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## Huma Bhabha Takes an Ax to Her Exhibit at the Met

By Ted Loos | March 10, 2018



The Pakistani artist Huma Bhabha in her studio in Poughkeepsie, N.Y.  
Credit: Lauren Lancaster for *The New York Times*

POUGHKEEPSIE, N.Y. — The sculptor Huma Bhabha, the next artist to be featured in the popular roof-installation series at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was working away in her studio here the other day. Unlike some of her famous forebears among Hudson River Valley artists, who were more likely to use a paintbrush, Ms. Bhabha was wielding an ax. It's a big ax, the kind that could be used to stock a woodpile or scare teenagers in a horror movie. Most remarkably, Ms. Bhabha — whose show at the Met beginning next month is only the first in a spate of museum exhibitions in the offing — manages to use it in a way that is precise and surgical, yet still emphatic. The Pakistan-born 55-year-old was chop, chop, chopping on the bottom of a block of cork on the first floor of a former firehouse that she bought with her husband, Jason Fox, also an artist. (His

studio is on the second floor, and they live on the third.) Cork is relatively unusual in the world of sculpture — and so are axes, for that matter — but it's one of Ms. Bhabha's go-to materials these days. "I like texture," she said, with the ax resting on the floor behind her. "I work with my hands, and I like to feel it."

The Met installation, "We Come In Peace," will be on view April 17 through Oct. 28. The Cantor Roof Garden installation series began in 1987 and it averages some 500,000 viewers each season. It assures the featured artist a measure of fame. Ms. Bhabha called it "huge exposure and a huge opportunity." She added, "It's obviously very exciting to be chosen for that, with the nature of my work."

Though some details are traditionally kept under wraps, Ms. Bhabha said that it will comprise two large figures — one of which incorporates cork — and that she was treating the roof as "a landing pad where these figures have arrived." Shanay Jhaveri, the Met curator overseeing the installation, noted that the roof was "an iconic space, but challenging." He said that Ms. Bhabha had conceived a "dramatic mise-en-scène" with a humanistic theme: "How we approach the Other." Ms. Bhabha generally depicts the human figure — or at least human-ish. "There's something haunted in them," said Eva Respini, the chief curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston and a fan of Ms. Bhabha's work. In Ms. Bhabha's studio, the artist was surrounded by several sculptures that were destined for a gallery show in Berlin. One was partly made of Styrofoam and some were drawn on with an oil stick in various shades, too. They formed a mysterious group indeed. "I'm interested in a certain kind of visceral

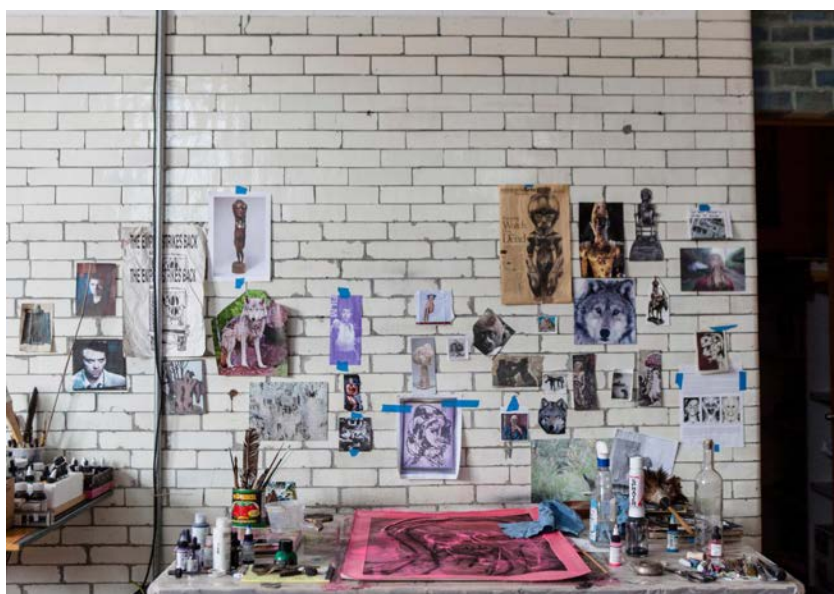


Ms. Bhabha's yard, which has her sculpture "Constantium," 2014, on view.  
Credit: Lauren Lancaster for *The New York Times*

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aspect, a kind of rawness in the work, which I like very much," Ms. Bhabha said. "It comes naturally to me."

After the Met, more shows are lined up. In September, Texas's Contemporary Austin mounts a solo exhibition of her work. In October, one of her sculptures will be featured in the 57th Carnegie International, an exhibition organized by Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum of Art. And the largest show to date of her works comes in March 2019, at the ICA Boston. "She's always been an artists' artist," said the ICA's Ms. Respini, who is organizing that museum's show. "But recently she has come into her own in an amazing way, and is hitting her stride."



Ms. Bhabha's studio in downtown Poughkeepsie, N.Y. Credit: Lauren Lancaster for *The New York Times*

Ms. Respini added, "She has a unique visual language that is so singular. And she has a complete mastery of her materials that comes through time and practice, not only cork but Styrofoam and burned wood too. They are all unwieldy, but she's able to wrangle them." Ms. Bhabha grew up in Karachi, and she has been living in the United States for almost 30 years. She attended the Rhode Island School of Design for her undergraduate degree and then got an MFA from Columbia. As she developed her art, she found that she admired artists with wide-ranging sensibilities and a protean quality, especially Pablo Picasso, Joseph Beuys, Alberto Giacometti and Robert Rauschenberg. Like a lot of sculptors, Ms. Bhabha started as a painter, and she still works in a variety of media. Her primary American gallery, Salon 94 in New York City, has featured her colorful ink-and-pastel works on paper, and Ms. Respini particularly praised the photographs that Ms. Bhabha takes and then draws on. But steadily over time, she has found her work getting more three-dimensional. "It was not a dissatisfaction with painting in any way," Ms. Bhabha said. "I felt the work leaving the wall gradually and coming out to the floor. I was realizing, 'Why not just have it stand up?'" Throughout the 1990s, Ms. Bhabha lived and worked in New York, struggling to get the art world's attention. Her first solo gallery show came in 2004, shortly after she and Mr. Fox moved upstate. "We couldn't afford New York City," she said. The street where she ended up in Poughkeepsie's downtown was very quiet on a winter Saturday, and some boarded-up businesses were visible. The artist couple was able to buy the former firehouse inexpensively, since most people didn't want so much open space. "You start to appreciate your isolation, and there's nothing else to do," Ms. Bhabha said, noting that the Hudson Valley had a lot of beauty, too. "It forces you to just concentrate on what you're doing." Ms. Bhabha employs assistants to help with large, heavy pieces and with cleaning up, but she flies solo at the crucial moments of inspiration. "I can't really work with people around," she said.

When a piece isn't going well, Ms. Bhabha said she isn't tempted to use her ax in anger on a recalcitrant block of cork. She recalibrates as she goes, mentally applying the same steady pressure found in her chop. "Even if it's not working out," she said, "you have to figure out how it's going to get there."