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A Sci-Fi Showdown at the Met Museum's Rooftop Garden

Martha Schwendener | April 12, 2018

Step out onto the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and you are confronted by a towering figure, somewhat humanoid but with a ferocious face that looks like a primate mask. She-He-It-They visually dwarfs the jagged Manhattan skyline and the treetops in Central Park. Kneeling before this behemoth is a second figure, bowing in supplication or prayer, with long cartoonish human hands and a scraggly tail emerging from its shiny black drapery.

Welcome to Huma Bhabha's "We Come in Peace," a spare and unsettling sculptural installation for the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Roof Garden Commission, which opens on Tuesday and runs through Oct. 28. While the figures aren't meant to be scary, in at least one way they can be interpreted as a warning sign. The title harks back to science fiction, the line an alien uttered to a human in the 1951 movie "The Day the Earth Stood Still" — but it ripples with other associations: colonization, invasion, imperialism or missionaries and other foreigners whose intentions were not always innocent.

Ms. Bhabha, 56, who was born in Karachi, Pakistan, and educated at the Rhode Island School of Design and Columbia University (she lives in Poughkeepsie, N.Y.), is a smart choice for the rooftop commission.

Working in figurative sculpture — or some version of it — she provides a cross-cultural approach that is needed particularly at this moment, making connections among histories, languages and civilizations, and our shared present and future. Her work has been included in large international exhibitions, including "All the World's Futures" at the Venice Biennale in 2015.

Unlike recent years and other commissions, where the Met roof felt like a playground or an obstacle course, Ms. Bhabha's project is shockingly, refreshingly, simple. There are only two sculptures, arranged in a kind of dialogue with the open-air roof serving, as Ms. Bhabha describes it in the accompanying catalog, as a kind of stage — an elegant play on the traditional pedestals on which sculptures were customarily displayed.

Her commission feels like an extension of the complex conversation going on downstairs, inside a museum packed with 5,000 years of art history. (The rooftop show was organized by another transplant from the same region: Shanay Jhaveri, who is



Drama on the deck: The artist Huma Bhabha's installation for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Roof Garden, opening Tuesday, is "We Come in Peace." The title comes from "The Day the Earth Stood Still," and the two sculptures could stand for any balance of power or meeting. Credit: George Etheredge for *The New York Times*



The bronze title figure is covered with patina color, and gouges that might read as cosmic wear and tear. Sci-fi aliens? Or contemporary updates of ancient Gorgons, warriors and spirits? Credit: George Etheredge for *The New York Times*

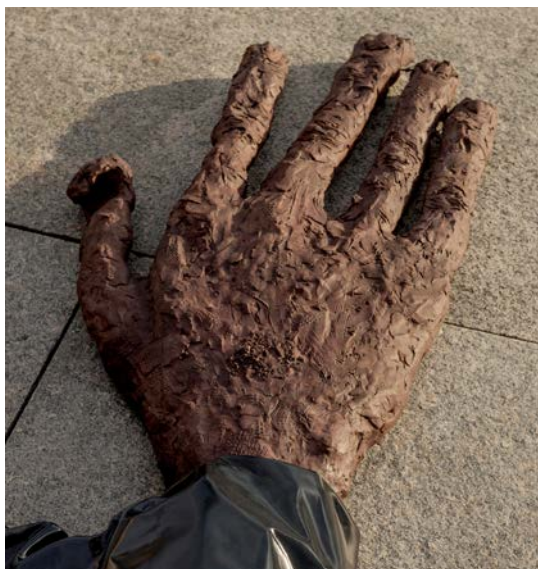
originally from Mumbai and was hired by the Met in 2015 as its first curator of modern and contemporary South Asian art.)

Both figures were originally carved in cork and Styrofoam. Ms. Bhabha generally works in scrappy, ephemeral materials. But these would obviously not survive a season on the roof, so the sculptures have been cast in bronze. And yet they retain much of their original tactility and distressed appearance. The bronze is covered with patina color, and gouges and markings on the colossal, golemlike figure read either as symbols or language — or perhaps a kind of cosmic wear and tear, harking back to sci-fi aliens. But — and this is particularly noticeable if you've been wandering the floors below — the work is also a contemporary update of the Gorgons and Medusas in Greek and Roman Art, the deities in the Asian wing, or the warriors and spirits in the Met's current, excellent exhibition "Golden Kingdoms: Luxury & Legacy in the Ancient Americas."

