

PRESSBOOK

Bharti KHER

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CULTURE & ENTERTAINMENT

All Eyes, Especially the Third, on India

[The Moment]

By MARGHERITA STANCATI
 New Delhi

Bharti Kher likes to play with clichés of India, starting with the bindi.

The forehead decoration is a traditional representation of the third eye, but in Ms. Kher's hands it is omnipresent, covering her sculptures of everything from dying white elephants to copulating dogs.

The idea is to approach archetypes of India and "turn them into something else," says the 43-year-old, New Delhi-based artist, who has made it to the forefront of India's contemporary art scene largely thanks to her appetite for risk.

In recent years she has taken on a new challenge at the heart of Indian femininity: the sari. "You ask any woman in Delhi, 'How many saris do you have,' and she is likely to look very sheepishly at you and then say 'Something like 500,'" Ms. Kher says. "I remember looking into a cupboard of this friend of mine and just thinking, 'My God, there's just so much in terms of memory.'"

But her saris are not draped around female bodies. Instead, they appear tossed aside, on the stairs or wooden chairs, or wrapped around cement pillars. They may speak of sexuality, love and desire, says the artist, but it's up to viewers to decide for themselves. "It's about the absence of the body," she says. "They're like gestures."

Born to Indian parents in London, Ms. Kher moved to New Delhi in the early 1990s, where she met her husband, fellow artist Subodh Gupta. Ms. Kher and Mr. Gupta, who have two children, are today the best-known artists of their generation in India and rising stars internationally. In 2010, Ms. Kher's elephant sculpture, "The Skin Speaks a Language Not Its Own," sold for \$1.5 million at a Sotheby's sale, then the highest auction price for a contemporary work by an Indian female artist. This week, Galerie Perrotin is showing new work

'One day I wore a sari—I just got home and pulled it off and chucked it on the floor—and in the morning it stood like a big pile,' artist Bharti Kher says. 'It was beautiful, almost like a piece of sculpture.'

by her in Hong Kong, her first exhibition in the city.

Ms. Kher spoke to The Wall Street Journal about turning saris into sculpture, being bad at physics and her bindi-free wardrobe. Edited excerpts follow.

The Wall Street Journal: How did the idea of using saris first come up?

Ms. Kher: One day I wore a sari—I just got home and pulled it off and chucked it on the floor—and in the morning it stood like a big pile. It was really three-dimensional. It was beautiful, almost like a piece of sculpture. It stood on its own. I was looking at clothes and at what they meant and at the idea of the garment as something you take off and use as a skin.

The bindis, now the saris. What draws you to these stereotypical symbols of India?

What I'm really asking when I make these works, what I'm really pushing for myself is: Are you

able to take something that already has so much narrative, that is so loaded, and then change it and perhaps look at it in a completely different way?

So does the sari work well as a material?

The sari is such a beautiful, six-meter piece of fabric. You are able to sculpt with it, actually. You can create space, and you can create dimension with just this piece of fabric, which has been set but is also very fluid. Within the sculptures [the 2012 "Portrait of a Lady" series], there is the permanence of the concrete, which is like the base, the body, and then you have these beautiful colors and the plasticity of the resin. It's almost like the fabric has just been draped, like it's just been taken off, like it's been worn.

Why are your new bindi panels named after school-like subjects, like "Physics," "Geography" and "History"?

These fixed boards are almost like textbooks, they are almost like school lessons. Here, the bindis start functioning like text or codes. "History" actually reads like a text from left to right. "Physics," because I'm really bad at physics, is structured and extremely complex and dense. "Mathematics" is also the same thing but it's a little bit more poetic.

The idea is that everybody goes to school, everybody learns about their own history, everybody learns about their own geography. It's kind of universal, to a certain extent. Our physiognomies are very extreme, our backgrounds are different, but we all come from somewhere, we all have a history.

The name of your Hong Kong exhibition, "Many, (Too) Many, More Than Before": What is that about?

It's the idea of plenitude, of plurality, that there can be many people, many, many ideas.

When I do the bindi work there's many, many, many, many of them. And there's too many of us, more than before. It's like a growing thing. It's really impossible to even talk about a country as large as India.

What do you think of the Indian art market?

I don't think the market in India is very healthy. There are a lot of speculators and not very many collectors. But I think there are some good galleries that are working really, really hard, in spite of very little support.

You've been using the bindi for a long time. Has its role evolved in your work over time?

I use it like I would any other material. There is not so much agony when I have to use it, because I am much more playful with it.

I've slowly been able to open up to it. I am able to enjoy its aesthetic value. And because it's my material, I can just put it anywhere, and it refers back to my own practice.

It's more of an idea: that you have another eye, another way of looking, another way of seeing. For me, that is something that hasn't changed at all; it's something that has stayed.

A more practical question: Where do you get your bindis from?

I have a couple of people, trusted suppliers with whom I've been working for many, many, many years. We've been working together on all things, from fabrics to glues, to how they are cut, to the dyes. Now that hard part is over. I order what I want, really.

And your saris?

The saris? Oh my God, there are saris everywhere in this country, in every market, in every shop. I go shopping for them myself. It's really fun. I also take saris from friends, people give them to me.

Are saris and bindis items you wear regularly?

Funnily enough, I don't, actually. I don't wear bindis, and I'm always in jeans.



Courtesy Galerie Perrotin, Hong Kong & Paris