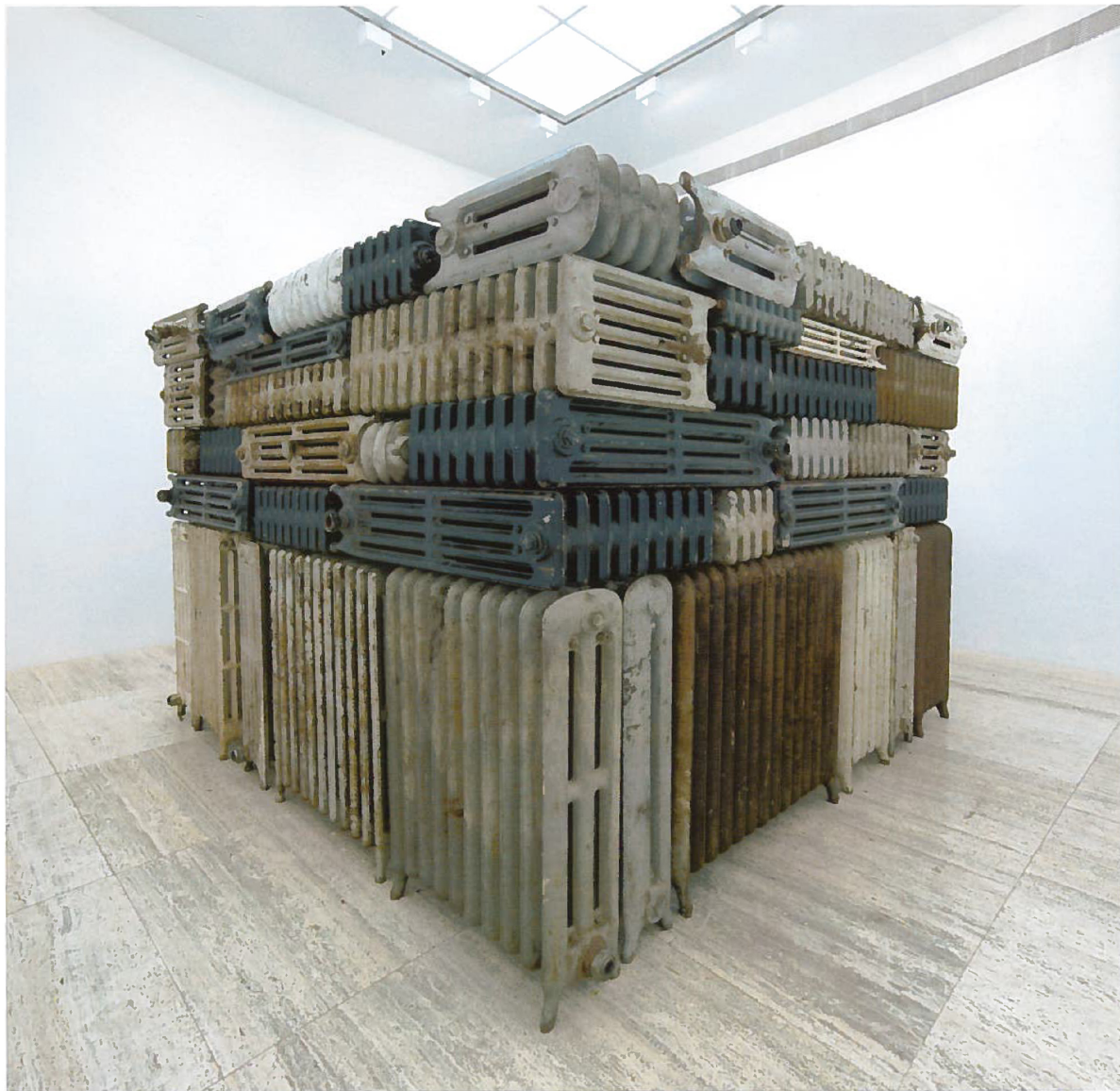


**PRESSBOOK**

Bharti KHER

*Flash Art*

*November 2012*



# **Bharti Kher**

**THE MACABRE AND THE BEAUTIFULLY GROTESQUE**

**Kanchi Mehta**



TO EXPERIENCE BHARTI KHER's work is to enter a labyrinth of complex questions based on cultural misinterpretation, social structures and memory. Her works have a language of their own, of which the visual aspect is only a fraction of the overriding narrative. She was born in London and spent most of her childhood in Surrey, a county southeast of England. Her parents emigrated from India as adults; her father worked in a textile company and her mother owned a fabric shop. She was always interested in art, and she went on to study in Middlesex Polytechnic in London and then at Newcastle Polytechnic in Northern England. In 1992 she visited India for the second time; as if predestined, she met and fell in love with her future husband, artist Subodh Gupta, and settled down in New Delhi.

