



## Sculpture

### Review

# Huma Bhabha review – 'Giacometti is a foil to her flamboyance. She is today's Picasso'

## Barbican, London

The Pakistani-American sculptor's traumatised patchwork people more than hold their own against the great Swiss artist's striding, emaciated statues in this thrilling clash



★★★★★  
'Ugliness trumps elegance' ... Encounters: Giacometti at the Barbican, with Bhabha's Mask of Dimitrios (2019) in the foreground



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**A**n artist has to ask big questions and have intense thoughts to get away with exhibiting among the profound masterpieces of Alberto Giacometti. I didn't give much for Huma Bhabha's chances. But she takes the Barbican's new daylight art gallery by storm.

Grey morning light from windows that look across the brutalist ponds at St Giles Cripplegate pours through big holes in her 2019 sculpture *Mask of Dimitrios*. This roughly assembled human figure has plastic bags for breasts – not inflated but sagging pieces of dirty polythene – a metal chair for a skeleton enhanced by blackened dog bones, plaster arms and legs, a battered tray for a face, all tacked together over an inner emptiness.

It is a troubling patchwork of a person, incomplete, unfinished – like us all. Just as Giacometti created universal images for his time, so Huma Bhabha creates them for ours. And the results are not pretty.

Bhabha was born in Karachi in 1962 and lives in New York state. Giacometti died in Switzerland in 1966 after a life that shaped our very idea of seriousness in modern art. Starting out as a surrealist, creating hybrid forms at once erotic, violent and inexplicable, he became a primeval visionary whose thinned, starkly pointing or walking figures with their tall narrow faces express the reduced yet still-standing state of humanity after the second world war. The Giacometti Foundation has lent some of his purest, most archaeological figures. Four *Women on a Base*, cast in bronze in 1950, look like lucky Pompeians who have walked out of the pyroclastic cloud of Vesuvius. Over by the window, another group of striding emaciated people are framed against concrete and sky – heroically anti-heroic icons of modern existence.



'This is intentional grotesquerie' ... Huma Bhabha  
*Encounters: Giacometti*.

But Bhabha makes poor Alberto seem museum-bound. You admire miniature figures by Giacometti standing to attention in their cases but are distracted by her rougher, rawer, terracotta-and-concrete shapes on the floor around them: a severed, chewed, gawping head, a bunch of gnarled human bones, a pair of swollen feet.

Bhabha is in subtle dialogue with Giacometti – or is she ever so gently taking the piss? Her traumatised clay-covered heads, feet and other scattered parts mirror his charred ruins of humanity. Yet it is hard to tell if they are homages or parodies. As the exhibition unfolds, Giacometti becomes more and more a foil to her flamboyance, a skinny Polonius to her witty Hamlet, as her existential questions start to feel more urgent, restless and resonant than his.

Giacometti, at least as represented here, is an artist who does one thing

with monumental perfection. (His surrealist works would have told another story). Bhabha is an omnivorous eater and vomiter up of traditions and conventions, modern one moment, prehistoric the next, exhilaratingly embracing bad taste. In the gallery's antechamber are four massive statues with bodies that are solid rectangular blocks on which she has incised distorted outlines of body parts and interior organs. These gross, corporeal towers have titles including *Mr Stone* and, er, *Member*. This is intentional grotesquerie by an artist who is totally in control of her hideousness.

Bhabha emerges as not a follower of Giacometti at all. With her savage embrace of what can only be called by that 20th-century word "primitivism", her mixing of beauty and revulsion, her pastiches, her awe at the mystery of human existence, she is today's Picasso. *Mask of Dimitrios*, with its chaotic human image supported by a chair frame, is highly reminiscent of an Oceanian mask owned by Picasso, now in the Picasso Museum, Paris, which he enhanced by placing on a little wooden chair.



Restless and resonant ... Bhabha's Magic Carpet (2003).  
Photograph: Kerry McFate/Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner Gallery

She is not, however, a European artist, embracing the "primitive" from elsewhere, but a Pakistani American who sees Europe as the outsider, the incomer, the brutal stranger. Near Giacometti's striding legs she displays her 2003 piece Magic Carpet, in which two booted white legs, bum in the air, stalk over a Mughal-style rug.

Yet she looks for the same kind of universal language that Giacometti and Picasso found in their ransackings of world art and myth. Her powerful statue Scout looks like an ancient Egyptian Ka figure or sarcophagus that's been burned then buried – she created its charred look by applying paint to cork. The cultural cannibalism of her art is as insolent and boldly entitled as the great 20th-century modernists.

Ugliness trumps elegance in this energising show. Instead of another depressing reminder that 21st-century art isn't a patch on 20th-century modernism,

it proves the opposite – that artists today are still able to find the new and wild by recooking the many cultures of our ever-shifting world. The Reform chairman recently said Britain needs more patriotic statues and less "crazy modern art". Huma Bhabha's art is a punch in the face for such attitudes – and a satisfying punch it is.

- At the [Barbican, London](#), from 8 May to 10 August

