her paintings and collages. Bhabha also references archetypal images in these. A set of four works on paper is reminiscent of portraits of saints. Instead of an identifiable face, the icons are only left with a glowing aura or soft halo.

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Some are bandaged or pointing the Batman ears. Beneath the gestural painting, aggressive werewolf eyes and snouts can be detected. While one surmises over the inwardness of her figurative program, as over decaying contents of old sarcophagi, hybrid apparitions dematerialize on the picture plane. A graceful water colored drawing merges two virtuoso howling wolves with the suggestion of a skull. Bhabha also works upon her own photographs and enhances them with Cubist masks and abstract color fields.

Everything shows signs of decay, as if something swept over it. "Not very optimistic," Bhabha responds to the question of how she looks in the future. "I'm not cynical, but I see what is happening in the world and react to it. We think it's normal to destroy things again and again. We never cease to wage war. We constantly create ruins all around us. And you are still obliged to witness your own time." However, she does not want to be understood as a political artist. She is just very aware of the decay of all earthly things. "The proximity of beauty and destruction interests me. The destructive element has always been a way to express feelings for artists. I'm not running away from that." Bhabha rather goes fearlessly towards it. Fear is not her drive, but the timelessness of sublimity.