

**KALEIDOSCOPE**

**INTERVIEW BY**

**MASSIMILIANO GIONI**

**HUMA BHABHA**

**THE ARTIST'S SCULPTURES  
AND DRAWINGS CONVEY A HYBRID  
LANGUAGE OF WORSHIP, AND THE  
ENTROPY OF A COLLAPSING SYSTEM.**



**Photo by David Brandon Geeting**



**MASSIMILIANO GIONI** When would you say you became an artist? Is there a work that you consider your first?

**HUMA BHABHA** I never had a "Marvel Comics" moment like that—it was more gradual, block by block. It was a series of moments: a painting of Bugs Bunny being cooked in a cauldron; Fauvist portraiture in high school; a small carved Constructivist painting on found wood; feathers on stretched fabric in grad school; modeling my first clay foot sculpture in Guadalajara. Hopefully, there will be similar moments in the future.

**MG** I always liked the way your work connects to a long history of figurative sculpture, which to me is strongly interwoven to the basic ideas of art making: funerary sculptures, totemic figures, magical or cultural objects. How would you say your work engages with these traditions?

**HB** I see myself as part of or a link in those ancient traditions. I am drawn to sculpture about death—and there is a lot of it!

I was reading an essay by David Levi Strauss—"Take As Needed," from his book *Between Dog & Wolf*—in which he writes about how Grunewald's altarpiece for the hospital/monastery in Isenheim was very naturalistic and meant to be therapeutic for the patients, as they would see their suffering through religious figures. I grew up surrounded by various degrees of destruction in my memory, starting with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, so I can relate to that idea. It's apparent in my own work: how destruction is made attractive through formal choices. Obviously, this idea of healing is very strong in the work of Joseph Beuys, and a part of an ancient tradition of art making.

**MG** I think it was Roger Caillois who, during a visit of a museum in Seoul, saw two Buddhist monks kneeling in front of a statue of the Buddha. For him, that episode came to signify the power of images to transcend even the context of the museum—to remain sacred even when they are meant merely to be contemplated. Are you interested in the power of images? How do you think your work relates to these problems?

**HB** That experience is very much about a recognized language of worship, whereas with my work, it's more of a unique hybrid language, one that is related to other older and larger languages. While my work relates very much to the history of sacred art, it has no religious significance and the humor in it is very contemporary.

**MG** On the other hand, many of your works appear

to be broken, consumed, as ruins or victims of acts of iconoclasm. What is the process you use to reach this effect? And what would you say is consuming your sculptures?

**HB** Working from the inside out, focusing in on the armature or skeleton, this "ruin effect" was an accident of the process that I began to use as a tool. I'm from a broken place, living in a breaking world. Growing up in a place where the longterm residual effect of colonialism and imperialism has resulted in a sense of brokenness, and then witnessing another system consume and break, I guess it feels natural to be relaxed among ruins. It is a very different surface from the shiny, perfectly fabricated surface of, say, Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst.

**MG** Your use of materials is quite unique—particularly in the combination of scraps and found objects with highly crafted details. Who inspired you to begin creating this type of poli-material composition?

**HB** I was looking at Beuys, Picasso and Rauschenberg—how they transformed found materials in a way that was very profound, and yet appeared effortless. I come from a place where almost nothing is thrown away, so I've always been drawn to the cheap and discarded. So Styrofoam is like marble for me, but with no weight. It represents both practicality and elegance.

**MG** While you work in sculpture, drawing and collage, your drawings in particular have a very special intensity, an almost three-dimensional presence. How does the work on paper relate to the sculptures? Do you make drawings as studies for sculptures, or more as individual works?

**HB** I make the drawings as individual works. There is some overlap with the sculpture—just as I sometimes paint and carve on the sculptures, I also scratch into the drawings—but the drawings stand alone. The sculptures and drawings are worked on simultaneously, which explains why the space they occupy might seem to blend, fuse together. But the drawings (especially the large ones on photographs) also have a kind of cinematic feel to me: the underlying photo is usually of a place where I've spent time (Berlin, Karachi, Poughkeepsie) and functions like an establishment shot. But the actual mark making is the action.

