

HUMA BHABHA A FLY APPEARED, AND DISAPPEARED

MO.CO.
18.11. 2023
→ **28.01.2024**

EXHIBITION HUMA BHABHA A FLY APPEARED, AND DISAPPEARED

NUMA HAMBURSI
CEO, MO.CO. MONTPELLIER
CONTEMPORAIN

[EXCERPTS OF THE CATALOGUE]

The railroad winds upwards from New York to Poughkeepsie along the Hudson River, like a wise old man looking back on his past life. Here, at the edge of the sweeping woodland that Chateaubriand admired for never having suffered at the hand of humans, on these lands that birthed American painting – Thomas Cole’s Hudson River School – is where Huma Bhabha lives and works.

The unsettling feeling that arises when in the presence of her sculptures is likely to prompt the usual age-old comparisons, since the rational mind only reluctantly accepts to be overwhelmed with the intuition of any magical or hidden thinking. Granted, the very act of sculpting often involves an invocation of the origins, genesis or dawns of art and expression, in the instances where language – the language that time was unable to pass down to us – no longer suffices to express unutterable truths. This was how the golem came to be sculpted out of clay, a creature in the raw that preceded speech. This was how the menhirs of the Haut-Languedoc came to watch over the telluric forces that struck fear in the hearts of its sedentary populations. Going back to the root of things can also be a means to imagine divergent futures: Michelangelo taking part in the excavations of the Baths of Trajan or Caracalla, during which the Laocoön Group was unearthed; or Alberto Giacometti feigning to ignore the *Ombra della sera*, the Etruscan masterpiece from Volterra. It is also sculpture that allows us to comprehend the genius of civilisations past and present, which remain enigmatic to this day: the kingdom of Nok in present-day Nigeria, which disappeared in the early years of this era; or the

Jarai people of Vietnam’s Central Highlands, whose “mourners” keep watch over their deceased ancestors. Because it is subjected to extreme injunctions – gigantism on the one hand and implicitness and tenuousness on the other – contemporary sculpture sometimes struggles to remember the buried realm that forged its legacy. In contrast, Huma Bhabha’s monstrous creatures display a type of formal vocabulary and creativity that is both timeless and marked by our own obsessions – incomprehensible if not sifted through the lens of the century; composite in their alphabet and composite in their flesh.

[...]

One question remains when it comes to the admiration one might feel in the presence of Huma Bhabha’s giants, sculpted in bronze, clay, cork or wood, their skins like weathered bark or streaked with contemporary hieroglyphs, stiff and intimidating like antediluvian gods. Native American totem poles, menhirs in the Minervois, the Mo’ai, Donatello’s sculptures of Christ, and even 1918 war memorials, all conveyed a feeling of hope, a belief, or were the expression of a sense of transcendence, whether religious or secular. What is left of form without the appeal of the great mystery, of the ineffable secret that we summon because we think it structures our lives? Perhaps it is the prescience of the conflagration to come: the new gods, the death of death, the unprecedented coexistence with new forms of intelligence. Or perhaps it is the archaeological evidence of a world – a world of imperfect, human and incomparable beauty – that is already fading before our very eyes.

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COMMISSARIAT :

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DIRECTOR OF EXHIBITIONS,
MO.CO. MONTPELLIER
CONTEMPORAIN

PAULINE FAURE,
RAHMOUNA BOUTAYEB,
CURATORS, MO.CO.
MONTPELLIER CONTEMPORAIN

A Fly Appeared and Disappeared is the first monographic exhibition at a French institution of the work of Pakistani-American artist Huma Bhabha, born in Karachi in 1962.

Huma Bhabha draws inspiration from science fiction, mythology, zoology, art history, and popular culture. In her sculptures, works on paper, and drawings on photographs, the figure is ubiquitous. Laced with allusions to war, migration, colonization, and ecological fragility, her hybrid creatures – both human and animal - suggest a strange, yet familiar, otherness.

The exhibition retraces more than twenty years of her creative career (2000 - 2022). Some fifty works reveal a fascinating repertoire of references (Egyptian antiquities, Modernist sculpture, horror and science fiction), and highlight her formal experimentation and interplay of materials.

In her sculptures, Bhabha works often with everyday materials such as cork, polystyrene, found objects, and clay. Some of her sculptures are cast in bronze, but retain the idiosyncrasy and tactility of the original materials. Bhabha's use of assemblage and trompe-l'œil can be seen through the exhibition.

Bhabha's drawings on paper and on photographs she has taken, are rendered with collage, paint, and oil stick. Busts of hybridized creatures with strategically embedded images of animals, from calendars and other sources, peer out from their hosts' eyes. A self-described expressionist, her works on paper and photographs reveal a talent with color and form.

This exhibition is a universe in which boundaries (geographical, chronological, material) have all disappeared, leaving a vision, which remains powerful and clear.

