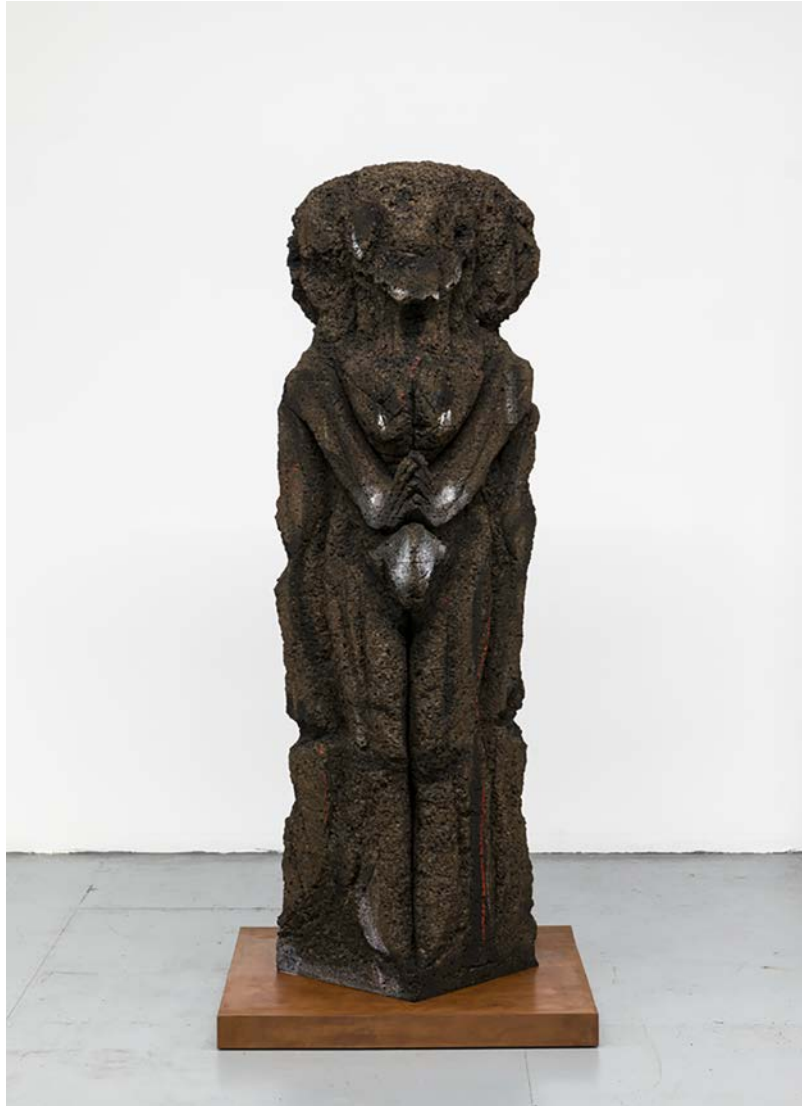


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Phantasms of Huma Bhabha

by Danielle Shang | January 25, 2020



Huma Bhabha, *Daydreamers*, 2019. Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles

Phantasms must be allowed to function at the limit of bodies; against bodies, because they stick to bodies and protrude from them, but also because they touch them, cut them, break them into sections, regionalize them, and multiply their surfaces; and equally, outside of bodies, because they function between bodies according to laws of proximity, torsion, and variable distance-laws of which they remain ignorant... They should consequently be freed from the restrictions we impose upon them, freed from the dilemmas of truth and falsehood and of being and nonbeing...; they must be allowed to conduct their dance, to act out their mime, as “extrabeings.”—Michel Foucault, “Theatrum Philosophicum,” 1970



Huma Bhabha, *Philosophical Extremist*, 2019. Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles

Huma Bhabha is known for her outlandish, elusive, but spiritually imbued figurative sculptures of monumental scale and hefty volume. She first carves them from columns made of cork and Styrofoam, then animates them by loosely incising and painting on the surfaces to delineate limbs, buttocks, chests, spines, anatomical structures, and, sometimes, exaggerated visages with wide-eyed gazes. The references in her work to Hollywood fantasy movies, to the art historical canon—from Pablo Picasso to Joseph Beuys and Robert Rauschenberg—and to her own biography as an alien woman who emigrated from the Islamic Republic of Pakistan to the United States of America have been extensively excavated by curators and critics. In the light of Michel Foucault's notion of phantasm, however, I want to open up a conversation about how Bhabha comments on monumentality and presents an open-ended narrative, in a spiritual tone, through the device of stylistic association, in the body of work included in her eponymous solo exhibition at David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. The show comprises a constellation of seven anthropoid sculptures and three drawings, all from 2019. The sculptures uniformly front the entrance, as if effigies of La Calavera were about to embark on a procession for the Día de los Muertos that honors the deceased and celebrates rebirth.



Huma Bhabha, Installation view at David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, 2020. Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles

Bhabha incorporates into her work many iconographic elements reminiscent of deities from bygone eras that span vast historical regions, from Gandhara (now northern Pakistan and Afghanistan) to Mesopotamia to Macedonia, and from ancient Egypt to Mesoamerica. Her unearthly symmetrical and upright composition, for example, reminds the viewer of structural arrangements from the archaic period. Her standing figures, entirely unclothed, appear with their long arms attached to their bodies and their feet close together, resembling kayotsarga in Hindu Jainism: an unflinching standing posture in the nude, meant to give up one's physical comfort to reach spiritual emancipation in austerity. The viewer is encouraged to circumambulate the works, as if to perform a meditative ritual at a stupa that represents Buddha's enlightenment and knowledge. Each of Bhabha's statues has multiple visages and bodies that face different directions and manifest various mien. Multiplication, in Hindu imagery, implies the notion of cosmic interconnectivity. Additionally, it is a visual manifestation of the deity's unlimited power to be both fiercely protective and destructive through violence and pestilence. Bhabha seems to be channeling such agency in her phantasmal and hermaphroditic characters. It is telling that she titled one sculpture *Dailamite Highlander*, evoking the image of a ferocious warrior of the pre-Islamic Parthian Empire.

