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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Reading Between the Lines of Time

Pakistani Artist Huma Bhabha's 'Monsters' Straddle Past, Present and Future at Her First Solo Museum Show

By Sameer Reddy

The contemporary-art market catapults many young talents into the limelight, but for Huma Bhabha, a Pakistani-born artist best known for her figurative sculpture, the art world's embrace was a long time coming. Despite producing work since she graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1985, it wasn't until gallerist Bill Brady presented her first New York solo show in 2004 that she began to attract critical and commercial attention, most notably from Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, owner of the powerhouse Manhattan gallery Salon 94.

"I stopped thinking about how my work was received a long time ago ... because it wasn't," said Ms. Bhabha, who is 50 years old and lives in Poughkeepsie. But "I always believed that this is what I do best, and that's what keeps you going. As an artist there are lots of ups and downs and that's the nature of it, but you just have to stick around."

Sixteen shows and one Whitney Biennial later, Ms. Bhabha is set to open her first solo museum show, "Unnatural Histories," on Saturday at MoMA PS1, presenting 29 sculptures and about 20 drawings, including several pieces made for the show.

Time has played a central role in her work in more ways than one, as her creations manage to evoke at once ancient and futuristic associations. "Cousin," which she created for the PS1 exhibit, is built from a cork body that, from a distance, resembles weathered stone and is topped with a pink Styrofoam head that suggests a retro rendering of a space alien. "Sleeper," Ms. Babha's first standing figure, from 2005, is constructed with a clay skin laid over a wood and Styrofoam skeleton. A frontal view, especially of the face, evokes an ancient artifact, but side and rear views reveal a contemporary architectural armature, laying bare the constructive decisions that generate the figure.

Andrew Hinderaker for The Wall Street Journal (Far left); Huma Bhabha/Salon 94, New York

Huma Bhabha, left, with her piece, 'Sleeper' (2005), made of clay over a wood and Styrofoam skeleton; above, Ms. Bhabha's 'There is No Killing What Can't Be Killed' (2012).

It is this straddling of past, present and future that most distinguishes Ms. Babha's oeuvre, said Peter Eleey, a curator at MoMA PS1. It "adopts a certain formal language and structure from older sculptural traditions, and yet, is made from eminently contemporary materials like Styrofoam, often mixed with things that we associate with more archaic and natural forms, like clay and animal bones. It belongs as much to history as it does to its contemporary moment."

While it's easy to pick up on her references to antiquities, Ms. Bhabha's attempts to create what she describes as "monsters" also comes, she said, from a longtime interest in science fiction. "Very early on," she said, "I was influenced by the imagery that I saw in directors like David Cronenberg and Ridley Scott, and the books of Philip K. Dick. When you read him, it's very complicated because he's talking about culture, but writing in a science-fiction context."

She's less interested than some of those artists, however, in making overt sociopolitical observations. "I don't like to force things onto the viewer. I'm very politically informed but the work isn't political in my mind."

A notable exception is "Untitled," from 2005, which addresses the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Composed of clay, black plastic, wood and wire, the sculpture resembles a prostrate, shrouded figure, and is suggestive of a woman (who happens to have a tail) in a burqa, praying. Still, the artist is more interested in embracing ambiguity. "Whatever you're thinking about gradually seeps into the work, maybe in the title or in different elements," she said. The viewer "is transported to another place, but each person does it in their different way. I don't want to lead you where I want to go."

Speaking of "Untitled," Ms. Greenberg Rohatyn pinpointed that ability to transcend politics. "It has a much more didactic quality, yet visually it's completely captivating and spiritual," she said. "As she's grown as a sculptor, the roots in that piece have expanded much further out, in terms of how they navigate art history and images through time. You can see a sculpture that [evokes] a kouros and as well as Brancusi's 'Kiss.' They travel through time in interesting ways."

Ms. Bhabha's distinctive vision is a result, in part, of her decision to sequester herself from New York's frenetic social life, living and working with her husband, the artist Jason Fox, in Poughkeepsie. There she makes use of a 1,000-square-foot studio and takes advantage of the inspiring landscape. "You don't have to walk very far to find something that is soothing and beautiful," she said. "Coming here was initially a bit of a shock, but once you get used to a slightly slower life, you start to realize that it allows you to focus on your work and think about things. It gave me the freedom to experiment within my work and changes started to happen faster."

Her embrace of a quieter and more contemplative lifestyle flows into the effect her work has on an audience. "Most art in the past was made for religious reasons," she said. "Art is supposed to evoke those kinds of feelings, where you are mesmerized, and that's something that I try to do. That's what makes art timeless. That's why we need art."