**MG** Many of your works feel like objects excavated from an archaeological dig. In this sense, they often seem to belong to another moment in history. Has archaeology served as inspiration to you?





**HB** Archeological sites are very romantic to me, and I love spending time with antiquities, but I prefer to think of my work as being very representative of now. There is so much physical destruction happening in different parts of the world, to the extent that many functioning cities look like archeological digs. One of the ways I like to approach the past is in a cinematic way, reimagining the past and projecting towards the future just as movies often do, I find that a fascinating problem. For example, the art design of movies like *Alien* or *Terminator* have been a huge influence on my work.

At the same time, I'm also interested in the ancient empire of Gandhara from 558-28 BC, where a hybrid form of sculpture evolved from being situated at a crossroads of Central Asia (or modern day northwestern Pakistan).

**MG** In recent years, we've witnessed a resurgence of iconoclastic violence: a fear of images and sculptures which demonstrates—as if there was still a need—the crucial importance images carry in our society. Your sculptures have often been compared to religious figures or idols, and in presentation, they are often broken, nearly destroyed. How do you feel about the violence towards images and towards artworks? What do you think people fear or respect within images?

**HB** The violence towards these idols or images from a heathen past is, in my opinion, a violent reaction against what the Western media and Western heritage foundations consider valuable as opposed to cities and villages with human life. It is not a naive response. The destruction across the Middle East, starting with the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001, has been a systematic demonization and humiliation of the people and their ancient and now present Islamic cultures. The destruction of ancient cities in Yemen by American-backed, Saudi-led air strikes is hardly mentioned, even though those are world heritage sites. It is, of course, profoundly sad to see any of these ancient wonders being destroyed, but how is that of much significance when ancient cities like Baghdad, Aleppo and Kabul have been reduced to rubble? These kinds of acts are lapped up by Western media because they make the enemy more barbaric, very much the "Other." Meanwhile, the West appears to value a non-populated ancient site over a village of innocents that will be droned. What do you expect?

**MG** As much as your work engages with non-Western traditions, it is also very much rooted in American culture, where there is a long legacy of sculptures

built out of found objects—not only in "high art," but even more so in vernacular expressions, of which your work seems keenly aware. Do you feel part of this tradition of eccentric, spontaneous sculpture one finds in American backyards, abandoned lots, and desert lots? Have you ever attempted to work on an environmental scale?

**HB** I've now lived in the United States longer than in Pakistan, so I feel comfortably fluent in American culture and art. As I mentioned earlier, Rauschenberg is a big influence, as are Noah Purifoy, Richard Prince and David Hammons. As far as Land Art, that scale seems beyond my realm of activity, but the ideas (especially of Robert Smithson) about science fiction, theatrical excavation and entropy are all very influential for me.

**MG** Your work engages with the passing of time, both as a sense of transience and as a means of resistance and disappearance. History seems to be engraved in the surface of your works. Having spent so much time on such subjects, how do you think your work will survive or disappear in hundreds of years? What shall remain?

**HB** I have never been overtly concerned with the durability of the materials. But maybe by creating an illusion of weathered fragility, there might be an extra effort to preserve the work. Hopefully, someone will take care of it for a while. But then, that's what is nice about bronze: it can take care of itself.

Images in order of appearance:

From Beyond, 2015

Road to Balkh, 2015

Courtesy of the artist and CLEARING, New York/Brussels

Untitled, 2010

Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York

Huma Bhabha (Pakistan, b. 1962) is an artist who lives and works in Poughkeepsie, New York. She is represented by CLEARING, New York/Brussels; Salon 94, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London; and Grimm Gallery, Amsterdam. The group exhibition "A Whisper of Where It Came From," featuring Bhabha and Sterling Ruby among others, is currently on view at Kemper Museum, Kansas City. Later this year, Stephen Friedman Gallery will stage a solo exhibition by Bhabha.

Massimiliano Gioni is the Artistic Director of the New Museum, New York, and the Director of the Nicola Trussardi Foundation in Milan. He recently organized a series of exhibitions by Nicole Eisenman, Goshka Macuga and Andra Ursuta, and he will present his most recent group show, "The Keeper," at the New Museum in July.

