

# UNCERTAIN STATES

AN INTERVIEW WITH BHARTI KHER

**RAJESH PUNJ**

*In Paris at Galerie Perrotin Kher has introduced a new body of works that in part draw attention to the anatomy of potential actions. As though in these configurations of differing materials everything could change in an instance. The potential for action and the actions that have occurred are the opposing energies that exist in this exhibition.*

If science is determined by a body of facts then art is closer to the fictitious. Moving between certain and uncertain states in order it creates its own visual parables of our lives as they are now, and are likely to be in the future. English born, New Delhi based artist Bharti Kher sees art as a situation, in a continent carried by a wealth of other interests. As her preoccupation with materials and matter is coupled by her consideration for human behavior, and of the manner by which we interact and exchange our skins with one another. And as positive as it proves problematic Kher sees societal advances coming at the cost of the individual. "It is strange now in India how it has become the easy option to have your sentiments hurt by art, imagery and other things, than to actually look at the real world and to find that what you are doing is extremely problematic." Kher sees power, progress and politics as having superseded more ephemeral energies and alliances between people that have shaped India, of the land, the hand and the individual. And of a moment when art and culture were as significant a language as the hundreds of dialects that cover the continent as sound systems. "As a consequence of what is happening socially and culturally, you realise that as cultural practitioners your voice is even more important, and as you say, the art we make has to measure up to that."

For Kher the joy of making work, the routine of walking into and out of her studio everyday comes with the knowledge that she is witness to history as it unfolds. The lives

of the individual are for the artist a measure of her intention to want to explore and come to explain what it is to be in and of the modern city. Applying plastic to wood, pressing bindis to painted board, balancing granite over concrete, are for Kher all actions of adventure with her environment, as it is in a constant state of flux. And as an artist she sees her role less a provocateur or protagonist, but more as a witness, looking over reality with an alien eye, seeing everything anew. "As I said you act as a witness, and some of the works that have come out in the past two years, if I look at them in retrospect are really about what is happening. I am not writing a story but the imagery comes instinctively. Or the sensibility of the work, the angst and awkwardness of the piece comes from the environment, because you make work about where you live, about who you are and where you are from." Replacing England for India, Kher sees her work as a reaction to the situations and circumstances that have multi-narratives pressed side-by-side in a society and city, polluted and over-populated. "I have lived in India for twenty-five years but my eye will always be different, but then so is everybody else's eye."

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*Bharti Kher, "When darkness becomes light" 2015, Concrete, wood, granite / Ciment, bois, granit, 157 x 62 x 23 cm  
Photo : Claire Dorn  
Courtesy of the Artist & Galerie Perrotin  
Bharti*



Kher sees in individual works entire universes that are there entitled to explode. “You start and you enter, and really the first thing that you see is the hammer, balancing on this huge granite stone. It just balances, it just sits there. It really is like a beginning and you mark an entry into the space. Like an object is in balance and it is at this point of contact where there is this incredible sound, almost like the sound of the universe. Bang, and a smaller object then holds in balance something that is far greater in its weight.”

#### Interview

**Rajesh Punj:** I am initially interested in talking about the works you have here at Galerie

**Perrotin, Paris.** The associated press material tells me that these are all new works for this exhibition. Can you introduce them to me?

**Bharti Kher:** I would say the two exhibitions I have done this past two months, would be this exhibition and the exhibition I am doing at the Freud Museum, London. You approach different projects differently. Sometimes spaces, specifically gallery spaces call for new projects that allow you to achieve something appropriate to the environment you are in.

