

PRESSBOOK

Bharti KHER

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Bharti Kher Points de départ, points qui lient DHC/ART Foundation for Contemporary Art Montreal



Installation view, Bharti Kher, Points de départ, points qui lient, 2018, DHC/ART. Left to right: Portrait from memory II (2012). Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Heroides VI (2016); Portrait: Reena (2013); Portrait of M (2015). Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin. Image © DHC/ART Foundation for Contemporary Art, photo: Richard-Max Tremblay.

Bharti Kher

Points de départ, points qui lient

DHC/ART Foundation for Contemporary Art, Montreal

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One is simply unprepared for the sheer visual and emotional wallop that Bharti Kher (b. London in 1969) has in store for viewers on the walls and floors of the DHC. Notorious for her profligate and exalting use of the *bindi* -- a core element in her work since she moved from the UK to New Delhi, India, in 1993 in her early 20s -- the formal invention evident in this show is simply staggering.

Tracing its etymology to the Sanskrit word *bindu* -- meaning point, dot or minute particle -- the *bindi* dot is a forehead decoration worn commonly by Hindu and Jain women mainly in South Asia - particularly in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius. It is associated with a person's mystical third eye in the old Hindu tradition.

In its traditional incarnation, it is a bright red dot applied to the centre of the forehead between the eyebrows. But bindis have morphed over time into widely popular decorative accessories and a number of Western celebrities have been accused of cultural appropriation for wearing one. It is a provocative mnemonic and conceptual trigger in Kher's work, reminding us of its many prevailing associations in art: from abstract expressionism, op art, and geometric abstraction to Tantra Asana in India. Kher has stated: "I activate the surface for you to imagine the microcosmic and macro. Remember also that the work looks back at you." This helpful admonition is everywhere heard in the present exhibition.



Installation view, Bharti Kher, Points de départ, points qui lient, 2018, DHC/ART. Left to right: Heroides IV (2015); My friend un-named (2014); Portrait: Sonia (2013). Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin. Image © DHC/ART Foundation for Contemporary Art, photo: Richard-Max Tremblay.

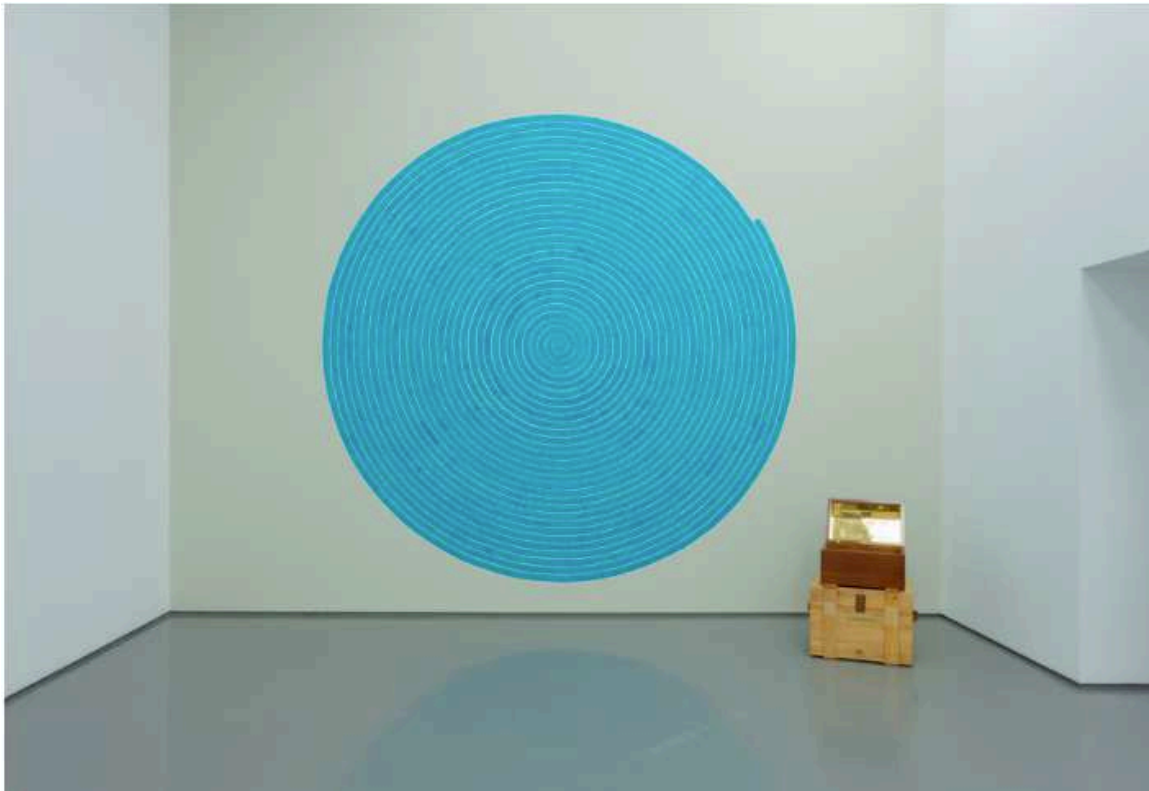
A tight and telling selection of the *bindi* paintings shown here includes the *Heroides* series (2016). It refers to Ovid's *The Heroides*, a collection of epistolary poems is written in the voice of suffering heroines from Greek and Roman mythology. Ovid's writing is arguably unique in its respectful dilation on the female. Indeed, he enjoys the distinction of being the very first male writer of consequence to write in a woman's voice. Kher's paintings are remarkable abstracts and semiotic cradles of meaning in which the reference to Ovid is a revealing and celebratory homage, an epigraph to works of searing power. It is akin to a finger pointing to a work's extravagant and tiered insides.