The second figure is more puzzling. Titled "Benaam," which means "unnamed" or "without name" in Urdu, its humanoid hands — which are reminiscent of Philip Guston's comic-inspired figurative painting — were carved in clay then cast in bronze. Its tail was crafted in phallic-looking coils of clay and was peppered with electrical conduits, all of which have been cast in bronze. The main element here — not entirely successful or exciting, for me — is a surface covering most of the figure that looks like a trompe l'oeil trash bag, cast in bronze and painted black. Is it a body bag? Maybe a burqa. Clearly something protecting, preserving or obscuring the figure.



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Credit: George Etheredge for *The New York Times*



The second figure, "Benaam," has humanoid hands reminiscent of Philip Guston's comic-inspired figurative painting. They were carved in clay then cast in bronze. Credit: George Etheredge for *The New York Times*

Most important is the relationship between the two sculptures. It could stand for any balance of power or meeting: parent and child, or strangers meeting for the first time (say, over drinks on this roof). The towering figure clearly suggests our entry into the unknown, its gender morphing into uncertain post-gender and post-humanity, raising the question of what life in other galaxies and universes might look like if or when we make contact with sentient creatures.

The ambitious catalog contains essays by Mr. Jhaveri and Ed Halter, founder and director of Light Industry, a film and electronic art venue in Brooklyn, which consider some of these issues. They make apt comparisons, zigzagging across time and space to include artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat and Auguste Rodin, whose approaches to figures have a formal roughness, as well as older sculpture from Africa and India.

Mr. Jhaveri quotes the philosopher Judith Butler and muses on "the ordinary ways that we think about humaniza-

tion and dehumanization." In thinking about the lower, quieter, faceless "Benaam" sculpture, I would add the philosophers Gayatri Spivak and Antonio Gramsci and their concepts of the subaltern, the person who does not have a voice and gets shrouded, covered up, or blotted out of history by politics, violence and oppression (and is most often a woman).

"The Day the Earth Stood Still" imagines the first contact between humans and aliens, who look surprisingly like humans, but in more anonymous form. Mr. Halter, in the catalog, also considers the "mutated" figures that appear in science fiction films such as "The Thing," "Terminator" and the video game "Mortal Kombat," and their relationship to sculpture by Pablo Picasso and Alberto Giacometti.



In the collision of traditions and forms on the roof, Ms. Bhabha's installation reactivates sculptures in the galleries below — particularly the Met's 18th- and 19th-century French and Italian figurative sculptures. Credit: George Etheredge for *The New York Times*

I was surprised not to see Eduardo Paolozzi mentioned in this round up because his sculptures are so formally similar to Ms. Bhabha's. A core member of the Independent Group in post-World War II Britain, which served as the progenitors of British Pop Art, Mr. Paolozzi made bronze sculptures throughout the 1950s and '60s, such as his "Robot" (1956), that bear a striking resemblance to Ms. Bhabha's works, both past and present. Mr. Paolozzi was also friendly with the sci-fi author J.G. Ballard. (An exhibition of Mr. Paolozzi's sculpture and seminal "Bunk" collages, made from popular magazines, is currently on view at the Berlinische Galerie in Berlin.)

One of the highlights of the catalog is that it includes photos showing the production of Ms. Bhabha's project, from preparatory drawings to the initial clay, Styrofoam and cork sculptures; to the foundry in Kingston, N.Y., where the bronzes were fabricated; and finally to the snowy Met roof in early spring.

Ms. Bhabha's installation is particularly successful for reactivating the sculptures inside the museum. In the galleries below — particularly the sculpture court where the Met's collection of 18th- and 19th-century French and Italian figurative sculptures is showcased — you see all kinds of dramas being played out, mostly derived from classical Greek and Roman literature.

And with your imagination ignited to the possibility of objects existing relationally, rather than as singular artworks, you see other dialogues occurring. For instance, in the Great Hall entrance to the museum, a giant Hellenic marble sculpture of Athena Parthenos (circa 170 B.C.) faces off against an Egyptian pharaoh (circa 1919-1885 B.C.), carved in basalt, a material that Ms. Bhabha's Styrofoam-and-cork-to-bronze sculptures weirdly resembles.

In all these cases, as in Ms. Bhabha's grouping, it is two figures confronting one another — the Self and the Other — not just the depiction of a hero, heroine, goddess or founding father. In the collision of traditions and forms on the roof, you sense possibility: the melding of cultures and aesthetics that might be harmonious rather than imperialist, or bent merely toward appropriation. Ms. Bhabha doesn't make specific claims for her work, but despite its ferocity and imposing presence, her title, "We Come in Peace," suggests that appearances — both in art and the real world — can be deceiving.