Perhaps the most conspicuous sculpture in the exhibition is *The Third Voice*—a towering figure standing two and a half meters tall, like a totem pole. The head and the lower body are made of cork and stained with dark paint, while the upper arms, chests, and viscera are constructed of Styrofoam, in vivid colors, and outlined with incised lines and crisp strokes of oil stick to accentuate the materiality of the mediums. With its body upright, this robust, eerie giant poses with its right leg slightly forward. Its weight is centered over two colossal feet, making the figure appear visually stable from all sides, like an Egyptian kouros, and suggesting a tentative forward movement. Its four faces appear mauled by violence and eroded by the passage of time. And the coarse



Huma Bhabha, Installation view at David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, 2020. Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles

but highly texturized surface is further cut, scratched, and pitted, as if the phantasmal body, riddled with scars, has been resurrected from a ruin to recount memories of violence and strife in the distant past. Despite the work's formal similarity to the archaic, Bhabha brings the character to life by choosing the materials and vocabulary of our times. Instead of sandstone or marble, she has constructed the initial column with banal, resilient, yet easily adaptable cork and Styrofoam. Cork is always brown and dark, indicating the color of the earth. Styrofoam comes in four light colors: white, pink, blue, and green. The blue reminds the artist of the sky, and the pink the sun. Positioning cork in the lower portion of the column visually grounds the statue, and the celestial colors of the Styrofoam guide the viewer's gaze upward. A narrow, straight gap is cut through between the two stout Doric-column-like legs. This curious new motif is a nod to Barnett Newman's "zip"—a vertical band that crosses the entire pictorial plane as a portal to the sublime.

In addition to alluding to the legacies of art history, Bhabha often adopts movie titles to tease out other layers of narrative in her work. *Mask of Dimitrios* is titled after a 1944 film noir by Jean Negulesco, in which the main character is a warmonger who profits from atrocities. A built rather than a glyptic sculpture, Bhabha's *Mask of Dimitrios* depicts an enthroned corpse, whose fragmented body is assembled in a similar style as reconstructed archaeological remnants of ancient chryselephantine statues. It sits in a rigid, upright position on the metal frame of a chair, calling to mind the posture of the Canaanite god El or the Egyptian Colossi of Memnon. The seated phantom is a recurrent image in the artist's oeuvre: first, in her print series *Reconstructions*, and then in the sculpture *The Orientalist* (both 2007). The frail figure of *Mask of Dimitrios* seems to be decomposing in its own armature and nearly disappearing in the space, if not for the two plastic bags hanging from the collarbones to fill in the void where the internal organs would be. The blotched texture of the clay limbs and the weightless appearance evoke the same sense of agony and deprivation as Alberto Giacometti's work made in the tumultuous 1940s.

A new addition to Bhabha's repertoire of sculptural typologies is presented in this exhibition: *Ground*, a monumental anthropoid stela on a tall wood slab that rests directly on the floor. His-



Huma Bhabha, *Ground*, 2019. Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles

torically, steles, half architecture and half sculpture, are monuments that commemorate the lives of the powerful. *Ground* also immortalizes a mighty one. The mysterious tall body is carved in high relief against a plain dark background. The artist creates the illusion of depth and spatial recession by forging strong tonal contrast with a combination of undercutting, texturing, and incised lines to sharpen the visibility of the emerging figure in the foreground. The circle of the head is framed with a shredded tire found on the street, and a used rubber mold discarded from the artist's foundry resembles an abstracted face. Recycled objects have always found their way into Bhabha's work, as if she is reclaiming relics that have been rescued from decay and neglect.

Bhabha relies on scale, volume, and texture to heighten the intensity of her works, which direct the viewer's attention to not only the passage of time (with a new urgency) but also the meanings of monumentality (with a grain of salt). It is worth noting that, like Constantin Brancusi's *Adam and Eve* (1921), all her sculptures, except for *Ground*, are elevated from the ground atop rectangular plinths. The plinth, an essential element of her work, distinguishes the sculpture from



Huma Bhabha, *She Has Only Three Paws*, 2019. Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles

the floor, emphasizes the representational space, and also underscores the work's transportability and homelessness—the negative condition of the monument, according to Rosalind Krauss. ¹

While walking through the parade of Bhabha's sculptural characters, the viewer is struck by a sense of awe, sublimity, and immortality that transcends destruction, brutality, misfortune, and mortality. Her work does not make a sound, but it speaks. On the one hand, I cannot help but see her fantastical figurative work as a series of oneiric images that articulates the imagined and the remembered to map out the otherwise invisible human psyche for survival. On the other hand, her work can be analogized to expansive, encyclopedic archives, in which times and spaces—throughout histories of art, civilization, and anthropology—are consolidated and re-presented to propose our destiny. Her characters call to mind Foucault's mimes, the freed "extrabeings," in a phantasmagoric *mise-en-scène* that articulates a space for theater, in which the viewer is ushered through an implied narrative of decay, transcendence, resurrection, and emancipation. This imaginative theater, imbued with the artist's personal view of the world, collective memories, and shared histories, enables her to speak when history has fallen silent.

1. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded field," *October*, Vol. 8. Spring, 1979, 34.