In *Heriodes V* (2016, bindis on painted board, 2.5 x 1.9), what at first appears to be a work of fabric art is, in fact, a construction made from thousands upon thousands of bindis adhering to a white board. The work references the fifth chapter in Ovid's collection in which the women mourn their lost lovers and express hope for their return. The sheer excess of the Hindu symbol here is as self-present and enlivening as the pigment in the heavily clotted, thick coat paintings of Eugene Leroy.



Installation view, Bharti Kher, Points de départ, points qui lient, 2018, DHC/ART. Mother and Child (2014). Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin. Image © DHC/ART Foundation for Contemporary Art, photo: Richard-Max Tremblay.

Kher's *portrait sculptures* (2012-2016) are cast concrete pedestals draped with the sari, the female garment from the Indian subcontinent that is considered a cultural icon. It is here a potent and poetic surrogate for the absent body. The ongoing series demonstrates Kher's ambidextrous articulation of the female figure. In *Six women* (2014) Kher dilates on the aging female body in an eloquent line of white-clay casts of seated women portraying prostitutes in Kolkata's red light district.



Installation view, Bharti Kher, Points de départ, points qui lient, 2018, DHC/ART. An absence of, assignable cause (2007). Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin. Image © DHC/ART Foundation for, Contemporary Art, photo: Richard-Max Tremblay.

In *The night she left* (2011), a repurposed wooden staircase is festooned with red bindis while a cast-off sari snakes around an upturned chair, referencing the work's title.

Also presented is the colossal and hugely captivating work *An absence of assignable cause* (2007, Bindis on fibreglass, 168 x 308 x 150 cm.), a brilliant rendition in fibreglass of the anatomic heart of a blue sperm whale, made in full scale and encased in an epidermis of bindis. The physicality of this work and the wealth of minute detail lend it, even granted the outscale dimensions, a larger-than-life presence in the show.



Installation view, Bharti Kher, Points de départ, points qui lient, 2018, DHC/ART. An absence of, assignable cause (2007). Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin. Image © DHC/ART Foundation for Contemporary Art, photo: Richard-Max Tremblay.



Installation view, Bharti Kher, Points de départ, points qui lient, 2018, DHC/ART. A half spectral thing (2016). Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin. Image © DHC/ART Foundation for Contemporary Art, photo: Richard-Max Tremblay.

Framed pencil drawings from the 'Alchemy Drawing' series, executed on ledger papers, are further proof of the artist's technical virtuosity and imaginative reach. And cascades of bindis repletely repurpose a series of framed maps found in a 1947 Larousse Atlas.

In one of the most impressive *in-situ* installations, 10,000 gigantic bindis constitute a mesmerising spiral on a wall adjacent to an open, gold-plated wood chest in *Virus IX* (2018), a somewhat ominous work that is part of a 30-year project that began in 2010 and will end in 2039, when Kher will turn 70.

In Kher's work, the *bindi* is central to an alembic of procedural transmutation, a letter in a secret language that subverts and re-invents both support and sign, from the subliminal to the supraliminal and stages in between. More than a mere symbol, it enjoys a dimensional physical/psychical depth that is ecstatic and suggests a coded language that the viewer must decrypt. The resulting works become "a text, like a Morse code that I have created," according to Kher, "and through them, I can actually speak in tongues, I can speak in code, I can speak in secret." Kher's body of work is predicated on a secret language of subversion and disruption in a way that reminds us of the "teaching stories" of Joan Jonas, but here anchored in constructed objects and embodied signs. A devout feminist, her work knowingly dilates on women's issues and the spiritual, and has humour and depth.

Cheryl Sim deserves real credit for bringing the work of this important artist to Montreal and she has curated what must now count as one of the most significant exhibitions mounted by the DHC to date in an exemplary and unusually sensitive fashion.

Bharti Kher's mark-making is innovative, fearless and contrarian. It contests socio-cultural norms in India and elsewhere. It practices an aesthetic of female empowerment. This artist dissolves boundaries and breaks down dichotomies with porous abandon, seamless grace, and a bracing measure of brio. **WM**