

Huma Bhabha

The Setup

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Press Release

Xavier Hufkens is pleased to announce Huma Bhabha's (b. 1962) first solo exhibition with the gallery. Featuring new sculptures and drawings, *The Setup* presents an overview of the visual and material language that the artist has been developing for over three decades.

Bhabha's sculptures are informed by a myriad of cultural references and executed in an equally diverse range of materials, processes and techniques. She is known for her evocative assemblages crafted from modest and unconventional materials (clay, Styrofoam, wood, wire, plaster, jute, paint) and for her powerful, totemic figures in materials such as cork or bronze. In parallel, Bhabha also creates complex, multi-layered works on paper in which the fearsome and the strange are rendered penetrating and beautiful. The exhibition brings together these various strands of Bhabha's oeuvre in an installation that plays with the notion of reciprocal gazes: multiple pairs of two and three-dimensional eyes meet one another in exchanges that are further activated, disrupted or intensified by the viewer's own act of looking.

Like an archaeologist or time-traveller, Bhabha moves back and forth between a wealth of visual traditions and different modes of temporality. Past, present and future are of equal significance in her work. She draws upon the iconographic languages and formal vocabularies of ancient archetypes (Greek and Roman statuary, Egyptian votive sculptures, African and Asian art), those of the modern era (with a particular focus on the twentieth-century artistic canon), contemporary culture (advertising, cinema, literature), and even the future (science fiction). Both Western and non-Western artefacts are sources of inspiration, with Bhabha's work often betraying a latent tension between differing value systems, artistic functions, and forms of cultural production.

The Interlocutor and *The Ambitious One*, both made this year, are roughly hewn from cork and painted with acrylic, oil stick and lipstick, a gesture that serves to underscore the dichotomy between sacred, and eternal forms and everyday disposable materials. Carving and mark-making are crucial to Huma Bhabha, who considers such traces to be vital components of her work. The raw forms can be interpreted, on the one hand, as an homage to the anonymous hands of past masters, but on the other, to the vicissitudes of time. The gnarled, rough-looking surfaces of works such as *Open Door* or *A Thousand Faces* also call to mind the destruction of once venerated sculptures through iconoclasm or conflict, but also, finally, to their resanctification in museums.

In utilising such ancient languages to tell new stories, Bhabha engages in an act of mythopoesis, which is defined as the creative utilisation of a time-worn myth by an artist so as to crystallise the meaning of the current social and cultural situation. Bhabha says: "There is so much physical destruction happening in different parts of the world, to the extent that many functioning cities look like archaeological 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." The title of the show, *The Setup*, implies an intended scheme or trick involving the exhibition's characters. Are they cogs in a machine trapped in a setup, controlled by con men who are (mis)leading humanity towards a disastrous end?

Bhabha's graphic works take the form of expressive drawings on her own

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photographs or prints (many of which relate to Karachi, her place of birth), often with collaged elements drawn from calendars and magazines. Here too, the pictorial surface demands a form of visual excavation. She says, “Each layer and each mark are a story. For me, it is my process and the more layers the more complexed, complicated and intense the work becomes.” Although presented as portraits, the deranged expressions and strange hybrid features of the subjects – part alien, part animal, part human – create a disturbing, semi-apocalyptic atmosphere that cannot be linked to any specific time, place or history. Animals and landscapes are recurrent themes in Bhabha’s oeuvre and point to an anxiety about the breakdown of the ecosystem. Several of the works feature mask-like rings for eyes, which creates an effect the artist has likened to “looking through a window”. A reminder, perhaps, of the belief that eyes are linked to the soul and directly reflect our deepest emotions and fears.

Huma Bhabha (b. 1962) was born in Karachi, Pakistan and lives and works in Poughkeepsie, New York. Recent solo exhibitions include: *Huma Bhabha: Against Time*, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK (2020–21); *Huma Bhabha: They Live*, The Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, MA, USA (2019); *We Come in Peace*, Roof Garden Commission, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, USA (2018) and *Unnatural Histories*, MoMA PS1, Long Island City, NY, USA (2012).

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