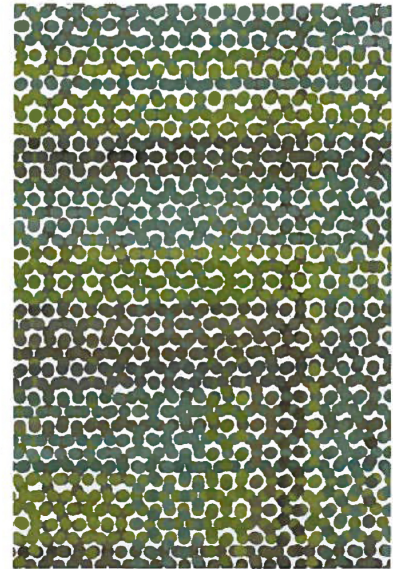
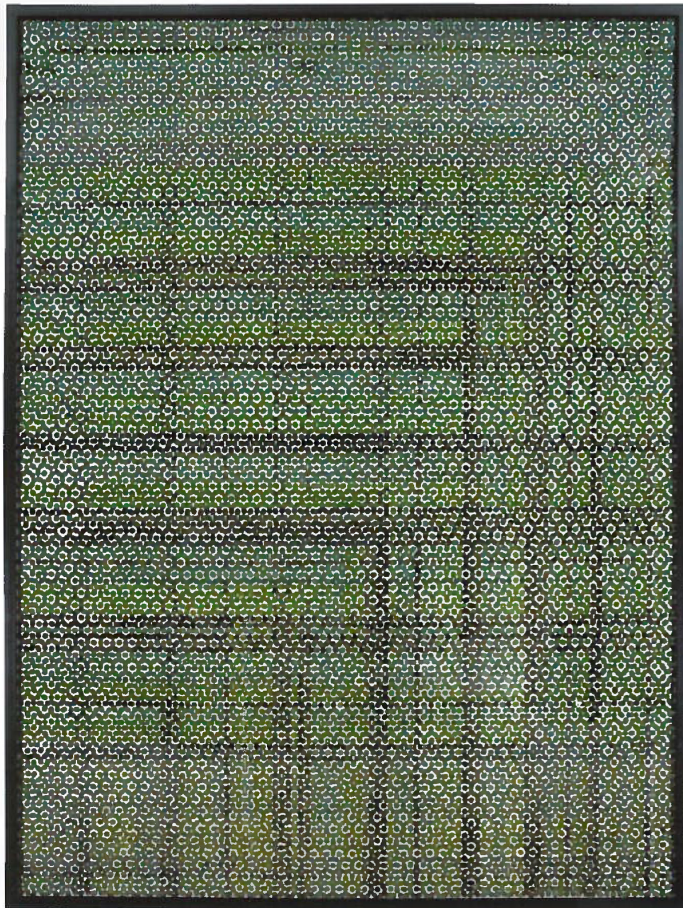
Kher's works reflect the displaced identity that she experienced back in India. A recurring element of her work is the *bindi*, a common cultural symbol in India. A female adornment worn on the forehead, it is a Hindu symbol of femininity, fertility or

marital status. Meaning essentially "a dot," it originates in ancient Indian philosophy as a vortex of energy as well as a "third eye" or "all-seeing eye." The stick-on *bindi* is a popular cosmetic accessory, which is available everywhere in India. Kher explained in an interview: "In India, when you go to people's bathrooms, you will see *bindis* on the mirror, because women take them off and stick them there at the end of the day, and that very *bindi* is the witness of the day and life of this person. It has been everywhere, it has heard everything." This dimension fascinated Kher. The *bindi*, of various sizes, shapes and colors, became an integral part of her works as a tactile surface on large-scale sculptures and "mirror paintings."

