

Reid, Tiana, "An Artist Who Works Alongside Giants," *NYTimes.com*, January 23, 2020

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# An Artist Who Works Alongside Giants

Ahead of her latest solo show, Huma Bhabha reflects on her towering mixed-media figures, and the strangest object in her studio.

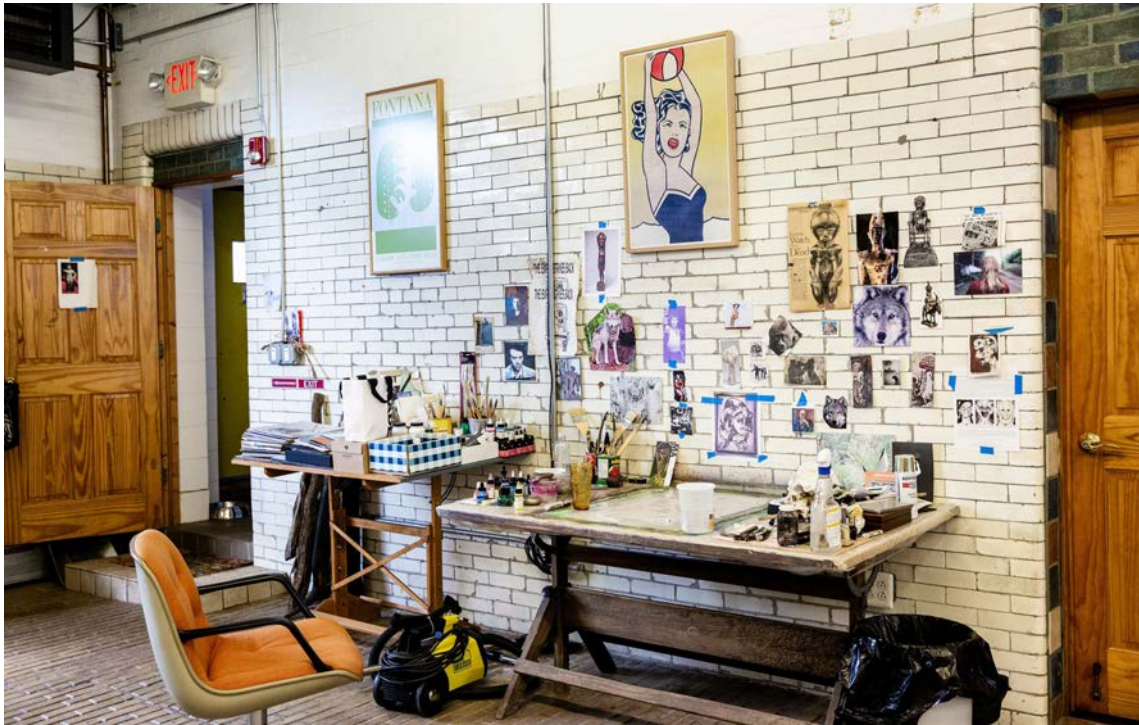
By Tiana Reid | January 23, 2020



The artist Huma Bhabha photographed in her Poughkeepsie, N.Y., studio, alongside one of her sculptures. Eva Deitch.

The artist Huma Bhabha is preparing to ship a selection of her large-scale totemic sculptures across the country for an exhibition, and is eagerly looking forward to her studio being empty again. "When I'm working on a show and on a lot of cork sculptures especially, there's a lot of dust — and cleaning," she says, standing in front of a grand staircase that ascends, thanks to a quirky renovation, from the floor of her studio only to end at its ceiling. The cavernous 3,600-square-foot space, a former commercial building in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., is currently filled with otherworldly figures, their bodies hewn from ancient-looking cork or wood and adorned with swaths of pastel paint or swipes of nail polish. The works will soon leave for the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, where this month Bhabha will show a selection of new mixed-media sculptures and drawings that explore both ancient and contemporary approaches to depicting the body. During the course of her three-decade career, she has become used to these types of farewells.

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Bhabha also has an 1,800-square-foot studio on the first floor of her home. Here she has drawing materials and collected imagery taped to the tiled brick walls. Eva Deitch

Bhabha, 57, grew up in Karachi, Pakistan, where her mother, an amateur painter, encouraged her to see artistic potential in unlikely places. She developed a fascination with cartoons and greeting cards as a child and knew from an early age that she wanted to be an artist. In 1981, she moved to the United States to attend the Rhode Island School of Design and later completed her Masters of Fine Arts at Columbia University. "I was mostly painting, drawing and experimenting with collage and assemblage before grad school," she says. In 2002, she left for Poughkeepsie because she could no longer afford New York City.

These days — though she has active drawing, print and photography practices — Bhabha is best known for the richly textured sculptures that she has been making since the 1990s from materials including cork, Styrofoam, plastic, wood, metal and paint. Frequently working with a palette of earthy browns, she creates alienlike characters whose craggy bodies, familiar but not quite human, seem marked by psychological pain and violence. In 2018, she gained particular attention for her work "We Come in Peace," an installation in the Metropolitan Museum's roof garden that comprised two gargantuan painted and patinated bronze figures, one 15 feet long and kneeling reverently before another, shorter, at almost 14 feet tall. Spare and woven through with found materials, the work suggested an apocalyptic scene and a solemn comment on how human beings encounter — and subjugate — the other.