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ROOM 1

CENTAUR, 2000

Centaur is an assemblage that, as its title suggests, forms a hybrid creature. The seemingly simple figure is made of objects found in the studio. The work attests to Huma Bhabha's long-standing interest in myth. The visible structure, and the balance between completion and incompleteness, chance and intention, are themes found in her work.

UNTITLED, 2004

During a stay in Mexico in 2001, Huma Bhabha began to experiment with clay. On her return to the United States, she began to work with self-hardening clay. A black garbage bag, used to keep the raw clay moist, gave form to the sculpture *Untitled*, (2002). In her photographs, Huma Bhabha sometimes stages her sculptures as cinematic characters. Pictured is the first version of this work which was subsequently produced in several different versions, including a monumental bronze in 2018, entitled *Benaam*.

ROOM 2

UNTITLED, 2009

Huma Bhabha produced the series of nine ink drawings on photographs in 2009. Expressionist portraits are drawn on black-and-white photographs of landscapes. The schematization of facial features is reminiscent of the works

of Picasso, and also of African masks, both are important sources of inspiration for the artist, as are horror and science-fiction films.

ROOM 3

UNTITLED, 2009

In 2008, Huma Bhabha purchased a batch of cork blocks from a stationer going out of business, she stacked them to form totems before beginning to carve them. Cork is an often used medium throughout her work, which she combines with polystyrene, wood, bones, and other materials to form her sculptures. The form of this sculpture is reminiscent of an eroded figure excavated from an archaeological dig.

ROOM 4

BOURNE DARKLY, 2008

Huma Bhabha's figures appear to be survivors of an apocalypse, or to be emerging from the ruins of our present. *Bourne Darkly*'s incomplete body rests precariously on one leg. The upper part of the body, in painted polystyrene, contrasts with the clay and wood of the lower part. The work was inspired by an unfinished sculpture by Alberto Giacometti, seen in a studio photograph. The title contains a double reference to "bourne," the limit, or destination and the *Jason Bourne* movies.

PLATFORM 1

THE HOOD MAKER, 2019

The Hood Maker consists of stacked pieces of cork and polystyrene. The resulting monolith was then carved into a double-sided hybrid silhouette. Two bodies appear, painted with acrylic and oil stick marks that enhance their anatomy. An interplay of duality and identity takes place. The title recalls Philip K. Dick's 1955 short story: a repressive regime employs telepaths to spy on the thoughts of the population, until one human, the "hood-maker," dons a hood that blocks this power.

THE PAST IS A FOREIGN COUNTRY, 2019

The Past is a Foreign Country combines a deer skull that forms the face, a dense headdress made of shredded tires, a cork body, and polystyrene feet. The 2.60-meter figure is ambiguous: alien, ancient god, or sorcerer in ritual garb. This character, made of various recycled materials, embodies the blending of eras and materials to create a potential future.

CASTLE OF THE DAUGHTER, 2016

Castle of the Daughter is a monumental figure over 2.50 meters high. It is composed of large blocks of cork and stacked polystyrene. The sculpture sketches a movement, a step. The figure appears feminine, with pink breasts and pastel face. The title is translated from Dari, a Persian dialect and refers to the name of an ancient, ruined castle near Bamiyan in Afghanistan.

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PLATFORM 2

MASK OF DIMITRIOS, 2019

Huma Bhabha is particularly attentive to narrative, and her titles sometimes have origins in cinema. In *Mask of Dimitrios*, the figure's body appears to emerge from a metal armature inspired by domestic chairs; plastic bags hover in the center of its torso like lungs; its limbs are covered with mottled clay; its ribs are made of rubber; and its spine is an undulating pipe that ends in a red rubber dog toy and resembles the vestigial appendage of a primate from another time or dimension.

LEOCHICOSPEEDY, 2016

Animals, and dogs in particular, reappear often in Huma Bhabha's works. This series of ten etchings is based on portraits of three dogs: Leo, Chico, and Speedy. The lines and drips are enough to reveal faces with round, schematic, hybrid eyes, whose disquieting power recalls Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893).

PLATFORM 3

RECONSTRUCTIONS, 2007

In 2007, Huma Bhabha made her first portfolio of prints, which she worked on with master printer Niels Borch Jensen, which is comprised of two woodcuts and sixteen photogravures. The *Reconstructions* portfolio shows monumental sculptures and structures existing in desert landscapes, in which new cultures or civilizations rise from the detritus of the past.

UNTITLED, 2022

During a residency in Oaxaca, Mexico, Huma Bhabha experimented for the first time with clay fired in a brick kiln. There, she produced a group of works, four of which are presented at MO.CO. These corporeal fragments are presented on concrete plinths which draw out the sculptures' varied terracotta hues and ossified fragility. The exploded vulnerability of the objects creates a tension with our sense of their occult power.