*Arione* (2004) is the disquieting figure of a dark-skinned, bare-chested woman in leather hot pants and an empty leather gun holster around her shoulders. She stands casually with one hand on her hip and the other hand holding a tray with two pink-creamed muffins. The viewer's uneasiness grows as the gaze moves from the torso to the legs. With one

well-toned leg wearing a pretty pink Mary Jane heel, the other leg is most unexpectedly a horse's hoof. This sculpture led to *Arione's Sister* (2006), a cyborg-like pale white bald-headed woman in a short skirt. Shopping bags fill her hands all the way from her wrists to her underarms, creating a fan-like halo around her, which almost makes her look celestial. "The bags weigh her down, but they're wings and she's going to fly..." explains the artist. These polymorphous sculptures represent limitations and contradictions related to the roles that women are expected as well as forced to perform in existing societies. Over the next few years, Kher created even more complex sculptures such as *Warrior with Cloak*

BHARTI KHER, Installation view at Parasol Unit, London. Courtesy the artist and Parasol Unit, London. Photo: Stephen White. Opposite: The hot winds that blow from the West (detail), 2011. 131 old radiators, installation view at Hauser & Wirth, New York, 2012. © Bharti Kher. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth, Zurich/London/New York. Photo: Genevieve Hanson.



BHARTI KHER, *A view of the forest, (and detail)*, 2012.  
Bindis on painted board, 249 x 188 x 7 cm. © Bharti Kher.  
Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth, Zurich/London/New York, Photo: Genevieve Hanson.

and *Shield* (2008), a well-endowed, almost naked woman with a large banana leaf hung from one shoulder. Emerging from her head are antlers that are “so big that she looks like she is becoming a tree, which in some ways could be considered to be about rejuvenation.” Another labyrinthine work, *Choleric, Phlegmatic, Melancholy, Sanguine* (2010), is a heavy bronze sculpture that is on display in Southwood Garden at St. James Church in London. Torsos of three women emerge from a burly mountain-like base, with sea-conch like masks embellishing the foreheads

and long snake like arms that circle around the sculpture. Another woman, stabbed in the torso by one of the arms, is suspended horizontally as if lifeless. Here, she expresses a manifestation of the Indian goddess Kali, whose wrath obliterates all evil that exists in the form of ego and desire. An intense dialogue with the ancient and modern, this work conveys a sense of quiet contemplation and dark beauty.

Bharti Kher’s works are enigmatic in nature. There are riddles to be solved and nuances to be interpreted. One of her larger

sculptures, *Confess* (2009), is a wooden confession box that seems to be taken from old church. Calm and serene from the outside, on the inside it is effervescent with countless *bindis* that are stuck onto the inner walls like an explosion of color. Once inside, there is barely any recollection of what was on the outside; the viewer is immediately transported into a world of fantasy. Like other works, there is a certain claustrophobic uneasiness that fluctuates between truth and lies, reality and dreams.

Her solo exhibition in Hauser & Wirth in New York in March 2012, titled “The Hot Winds That Blow from the East,” was based on the idea of domesticity and home, a space where the self as well as objects take on a different meaning. Bharti explains, “In Asia and India, the house and domestic space constitute a female domain, and this is where women are able to truly assert more ‘self’ within space. But a house is also fraught with social, economic and sexual excesses that can obscure or even threaten to obliterate the spiritual connections that are our greatest resource.” As you entered the gallery space, there was a 17-foot-long staircase, a found object from an old house, installed in the middle of the room, spanning from floor to ceiling — an object of utility and yet of no use. The staircase was stained with red paint and covered with black, sperm-shaped *bindis*. “I am always interested in the idea of a home. You start your life in a home, and I wanted to explore that but in a way that’s not completely familiar...”



There is a fine thread that connects each of Bharti's works. Visually, they seem to have no literal relationship, but it is the basic ideology of the artist's oeuvre that eventually deciphers the narrative of each work. "I take things from books, sci-fi, cartoons, Hindi comic books and even TV. I look at everything." *An Absence of an Assignable Cause* (2007) is a life-sized sculpture of the heart of a blue whale, (approximately the size of a small car) the largest living mammal on earth. The sculpture is intricately covered with *bindis*, and emphasizes the romantic idea of a 'big heart', along with the mysteries that bind the heart to concepts of love, life and death. Here she conquers the ambivalence of the imagination with the specificity of reality. *The Solarium Series* (2007) and its sequel, *The Waq Tree* (2009), are installations of fiberglass trees bearing what appear to be fruit; these are in fact minuscule heads of beasts, animals and mythological creatures made of flesh-colored wax. There is an implicit reference to the mythic "tree of life" in this work. However, there is also a related legend based on Alexander the Great, who was warned by the tree not to invade Iran. The *Waq Tree*, as it is called, is believed

to be an oracular tree: the heads spoke words of advice to travelers and warriors.

