

**Bharti KHER**

*Artnews,*

*Artist Bharti Kher's Monumental 'Ancestor' is now guarding Central Park*

*September 2022*

## Artist Bharti Kher's Monumental 'Ancestor' is now guarding Central Park



*Bharti Kher, Ancestor, 2022. Photo: Nicholas Knight.*

A towering mother is stationed at Central Park's mouth. She's 18-feet-tall with a body of painted bronze. The heads of her 23 children sprout from her womb, belly, shoulders, and back. Her expression is kind: all passersby—and any who may spot her from the distance—are welcome within her embrace. Titled Ancestor, she's the work of Bharti Kher, a New Delhi- and London-based artist whose practice collapses daily ritual and ancient symbol, sacred objects and ephemera into new forms. Her creations—sometimes painting, sculpture, or installation—explore individual and collective relations to the cultural past. If we're not content with history, Kher proposes, manifest a better future.

Ancestor is the most monumental entry in Kher's practice that spans two decades. It belongs to the artist's ongoing "Intermediaries" series, mostly surreal clay chimeras—a mix of human, animal, and mythical creature whose fluid identities mirror Kher's own cross-cultural journey. The work is presented by the Public Art Fund, a nonprofit organization that has been transforming New York's communal spaces with incisive works of art, and its presentation is curated by Daniel S. Palmer, who was named the chief curator of SCAD Art Museum earlier this year.

Ancestor will be on display in Doris C. Freedman Plaza, near the Fifth Avenue and 59th Street entrance of the park, until next August. Its forever home will be the Kiran Nadar Museum of

Art in New Delhi. Nadar, the collector who founded the eponymous institution and who **has ranked** on **ARTnews**'s Top 200 Collectors list since 2019, has been collecting Kher for around 10 years and considers her one of the "foremost contemporary artists in India."

"The vision for my collection," Nadar said upon the sculpture's unveiling on Thursday, "is to archive memories and preserve the creativity of our culture for future generations. Bharti says her work **Ancestor** is the keeper of all memories and time. The narrative that this sculpture brings forth has been my trajectory of building KNMA over the last 12 years as a leading institution for the arts of South Asia. This work succinctly captures all of my dreams and wishes and much more."

To learn more about the work, **ARTnews** spoke with Kher via email.

**ARTnews: How did the "Intermediaries" series start? How has its meaning or process evolved?**

**Bharti Kher:** The series—or family as I like to call it—took shape from small clay figurines collected over many years from South India. The series started in 2016 when I had close to 500 dolls shipped to my studio in Delhi and many of them arrived broken. I began repairing and remaking them. I really continued this new body of work during my residency at Hauser & Wirth in Somerset in 2017

My interest in the objects changed and developed into a deepened intensity of mutations, the objects before me represented an entire range and source of life—from animals and metaphor to the ritual and secular. By physically repairing and breaking open these figures with my hands and fusing them together in new configurations, I was creating unique avatars. Entropy was now at play.

The "Intermediaries" series suggests a familial life, a mélange of unconventionality, ancestral complexity, and diasporic identity that brings with it both geographical and psychosocial dissonances. They continue a practice of narrative building for hybrid beings that has been central to my practice—along with ideas of rupture and repair. They suggest a transitional space between reality and illusion, decay and regeneration, balance and weight, and seek a way to address questions of identity.

I describe them as a "a family of in-betweeners" and as "the outsiders," the self-created and the djinns that take shape at will, these are shapeshifters.

**Tell me about the challenges of creating a large-scale piece. How, if at all, did your practice have to adapt?**

I began translating the smaller "Intermediaries" into large-scale works in 2018.

I had not really ever thought of working outdoors at this massive size simply because I make most of my work in the studio. So many of my works are intimately scaled and domestic, with a focus on materiality and making that reflects my long-term interest in the human body. There

was just something about these miniature figurines that called out for them to be aggrandized and celebrated on a larger scale. They had a monumentality to them that felt like Indian sculpture. I had to reach out to foundries who could work at this scale and who were as committed to my approach to materiality and the choice to hand paint and patina the bronze to look and feel like time-worn clay (reflecting the unresolved state between permanence and fragility).

I am no stranger to collaborating with a team as I do with my team in Delhi. It's just a different way of working and I honestly loved it.

**Can you break down some of the symbolism of your new sculpture?**

Metaphor needs to be felt in art. Symbols are starting points for you to leap from. The mother is a universal symbol of care. She is the earth, sea, and skies. This mother is draped in a sari, with a small child hiding behind its folds. Her name *Ancestor* is a mythical and powerful female force that pays homage to the generations before and after her. She honors her mothers and their mothers, their stories and histories and journeys. She carries the heads of her many children that extend from her body like the breasts of Artemis. Her children are from everywhere, all countries, all religions, all genders, all peoples: she embodies multiculturalism, pluralism, and interconnectedness.

**Found objects are important to your practice. When you integrate these objects into a new work, what do you imagine happens to their pre-existing histories? Is the meaning erased, or reinterpreted?**

Meaning is always made and interpreted. Found objects are materials with meaning and are very much a part of the language of accrual. They can be worked to make art with multiple meanings. They carry memories of their pasts and I can build on. When I originally started with the bindi as material, I thought that I would perhaps use them for a while. But when I started to really look, and keep pushing the material, I think what I was able to do was incorporate it into my practice and make it integrally mine and a language that I could then speak. Taking both its own history and my own.

I always want to know what the material has to say about itself. There has to be more than me in the making. The anthropology is the part I love; researching and reading material and piecing together stories that inform the work but which I also totally ignore. So yes, sometimes you reinterpret and sometimes you erase. It's like drawing or language or music, where you learn your scales but don't always need to play them. In order to speak my language, I'm pulling things out from a library of tools and references that I've been collecting over many years. It's like conducting music or making material sing for you.

**Tell me about how you settled on themes of motherhood for this piece, and what it means to you to have a figure of refuge situated in a public, heavily trafficked space.**

A Mother in a public space is so needed right now as a site of refuge and a keeper of wisdom; she is the eternal source of creation. It's a time where we require collective healing for so many things. The earth is asking us to take care for her; societies are becoming more and more

divisive; tolerance and shared kinship with each other can be our common goal and not an opposing game. Humans believe they are the keepers of earth, but they are not. We are visitors.

Ancestor really proposes a genealogical, spiritual, and metaphysical inquiry into the meaning of people: who are we and where are we really going if we don't learn from our past and create a shared space for us all. It's an investigation into our relationship with progeny, self, and memory and what this means in this world today.

She is a shaman in a public space: a keeper of all memories and time. A vessel for viewers to travel into the future, a guide to search and honor our past histories, and a companion envisioned for New York City to leave their secrets and wishes.