

WITH NO FIXED BOUNDARIES

THE WORKS OF BHARTI KHER, ONE OF INDIA'S MOST WELL-KNOWN CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS, SEAMLESSLY MELD THE MULTIPLE IDENTITIES OF A MODERN GLOBAL CITIZEN WHO DOESN'T BELONG TO ONE PLACE BUT BELONGS EVERYWHERE

BY ARCHANA KHARE-GHOSE

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH

Installation view of
"Six Women," 2013-2015,
"Bharti Kher. Starting points,
points that bind,"
DHC/Art Montreal, Canada,
April 18–September 20, 2018.



Bharti Kher



I had never been to Bharti Kher's studio and therefore, when we agreed on an interview, I was a little worried about finding it in the maze of industrial units of Gurgaon despite the assistance of Google Maps. Increasingly being referred to by its new name of Gurugram, the millennium city neighbouring New Delhi is as well known for its high rises, high-end lifestyle and shopping malls as it is for the mess and confusion of factories and foundries.

Turning the last bend on a particularly chaotic road, a modest building appeared with a prominent bullseye target high on a wall. Even before I could cross-check the address, I knew this was my destination.

Bharti Kher Studio in many ways sums up the artist that it belongs to and the works that she produces: Easily noticeable, and potent enough to demand a second look. A recent example is "The Intermediary Family," her unmissable 4.8-meter bronze sculpture that was on view at the Frieze Sculpture Park until October 7. The bronze sculpture, part of a series that Kher began some years ago, has been called "half things" by the artist in an interview — hybrid beings enmeshed together, and resembling figures or avatars of a mythological pantheon in their colorful attire. The three figures that make up the sculpture constitute a family grouping — man, woman and child — and are relatable for many global citizens who

come from different cultures yet get together to form a family.

Considering that Kher has shows all over the world, it was a stroke of luck to have caught one of the best-known Contemporary Indian artists in her studio. Between July and December this year, she is or has been featured in solo or group exhibitions in a

wide arc across the globe — from New York to Tokyo, from Wolfsburg, Germany to Jaipur, India.

Two of the most recent group shows are "I see you," at the Savannah College of Art and Design in Georgia, U.S. (through December 30), and "Vision Exchange: Perspectives From India to Canada," at Art Gallery

Installation view, "Bharti Kher, Chimeras," Centre Pasqu'Art, Biel, Switzerland, June 29–September 28, 2018.



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER WIRTH
PHOTO: STEFAN ALTENBURGER, PHOTOGRAPHY, ZÜRICH

PHOTO: ANAY MANN



LEFT:
Bharti Kher,
"Sing to them that
will listen," 2008,
rice grains with
metal bowl,
110 x 31 x 31 cm.

RIGHT:
Bharti Kher,
"Virus VIII,"
2017.



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PHOTO: STEFAN ALTENBURGER PHOTOGRAPHY, ZÜRICH. FACING PAGE: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH

Installation views,
"Facing India,"
Kunstmuseum
Wolfsburg,
Germany,
April 29–
October 7, 2018.



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PHOTO: MAREK KRUSZEWSKI; THIS PAGE: COURTESY THE ARTIST, HAUSER & WIRTH AND FRIEZE
PHOTO: STEPHEN WHITE

Bharti Kher,
"The
Intermediary
Family,"
2018.

Alberta in Canada (through January 6, 2019). On November 1 began another group show of which she is a prominent part — at the Sculpture Park at Madhavendra Palace at Nahargarh fort in Jaipur. Meanwhile, two big solo shows are lined up for the coming months: "Djjins, Things, Places," at Perrotin in Roppongi, Tokyo, beginning November 14, and another solo at Bikaner House in New Delhi that will launch the venue's new wing in January next year. The latter promises to be especially interesting with many new works, one using the left behind saris of the sculptor (and friend of Kher's) Mrinalini Mukherjee (1949-2015).

Kher, 49, has declared herself a studio person in quite a few interviews and I wonder how she juggles this identity with so many simultaneous shows that must involve a fair bit of travelling. "I work at a stretch and then travel," she said. "There's a certain rhythm that I've found. I make works simultaneously and over long periods and don't feel the need to show them immediately. I keep an idea, recall it again and again. It doesn't matter if a work was made six years ago or yesterday and has never been seen in the interim."