**RP:** So did you see these galleries and then consider what would sit well as a body of works?

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View of the exhibition / Vue de l'exposition  
Bharti Kher, “The laws of reversed effort” at  
Galerie Perrotin, Paris from  
October 19 to December 23, 2016  
Photo : Claire Dorn  
Courtesy Galerie Perrotin

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**BK:** No, because for this exhibition I have had a nice period of production, that allowed me to do what I wanted. The way that I work is that there are years that I only ever exhibit, and I don't produce much work because I am busy with exhibitions; whilst writing, thinking about related literature and how the work gets disseminated. And then there are other times that I go to the studio and close the door and concentrate on making work. So I have been able to do that for the past year and a half, which has been really good for my practice. Because it has allowed me time to find and push new ideas, especially materials. I think I don't really see my practice as direction based, I see it as quite cyclical. So I don't go off in one direction and follow that path for a long time and my work suddenly changes, it all sort of happens at the same time.

**RP:** So you come back to existing ideas.

**BK:** Yes and then new works or materials lead, as my practice is quite material driven. Whereby I use them as a kind of alchemy, and as a way of investing in matter; of pushing ideas that see material as transformative, and allow it to have some kind of energy that transforms a space. It can sound a little ‘hokey-pokey’ but artists can be a little hokey-pokey sometimes, can't they? We can be a little ‘witchy’ and get away with it.

**RP:** Faith is fundamental in India.

**BK:** I would say art is really about faith and ideas, otherwise how you would name something, and say it is what it is? It is really about naming and having faith in an object. Artists make things that nobody needs anyway. It is only because they say

this is what it is and it is worth considering that anyone actually considers it. But to name it is also a complete folly because we are making folly projects in many ways. I am interested in that, the like the idea of the folly as a project as an object. For me this exhibition has arrived at a space where the objects and the material are all about balance and equilibriums. And of my not being specifically worried about complete coherent narratives anymore, because I don't think I work like that actually. I don't create narratives and see my work as quite disjointed.

**RP:** It is interesting your having identified the uncertainty of your approach, when so much of the commentary that surrounds your work stresses there is an underlying narrative to what you are doing, that explains it. Which begs the question as to how you





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things like this because it gives me a great deal of pleasure.

And then there is that part of it that not only gives me pleasure, but I can lose myself in a language perhaps, on a separate axis, whereby art takes you onto a separate axis. And you are there for a moment and it is quite a high actually. There is that and the other part of it is okay 'what does the work then do?' because as artists now our work is supposed to do something. 'What does your work do?' 'What does it do?'

**RP:** *Something I have never asked, because on the contrary I see art as being without function.*

**BK:** You should ask 'so what does your work do?' well it depends. Does it talk about language? Does it talk about how you are supposed to look at shapes, balance, form, and volume? Are you supposed to experience the work through your body? Or are you supposed to experience the work through

your intellect, through your mind? Are you supposed to ask questions? Are you supposed to feel disenfranchised, strangely unsettled or at peace? Some works make you weep, some works don't.

**RP:** *It is very interesting, because the work is the work and it is all about the material, the physical, and the solid; and everything you mention is to do with the abstract and the ephemeral. How do they sit together? How do you employ materials that become objects that are intended to cultivate a set of sensations? Significantly it is the space around the work that interests me, and what that alludes to?*

**BK:** We are all more sophisticated now aren't we, as we are able to create the connection between sound, and smell and vision. Sometimes when you make art you are not just looking at what you see, you are also creating a sensory environment for the things that you hear. You hear the things that

**accommodate others opinions of your work?**

**BK:** I think you have to just let go. There will be points where you can't control everything as much as we all want to be controlling. But then at some point the artist's voice becomes important, which is why I think interviews such as this are important. Why your own writing is interesting, why you sometimes have to bring people in, because the conversations that you have sometimes are the ones that don't get put out there. There is an element of caution, but consideration is also about fear, so you can allow the work to do what it does, and I think it finds its own trajectory after a while. People think that they want

completion, but I think that people want completion in everything anyway. Art's not the place to seek completion, is it? Or the completion of an idea about what an artist does? Because I am not seeking completion in my own work, otherwise it would become too 'comfortable'. I think to make art you have to be a little uncomfortable, challenged. It is about spaces where you can practice crafting works, and for me I think I am going in many different directions; which I think is actually how I work. Sometimes it is really about making, which is something I really like to do. I like making things. I like making things with my hands. I like making things in clay and building. I like drawing and sculpting, and colouring. I like doing

