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ELLE's 2020 Women in Art: Five Artists to Know Now

Plus the curators, critics, and exhibitions exploring what it means to exist in our messy world.

By Molly Langmuir | March 5, 2020

The Sculptor: Huma Bhabha



Photo: Lauren Lancaster

In April of 2018, two roughhewn figures created by the artist Huma Bhabha appeared in the rooftop garden of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. One was prostrate, head bowed, hands outstretched, much of its body obscured by what appeared to be black plastic. The other stood, towering over both the garden and the cityscape behind it, its four-faced head somewhere between alien and human.

We Come in Peace, the show's title, refers to a 1990 movie in which a figure emerges from a spaceship and tells the assembled humans that the visitors mean no harm—only for the two sides to immediately begin trying to kill each other. But you didn't need to know that to understand that Bhabha's installation explored the connection between fear and violence, power and powerlessness, destruction and faith. "She will never tell you her politics in the work," says Alissa Friedman, a partner at Salon 94, which has represented Bhabha since 2007. "But she is a political artist. At a recent Q&A, she was asked why she didn't talk more about the plight of women. She said, 'Well, I think those things are important. But to me the most important thing is war.'"

Raised in Karachi, Pakistan, Bhabha studied printmaking at the Rhode Island School of Design, then got her MFA in painting from Columbia University. It was only afterward, living in New York, that she began making sculptures. The first ones she produced, which were crafted out of pantyhose and other soft materials, then painted with enamel, were influenced by her curiosity about mutation and her love of sci-fi films: "There's a certain paranoia in [those movies] that I can relate to," Bhabha says. "I was interested in the visceral and the grotesque." Today, she utilizes everything from wood to cork to dumpster-sourced Styrofoam to build her sculptures, which are then often cast in bronze. "I love the raw expressivity of her work," Friedman says. "It is visceral and direct, almost like punk rock."



One of the figures from *We Come in Peace*, which Bhabha installed on the Met's Roof Garden in 2018. Courtesy of Huma Bhabha / The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Salon 94.

Bhabha often describes the figures in her art as characters, and she returns to the same ones again and again. She initially produced a version of the prostrate figure in late 2001, partly in response to America's post-9/11 invasion of Afghanistan, though at the time many viewers missed the subtext. "I don't think people wanted to address issues like that, where it had to do with the killing of many people on the other side of the world," she says. When her work appeared on the rooftop of the Met, though, the world was more receptive. "People picked up on it," she says. Since then, Bhabha's had her largest solo show to date, at the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, and her exhibit *The Company* opened at Gagosian gallery in Rome last fall. "She's always been an artist's artist," Eva Respini, the chief curator at ICA Boston, told the *New York Times* in March 2018. "But recently, she has come into her own."

In 2002, Bhabha and her husband, the painter Jason Fox, moved to Poughkeepsie, New York—Bhabha initially found work in the area with a taxidermist. These days, she and Fox occupy a huge old firehouse, where, one rainy afternoon last October, Bhabha's studio on the ground floor contained a few photographs she was in the process of painting on. Taped to the walls were pictures of wolves, a yellowed newspaper clipping showing gorillas fighting, and a photo of an iron maiden. ("I'd love to make something like that someday," she said.) There were also some baby animal calendars, which she sometimes collages into her paintings—"I thought, 'Why not bring out the corny side of me?'" she says—and a cutout from the cannabis-focused magazine *High Times* (she uses such images for collages, and besides, "I smoke a lot of weed," she says with a shrug).