To create the commission, Bhabha knew she needed a bigger studio and discovered that the large commercial building (now her current space) next door to her house was available. Less fortuitously, the studio wasn't ready in time, and so she built the towering figures in her home, a former firehouse that she shares with her husband, the multidisciplinary artist Jason Fox, and their two golden Labradors, Speedy and Chico. "I worked in a way where I wasn't able to see the whole sculpture assembled fully because of the height," she says of creating the commission. "I worked on two sections at the same time."

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Three of Bhabha's sculptures, two of which will be on view in her exhibition at the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles. Eva Deitch.



The artist's sculptural practice often produces a lot of dust — she works regularly with wood and cork — so she is ready to clean and start fresh after shipping her new works. Credit. Eva Deitch

Regardless of size — and many of her works are on a superhuman scale — Bhabha's sculptures, with their grotesque tenderness, exude an understated intensity that compels equally hushed observation from their viewers. When filled with her works, her studio seems, at times, to vibrate with otherworldly energy. On a crisp January day, sitting in a brown upholstered swivel chair in the middle of her white-walled studio, and surrounded by her visceral cork figures, Bhabha answered T's artist's questionnaire.

**What is your day like? How much do you sleep, and what's your work schedule?**

I sleep around seven, eight hours — so I sleep well. I work during the day and also in the evening before dinner. And then, of course, my schedule varies upon deadlines. I've just finished this work so I'm taking a little bit of time off.

**How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?**

Twenty-four.

**What's the first piece of art you ever made?**

When I was around 10, I loved copying greeting cards. I did copies of Bugs Bunny cartoons but I also made paintings on chip board or whatever.

**What's the worst studio you ever had?**

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The artist in her backyard, where she often lets her dogs, Chico and Speedy, out. Eva Deitch.



Bhabha's "Constantium" (2014), a bronze work marked by crevices and crude marks, lives in her backyard, and can be seen from her ground-floor window. Eva Deitch.

Every studio was good. I've had studios with no windows, but it all depends on what kind of work you get out of it. They were small. But even the studio that was a closed-in porch — it was tiny — there were some breakthroughs that happened for me there. So I think you can make work anywhere.

### **What's the first work you ever sold?**

I think it was around 1991. I sold a soft sculpture ("Untitled," 1990) made of corrugated yellow foam, which I had painted red on one side and cut up and stuffed into a clear plastic zipper bag used for comforters. Then I sold another piece in 1993 and then I didn't sell again until around 2002.

### **When you start a new piece, where do you begin?**

I start by building the armature for a sculpture. It's pretty much coming straight out of my head — no sketches or drawings usually.

### **How do you know when you're done?**

I listen to my gut.

### **How many assistants do you have?**

One.

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A selection of oil sticks in the artist's studio. Eva Deitch



When Bhabha first moved to Poughkeepsie in 2002 she worked with a taxidermist, and collected animal skulls, as well as these wolf paws. Eva Deitch.

**Have you assisted other artists before? If so, who?**

The Venezuelan-born painter Meyer Vaisman. I worked with him for four or five years while I was studying at Columbia and then after.

**What music do you play when you're making art?**

I listen to the radio a lot. We have a really good Vassar College station. I've come across some really interesting shows. And then I listen to Suicide, reggae, Blondie, whatever, a variety.

**When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?**

I always said that, even when I wasn't making any money from it. Even when it takes a long time, when you're not really showing that much or selling anything at all, that is what you believe in. When I had to fill out a form or something, that's what I put down as my profession: artist.

**Is there a meal you eat on repeat when you're working?**

No, I don't eat in the studio.

**Are you bingeing on any shows right now?**

I was — it's called *Mar de plástico* [Plastic Sea]. It's a Spanish series.

**What's the weirdest object in your studio?**

The front legs of a wolf. I used to work in a taxidermy studio, and that's where I got them.

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Bhabha sitting on the staircase of her vast main studio, located next door to her home. Eva Deitch.

They're beautiful big paws. They didn't want them so they cut them off for the person that had shot the wolf. They were just lying around.

**How often do you talk to other artists?**

Every day because my husband is an artist.

**What's the last thing that made you cry?**

Every time there's a drone strike that kills civilians, then I know that more people are going to die. It's like a warning.

**What embarrasses you?**

Talking about myself.

**If you have windows, what do they look out on?**

These look out onto a pretty busy street, but they're all covered up. Nobody can look inside. At the studio next door in my home, there is a window that looks out onto the backyard, and I have a sculpture out there.

**What are you reading?**

I just started reading "The Penguin Book of Italian Short Stories" (2019), which someone gave me as a Christmas present.

**What's your favorite artwork by someone else?**

"The Night Watch" (1642) by Rembrandt.