She likes being in the studio because that's where all the material that she's collected is kept, in the form of her thoughts in her diaries, or nuggets from the multiple books she is reading at any given time — all the material that is waiting to be created into something else.

"And material gets activated by belief," she said, adding, "by my fantasy and truth. It's a crucial part of one's life. You have to allow





LEFT:
Bharti Kher,
"Mother," 2016,
plaster, wood,
140 x 63 x 96 cm.

FACING PAGE: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH. THIS PAGE: COURTESY THE ARTIST, HAUSER & WIRTH AND CENTRE PASQUART



RIGHT:
Bharti Kher,
"The Chimera (1),"
2016,
wax, concrete, plaster,
hessian fibre, brass,
49 x 11 3/8 x 11 3/8 in.

yourself the time to dream.”

It's interesting how this simple philosophy led to the creation of works that were a blockbuster hit on the Indian art horizon when they first appeared, and resulted in an unmistakable Bharti Kher signature. Today, Kher's work is one of the most recognizable in the pantheon of Contemporary Indian art and has an enviable following in international art circles, matched only by a few compatriots such as Subodh Gupta, Jitish Kallat, Amar Kanwar and Shilpa Gupta.

The unique language that Kher developed was born out of symbols, and observations of acts and attitudes that are present everywhere, only waiting to metamorphose into a work of art. Who would have thought that a “bindi” — a small colored stick-on dot made of velvety paper, often red or maroon that Indian women wear on their foreheads — would be turned into an art element, helping create unforgettable works? Since the late 1990s, Kher has made many works with bindis and has left the interpretation to the viewer's imagination. Bindis symbolize the third eye, a consciousness that she wishes to tap into. Her most well-known work that uses this the bindi is the iconic fiber-glass dying elephant lying prone on floor and covered with sperm shaped bindis. Titled “The Skin Speaks a Language Not Its Own,” (2006), it was one of the most expensive works of art by a Contemporary Indian artist sold at auction when one variation came up for sale at Sotheby's in 2010, fetching £1.5 million.

Questions about bindis are something that Kher must definitely be tired of but can an artist escape

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the fame of her art? Kher answered stoically, “All artists get categorized somewhat. But I've to be like music or water and keep moving or I get stagnant.” I preferred not to interject in the ensuing pause, and after a while, she continued, allowing herself the luxury of accepting that the language of bindis in Contemporary Indian art was a unique creation. She said, “The works are about perception. It allows me to create a language that is mine even if that may be nonsensical or spoken in prose.” She added after another pause, “But, I speak many languages through my work, do many different things.”

Another question that Kher cannot escape — and which may be a reason why she is able to see things in India that those who have grown up there miss easily — concerns her own unique status of coming into India to live and work after growing up in London. That's the reverse of the trend that has been popular among Indian artists for long.

“I don't know if I am an outsider, or if I belong to this world,” she said.

Born in London to parents from Punjab, Kher studied at Middlesex Polytechnic, London, and received a BA Honors in Fine Art, Painting, from Newcastle Polytechnic. She

shifted to India when she met Subodh Gupta and made her home and studio there. During our interview, she spoke to a studio assistant in Hindi inflected heavily with English and informed me, “I learned Hindi when I arrived and I love this city even though it has many issues. I came here in my 20s and I have made many dear friends. I don't know if I'm still an outsider, or qualify now to be an insider!”

The issue has been a part of her sub-conscious for years, which has turned out in the “Intermediaries” series of sculptures, one of which was on view at the Frieze Sculpture Park. She described the “Intermediaries” series in an interview with the Evening Standard, London: “They are avatars of human psychology, the gods, the planets. They are djinns.” The larger sculpture in the series followed from the smaller clay and resin models that Kher started working on while on a residency with Hauser & Wirth in Somerset a year ago.

Maybe, it's best for an “intermediary” like Kher, one who travels fluidly between two cultures, to decode both ancient civilizations and our modern chaos.^{MP}



Bharti Kher, “Hear with your eyes,” 2016, bindis on painted board, 96 1/8 x 72 in.

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