THE ANCIENT AND ARCAINE, 2021

The Ancient and Arcane is a bronze sculpture on a concrete base. Bhabha is interested in the rawness and the immediacy of the material manifestations through her probing working method: exploring and contemplating, adding and subtracting, making and unmaking. Although there are layers of patina, her fingerprints are vividly pronounced on the surface, and the narrow fissures resulted from knifing through the wet clay. Its verdigris patina gives the work an aged appearance. The eyes are hollowed out; the open, toothless mouth seems to be decomposing.

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HUMA BHABHA BIOGRAPHY

1962

Huma Bhabha is born in Karachi, Pakistan.

1981

She travels to the US to study at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in Providence, where she studies painting and printmaking.

1983-1984

Huma Bhabha spends her junior year in Rome.

1985

She obtains her Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) from RISD.

1989

She obtains her Master of Fine Arts (MFA) from Columbia University School of the Arts.

1994-1996

Huma Bhabha produces a series of masks inspired by horror and sci-fi movies, notably the 1995 film *Mortal Kombat*.

2000

Her work *Centaur* marks a turning point and sets the benchmark for her practice: revealed structure, a multitude of viewpoints, hybrid form.

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2001

During a trip to Mexico, Huma Bhabha experiments with clay. Back in the U.S., she works with self-hardening clay.

2002

Covering the clay with a garbage bag, Huma Bhabha creates *Untitled*, the first version of her prostrate figure.

With her husband Jason Fox, she moves from New York City to Poughkeepsie, NY.

Huma Bhabha begins working for a taxidermist, where she remains until 2004 and learns how to build her armatures.

2003

Waiting for a Friend marks the advent of verticality in her work.

2004

Her first solo exhibition in New York takes place at ATM Gallery.

2006

Huma Bhabha creates *A.B.*, her first bronze sculpture.

2007

The *Reconstructions* portfolio marks the return of printmaking to her practice. She also begins drawing in ink on photographs.

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2008

Huma Bhabha acquires a batch of cork blocks from a stationery store going out of business. She experiments with this material, beginning a series of sculptures.

2013

She starts incorporating images of animals found in calendars into her drawings.

2018

The work *Benaam*, a monumental bronze version of her 2002 sculpture *Untitled*, is produced for the Roof Garden Commission at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

2022

During a residency at Casa Wabi in Mexico, Huma Bhabha creates her first works in terracotta.

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ALSO ON VIEW



14.10.23
→ **28.01.24**

SOL!
LA BIENNALE DU TERRITOIRE #2
SAD SUN

This second edition of the Biennale du territoire takes as its starting point a little-known episode: the Marquis de Sade's stay in Montpellier in 1776. It was in Montpellier that he is said to have met the young woman who inspired the heroine of his first novel: *Justine, or The Misfortunes of Virtue*. The exhibition embraces the Sadian ethical and aesthetic order through the works of some twenty artists. In it, the body exists alongside language that seeks to give form to the formless and the forbidden. If Sade has long been relegated to the realm of the clandestine, the exhibition gives space to ephemeral, sometimes invisible narratives and forms, just like this city, which has historically had a secret and hidden face.

The exhibition is supported by Pro Helvetia, the Swiss Arts Council, and the Occitanie region.

MO.CO. Panacée
14, rue de l'École de Pharmacie, 34000 Montpellier

09.12.23
→ **13.05.24**

EXHIBITION TIPHAINÉ CALMETTES
MAKE THE SHOW BLOOM

Through sculpture, installation and performance, the artist seeks to set both her forms and her research in motion. It is a way of seeing the production process as a living organism in direct relationship with the spaces that host it, the beings that encounter it, and vice-versa. Her creative process is an ongoing conversation with the history of craftsmanship and its revival in the present. Tiphaine Calmettes is attentive to the context in which her work is produced, and she collaborates with various craftspeople. Like a storyteller, she reinvents collective practices and ancestral rites through performative actions that bring objects to life.

An exhibition produced in partnership with MO.CO Montpellier Contemporain

Opening 08/12/2023 at 18.30
Site archéologique Lattara
Musée Henri Prades
390 Route de Pérols 34970 Lattes

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

MO.CO.

13, rue de La République - Montpellier
Accessible to persons with reduced mobility

ACCESS

Tramway : Lignes 1, 2, 3, 4 - Arrêt gare St Roch
Voiture : Parking gare St Roch, Comédie

OPENING HOURS

From Tuesday to Sunday
June to September → 11am to 7pm
October to May → 11am to 6pm

CONDITIONS ADMISSION PRICES

Full price individual admission: 8 €
Reduced rate individual admission: 5 €
Free admission, see conditions online
Free access on the first Sunday of the month
Annual subscription MO.CO. SOLO PASS: 20 €
Annual subscription MO.CO. DUO PASS: 35 €

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ONLINE

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CATALOGUE

Huma Bhabha. A Fly Appeared, and Disappeared
Catalogue published by Snoeck
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It includes unpublished texts by Numa Hambursin and Eva Barois De Caevel,
as well as an interview between Huma Bhabha and Vincent Honoré.
Bilingual edition French-English 220 pages, 39 €
Available for sale at MO.CO. and in bookshops



