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Art & Design

Huma Bhabha at Rhona Hoffman Gallery

Huma Bhabha shows new sculptures and photo-drawings *By Lauren Weinberg*



Huma Bhabha, *Untitled* (detail), 2011.

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We tend to associate Styrofoam with fast food and electronics packaging, not the ruins of great civilizations. But Huma Bhabha's new sculptures give the trashy material majesty and monumentality. Styrofoam blocks form the armature of a colossal foot in *Jhukarjodaro* (2011), which she drapes in chicken wire and covers with clay. The Pakistani-born artist, who lives in Poughkeepsie, New York, lets this earth-colored surface flake off, evoking decaying skin or the crumbling of a museum artifact.

While the sight of this "vast and trunkless" extremity encourages viewers to quote Shelley's "Ozymandias," the confusing untitled "photo-drawings" accompanying Bhabha's sculptures won't summon up poetry. The artist buries large-scale images of rubble or vegetation under painted faces (pictured) or scraps of movie posters and maps. According to the gallery's exhibition statement, these pieces reflect Bhabha's concerns about colonialism and war. A sinister black figure lounging on a balcony, tinted a chemical orange, exudes the menace of despotic force.

Still, it's easier to glimpse Bhabha's longtime interest in science fiction than references to real-life issues, given how the artist twists and layers the elements of her works until they disorient viewers. The photo-drawings' fluorescent skies and the dark monster towering over one barren landscape suggest a post-apocalyptic future. The Styrofoam-slab sculpture *Ripley* resembles a 1950s robot, barely humanized by its two eyeholes. As it stares through the gallery window at passersby, surprisingly, it evokes an African idol as well. Bhabha's most powerful works have one giant foot in the past.

April 13, 2011

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