Bharti Kher's works can be taken as light-heartedly as they can be taken seriously. They are interactive works, both on an emotional and experiential level, that have an undeniable ingredient of seductive beauty married to the grotesque. They captivate audiences, who are hypnotically drawn from a distance to look at the work from up close, where they often inspire curiosity, shock and sometimes even a hint of repulsion. ■

*Kanchi Mehta is Flash Art's India editor.*

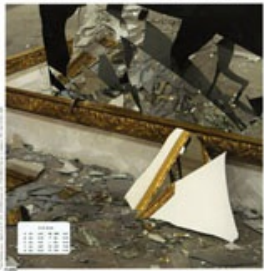
*Bharti Kher was born in 1969 in London. She lives and works in New Delhi.*

*Selected solo shows: 2012: Parasol Unit Foundation for Contemporary Art, London; Hauser & Wirth, New York; Savannah College for Art and Design, Savannah (GA, US); Perrotin, Hong Kong. 2011: Perrotin, Paris. 2010: Hauser & Wirth, London; Gallery Ske, Bangalore (IN); Kunstmuseum Thun (CH) (with Susan Hefuna and Fred Tomaselli). 2008: Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead (UK); Perrotin, Paris. 2007: Jack Shainman, New York; Nature Morte, New Delhi. 2006: Gallery*

*88 and Gallery Ske, Mumbai (IN). 2004: Gallery Ske, Bangalore; Nature Morte, New Delhi. 2001: Gallery Chemould, Mumbai. 2000: Bose Pacia, New York. 1999: Galerie F.I.A., Amsterdam. 1997: Galerie F.I.A., Amsterdam. 1995: Art Heritage, New Delhi. 1993: AIFACS, New Delhi.*

*Selected group shows: 2012: Kiev Biennale. 2011: "Paris - Delhi - Bombay," Centre Pompidou, Paris. 2010: "The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today," The Saatchi Gallery, London. 2009: "Who's Afraid of the Artists? A Selection of Works from the Pinauli Collection," Palais des Arts de Dinard (FR). 2008: "Passage to India," Frank Cohen Collection at Initial Access, Wolverhampton (UK); "Still moving Image," Devi Art Foundation, New Delhi; Busan Biennale (KR); "Indian Highway," Serpentine Gallery, London / Astrup Fearnley Museum, Oslo / Herning Kunstmuseum (DK) / Musée d'Art Contemporain, Lyon (FR) / MAXXI, Rome. 2007: "Urban Manners - 15 Contemporary Artists from India," Hangar Bicocca, Milan. 2006: Asia-Pacific Triennial, Brisbane (AU).*

**BHARTI KHER, The Waq Tree, 2009 (detail).** Fiberglass, iron, copper, 450 x 300 x 550 cm. © Bharti Kher. Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, Zurich/London/New York. Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography Zürich.



MICHELANGELO PISTOLETTO

FLASH ART  
March - April 2010  
Rajesh Punj

## Flash Art

## NEWS



UK

### INDIAN SPRING SEASON

Rajesh Punj

It is almost impossible to miss the new zeitgeist that has crossed the continents for London and the UK. Art from the Indian subcontinent has settled upon our shores like a welcome handshake from the old colonies. Like China, India has developed beyond all recognition, and both countries are positively thriving on their ambition for economic and cultural supremacy.

