

Bharti KHER

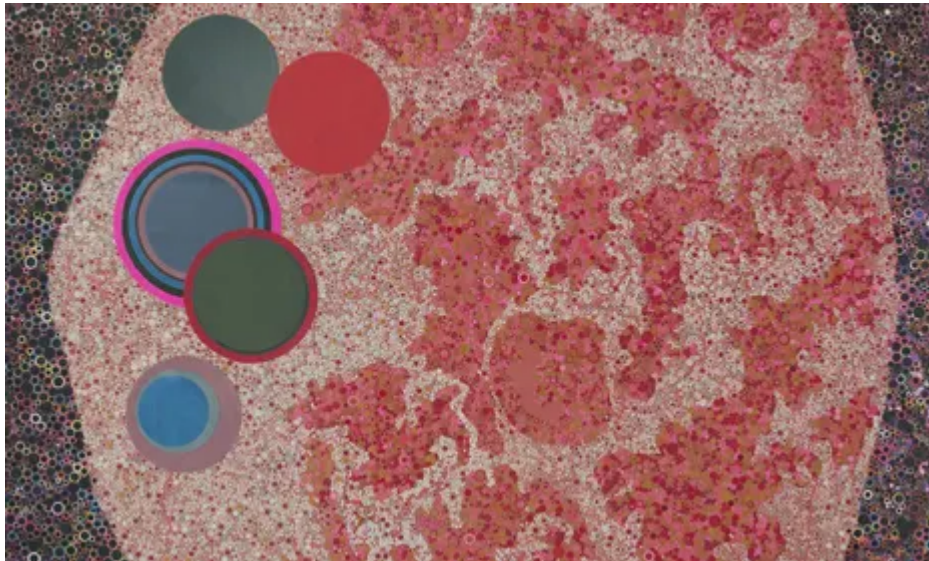
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The Body is a Place review – a furiously energeticcultural vomiting

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In September, Bharti Kher installed Ancestor, a monumental statue of a hybrid female deity, in New York's Central Park. Five and a half metres tall, cast in bronze, it is the London-born, New Delhi-based artist's largest and most publicly visible work. As this exhibition demonstrates, however, sometimes small gestures can pack more power than a public monument. At times, this apparent whisper of a show roars with justified fury.

Kher has a distinctive material language using self-adhesive felt bindis – coloured dots or shapes worn on the forehead – as readymades. She builds up pictures with them, both in rhythmic patterns like a secret language, or globular abstractions like bacteria viewed under a microscope. Large bindi works line the Arnolfini's upper gallery – rich and handsome pieces, mesmerising in their simple use of repeating shapes. In several works, seductive matt felt is set against a layer of sparkly or metallic paint. The simplest of these play with optical effects, but Kher achieves surprising complexity with apparently limited means: not pointillism exactly, but something more scientific and atomised.



📷 Sneezing in proximity to these works is hair-raising ... Bharti's balanced sculpture. Photograph: Claire Dorn/Bharti Kher/Arnolfini

Her “balance” sculptures use readymade elements to achieve something restrained and harmonious. They make me intensely anxious. Granite cones – which appear to be ancient architectural components – rest on three concrete plinths, each the approximate weight of the artist. On these are balanced an enormous wooden sledgehammer, a spindly wooden frame resembling a deconstructed easel, and a decorative metal rod positioned off-centre with its long handle counterbalanced by two ceramic flasks. Sneezing in proximity to these works is hair-raising.

There's less nerve-jangling balance in *Consummate Joy* and *a Sisyphean Task* (2019). Wood components at different levels of processing, including half carved slices from a tree trunk, showing bark on one side and smooth curves on the other, sit between a smoothly finished horn shape and a suspended loop. Viewed through the wooden loop, on a coarse wooden plinth, is a magnificent lump of red jasper. Here, Sisyphus's rock is no rude boulder, but a precious thing. In the wooden pieces, we see the results of repetitive movements: the smoothing and shaping that turns raw material into something smooth and elegant. Sisyphus's task is imagined as a meditative undertaking rather than a punishment.

This relationship between flesh and stone, the rough and coarse, returns in a series of objects built up in clotted layers of plaster, hessian and coloured wax. Somewhere inside them, apparently, are casts of human body parts. The built-up layers of colour instead transform them into geodes, rocks lined with banded quartz and crystals. They look like geological specimens set on reflective brass plates.



📷 Meditative undertaking ... Kher's Consummate Joy and a Sisyphean Task. Photograph: Bharti Kher/Arnolfini

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Kher's ongoing series *Virus*, begun in 2010, is conceptually weighty. I struggle to grasp it. Physically, it amounts to a coloured spiral made on the wall in large bindis, which Kher imagines as a portal through time. It is intended to be a 30-year work, with each annual version accompanied by a text that records personal and geopolitical events and makes predictions for the future. There's something here about incremental changes so small that only the individual will notice them, becoming more generally evident over larger periods of time. I feel the work is almost so private as to be hermetic.

Most visitors to the Arnolfini will start in the lower gallery, as I did. It contains smaller works on paper, but really, this is the meat of the show. Around the walls are sketches and experiments. It's exciting to see an artist of this stature indulging herself so freely and playfully on the page. There are splats and smears, finger painting, careful minimalist compositions and wild ecstasies of clashing techniques and colours. It is interesting to see how directly this apparent free play translates into the more controlled bindi paintings upstairs.



📷 The meat of the show ... downstairs at The Body is a Place at Arnolfini, Bristol. Photograph: Lisa Whiting Photography for Arnolfini

In the centre of the gallery, *Links in a Chain*, from 2016, is a series of double-sided works on paper each shown in a freestanding black metal frame. Adapted from pages of an old children's reading book populated by blond anglo kids playing out stereotyped gender roles, here Kher lets rip. It's like a cultural vomiting – an emetic response to metabolised behaviours and learned norms. Dressed with neurological diagrams and showers of obliterating sperm-shaped bindis, the pages are daubed with alternative text, including terms of sexist and racist abuse.

“Tim and Spot” becomes “Victim, Fatherland, Despot” while another page reads: “Foresee Sally's hysteria: it stems from her childhood.” Kher addresses these childhood texts – so redolent of Britain's nostalgia sickness – as a kind of brainwashing, symptoms of cultural hypnosis. Here, childhood is something that happens to neatly dressed white children in rural spaces, in which boys are boys and girls are girls. The furious energy of these works is intoxicating, particularly in a show elsewhere dedicated to balance, harmony, and meditative gestures of repetition.

