

PRESSBOOK

Bharti KHER

Vogue

February 2018

Bharti Kher on working alone for the first time in 20 years

www.vogue.in/content/bharti-kher-on-working-alone-for-the-first-time-in-20-years

Fiona McKenzie Johnston

February 17, 2018



Image: Bharti Kher

"I don't think there could be two more polar opposite places than Delhi and Somerset," remarks Bharti Kher, staring out into the slow English dusk that has gradually enveloped us in a quiet stillness, contrasting with the sound of Kamasi Washington's jazz and the reek of resin that fills this artist's temporary space. Kher has been carving up and re-gluing clay figures that are lined up on trestle tables, while the setting sun has been streaking the huge sky pink, silhouetting trees that are shedding leaves like a peacock sheds its tail feathers. "There's a window upstairs from which the view is picture-perfect," she remarks, "The colours are crisp: blue skies, orange trees and hundreds of shades of green."

A ROOM OF HER OWN

Kher's return to rural England—it is not an unfamiliar landscape; she grew up in Surrey—is as an artist-in-residence at the leading international gallery Hauser & Wirth's West Country outpost at Durslade Farm. Exhibitions are housed in a collection of farm buildings, and the farm itself provides food for the gallery's Bar & Grill. There is a garden designed by Piet Oudolf, a pavilion by Smiljan Radic, and sculptures by Paul McCarthy and Kher's artist husband, Subodh Gupta, which I suggest might add to the feeling of familiarity. "I look at it and think, 'I know how you started!'" Kher replies, smiling. The house and studio for visiting gallery artists is located a short walk into town, in a former malt house behind Bruton's single-lane High Street. Kher is here for four months.

Not only is she displaced, she is also alone for the first time in 20 years; no children, no husband—Gupta visited, cooked ("he's a great cook") and left ("he's not allowed to disturb me!")—and her well-populated Delhi studio has been replaced by a single technician, Sam. "I can go days here without seeing anyone. And I can work like I used to way back before I had kids. I used to work mostly at night, which I love." She seems as peaceful as the surrounding countryside, I remark, as she sits still in her overalls, a cup of tea in her hand. "I do feel

Kher explains how she arrived here with no plans, and almost no belongings. "But within about 10 days of belonging here, I realised that to make the studio my own, to remove the djinns of the other artists who've been in, I needed some of my own energies in here." She sent for a crate from Delhi—clay figures from South India she has been collecting for about three years—"and the work started taking off in a way that it really wasn't in India." Taking me through a brief history of ritualistic sculpture using clay from the Ganges, she indicates the array, "They're gods and mortals, the sacred, the profane. When I found them, I decided that I was going to break them down and remake them into this idea of the hybrid figure, making new gods out of old. The series is called *The Intermediaries*, the in-between people, the shamans and the tricksters who are always between states of being, states of living, states of animal and human."

A TALE OF TWO WORLDS

It strikes me that there's an analogy to be drawn between this residency and this period of Kher's life. "I do believe that I make a lot of work that pre-dates my own psychological and physical state," she replies. Her return to Delhi will mark a new phase in which she'll be in a position to "step up the commitment," the draw to leave the studio at 6.30pm less strong as her children, both older, are no longer living at home. She explains, "Women, mothers—we're expedient. I can do loads in two hours. It's a choice I make—as a female artist—to also be around my family and children."

Her days here have developed a rhythm: she gets up, goes for a run around the Somerset lanes in the damp dawn mist (in Delhi it's on a treadmill), eats, and is in the studio by 10am. She works all day without a break, accompanied by the radio, cooks for herself using local produce—she raves about sheep's milk—and is in bed by 10pm every night. "I have so much energy here, just from the change in the air. I wake up fresh." And while she occasionally goes for a walk around the farm, she's yet to stray further afield. "I'm a very bad tourist. But I feel like I've given myself this gift of time, and I don't want to do other things except make art."

WHERE ART HAPPENS

The direct influences of the rural surrounds are not yet able to be judged: "Making art is not immediate. It's really slow—slow thinking, slow working, slow time. What I'm doing in a studio is creating connections for tomorrow." It has altered her focus: "In Delhi, I work on about eight or nine different things at the same time, and I'm restless. Here I've got just one project, and I'm sitting and doing it." It's a practice she'd like to take home with her—and the residency is an experience she feels emboldened to repeat: she mentions one with ceramics in the Netherlands. "To be a creature of habit is very comforting, but you have to push yourself out of that comfort zone to a place of rupture. That's when the art happens." And so, I leave her to the in-between people, the night, and the peace she has found in this Somerset countryside.