The institutions of contemporary art in London have followed such economic shifts and have taken to introducing Indian art to a palpable new audience. Artists like Subodh Gupta, his wife Bharti Kher, Jitish Kallat, TV Santhosh and Atul Dodiya are among a new elite of young Indian artists that have already conquered the international art scene and cemented a reputation for themselves. They suc-

ceed Anish Kapoor, the revered British sculptor who was granted permission recently to fill the exhibition corridors of the Royal Academy with red wax and a firing cannon. It may not have been Kapoor who introduced Indian art to the capital — in fact, he has been vocal about not wanting to be associated with such trends — but explosive painterly work at the RA has only helped to trigger something of a landslide for all things Asian in London, including an aptly titled Indian Winter season on Channel 4 television. While audiences were drawn to the sheer scale and strength of Kapoor's survey show at the RA, Subodh Gupta was given the hallowed bank vaults of the Hauser & Wirth spaces in Piccadilly and New Bond Street in October to exhibit solo. Gupta was also included in a 2008 group show or-

ganized by the Serpentine Gallery called "Indian Highway," which included installations, sculptures and photography by Bose Krishnamachari, Tejal Shah, Dayantia Singh, Shilpa Gupta and Sheela Gowda among others. In light of such exhibitions, philanthropists and art collectors Charles Saatchi and his counterpart in the north, Frank Cohen, have instigated a near-monopoly on contemporary art from the subcontinent by acquiring a vast body of new works from the length and breadth of India. Charles Saatchi revolutionized contemporary art in London with his interest and investment in the young *enfants terribles* of the late 1980s that included Gary Hume, Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas and Damien Hirst. Opening galleries and occupying aging government buildings, Saatchi absorbed Britain, took hold of

Europe, rewarded a new generation of talented Americans and then looked east toward the new sophistication of Asia. Exhibiting contemporary works from China in 2008 and works from the Middle East, including Iran, Lebanon and Dubai in 2009, he has single-handedly been responsible for orchestrating seismic changes in the parameters of contemporary art. Frank Cohen, to a lesser extent, has sought to do the same, absorbing a large portion of this emerging market. Last February, Cohen unveiled part of his collection in "Facing East" with works from Japan, China and India at the Manchester Art Gallery. Cohen's exhibited collection

BHARTI KHER, *The Nemesis of Nations*, 2008. Installation view at Indian Highway, Serpentine Gallery, London, 2009. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth, London. Photo: Hugo Glendinning. © Bharti Kher.



## NEWS



appears to mimic Saatchi's new show "The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today" that opened in Sloane Square weeks previously with a larger collection of works from some twenty-six artists, both established and emerging. This seminal show of contemporary Indian art appears to have consummated London's new passion for work from the sub-continent. It is a marker of how far Indian art has come that such institutions have followed the market and taken to these artists with such gravitas. Independently of the fervor surrounding Saatchi's new collection

are subsequent solo shows by Jitish Kallat, Bharti Kher, TV Santhosh and Subodh Gupta. Kallat's solo show "The Astronomy of the Subway" (February 15 to March 10) at Haunch of Venison includes vast new installations and a video projection. Kher has a debut solo show "inevitable undeniable necessary" at Hauser and Wirth (March 20 to May 15), while Subodh Gupta has also been commissioned by the same gallery to show an astonishing installation entitled "School 2008" (February 23 to March 27) consisting of 45 cast brass stools and the stainless-steel utensils that

have become his signature objects. Kerala-born TV Santhosh has a solo show of new works and sculpture at Aicon Gallery, and Sunil Gupta, the curator of the new exhibition "Where Three Dreams Cross: 150 Years of Photography from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh" had a solo show of his own photography last January at Grosvenor Gallery. "Where Three Dreams Cross" at the Whitechapel Gallery is a sizable collection of photo works from three countries that are intertwined by geography, history and politics. With these ambitious shows it ap-

pears that India's contemporary art history is being written here as quickly as her economy at home is expanding. This newfound cultural wealth has become an integral part of our landscape.

Above from left: The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today, 2010. Installation views at the Saatchi Gallery, London. Courtesy the Saatchi Gallery, London. SUBODH GUPTA, School (detail), 2008. 45 cast brass stools and stainless-steel utensils. 560 x 545 cm. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: A. Burger © Subodh Gupta. Below from left: JITISH KALLAT, Untitled (Eclipse) 3, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, triptych, 274 x 518 cm. Courtesy the Saatchi Gallery, London. © Jitish Kallat, 2010. SUBODH GUPTA, Spill, 2007. Stainless steel and stainless steel utensils 170 x 145 x 95 cm. © Subodh Gupta, 2010. SUNIL GUPTA, The New Pre-Raphaelites (series), 2008. Archival ink-jet print, 106 x 71 cm. Courtesy Grosvenor, London.