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*Bharti Kher, "Six women" 2013-2016  
Plaster, wood / Plâtre, bois  
138 x 463 x 96 cm  
Photo : Claire Dorn  
Courtesy Galerie Perrotin*

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*Bharti Kher  
"What can I tell you that you don't know already?" 2013, Bindis on shattered mirror, stainless steel frame (8 elements) / Bindis sur miroir brisé, encadrement acier (8 éléments), Dimensions variables / Variable dimensions, Photo : Claire Dorn  
Courtesy of the Artist & Galerie Perrotin*



you see; you smell the things that you taste. It's like that, you have to crossover the wall to have a complete experience, and you can experience the work like an animal. You are not human anymore.

**RP:** *Do you think the audience has changed? Do you think they have become more sophisticated?*

**BK:** No I think I have changed. I think we change don't we? Maybe art has changed. Maybe that is the nature of our psyche.

**RP:** *I mean to say do you think the audience expect more from the artist now?*

**BK:** What do you think?

**RP:** *I think they do, we are in and of a globalised culture that expects more, and it is as if we think we deserve more from it.*

**BK:** The audience as monolith.

**RP:** *I am constantly reading about contemporary art whilst looking back at modern art, and I think there is something incredible about modern works whereby the audience were in genuine awe of what they were given. And it was part of a cultural experience that bridged over into literature, language, film and fashion. I think of the American 'beat generation' when I describe such a collective phenomena. Contemporary art seems to exist in and of itself as culture and the crowd have acclimatised to everything being radical and revolutionary, with a corporate 'c'.*

**BK:** Maybe that is just the nature of the beast, in terms of the art world now. Art has become a circus styled spectacle, and it has become corporate and part of the entertainment industry at the same time. You can stay there; you can play that game if you want because we are all players. We are all in the gallery system. Let's not all be holier

than thou. We are all players, we are all in it and you have to decide what makes us happy. You can only perform if that's part of you. Some people do it really well, they are really good at it, and you think 'wow' that's a great piece. The scale is huge, the ambition is gigantic, and the execution suggests there is a lot of support. I think the art world is quite interesting now. I think what it has become is a lot more inclusive, including practitioners from other disciplines, and I think that that is really interesting, including collectives. I think it (the scene) is much bigger, and as a consequence it is much harder to hold everyone's attention. It is much harder to know about everyone now. It has become a full-time job.

**RP:** *I guess you need someone in your ear constantly telling you who's who, and what's happening.*

**BK:** Of what's happening.

**RP:** *And of what's relevant.*

**BK:** Of course, it's like now here in Paris there are things going on at the opera and with contemporary dance; and if you could see everything you would feel more informed.

**RP:** *But I guess when you are constantly travelling you must pick up on all of these things; you're your efficiently being informing of where you are and of what's happening. You must have a method to consuming culture.*

**BK:** No I am really shit at it. I am really shit at stuff like this because I am not a social, media person. I kind of sit here and do my show and then I call a friend and say 'let's go out for dinner', and have a nice chat.

**RP:** *You are a human being, it's allowed, no?*

**BK:** Yes, and then I miss that.

**RP:** *I made a decision years ago to*

*It is very distracting, just a noise. And there is so little time now to finish everything, and execute all of the ideas that you have. There is so little time to watch the hundred films that you need to see; so little time to read all of the books that you need to read in between making all of your work. You feel sometimes that you have to be a bit calmer, and I realise I like being in my studio more than anything else.*

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Bharti Kher  
*"The betrayal of causes once held dear VI"*  
 2014-2016, Bois, liège, bindis, cire, verre /  
 Wood, cork, bindis, wax, glass  
 218 x 200 x 52 cm  
 Courtesy Galerie Perrotin





*allow myself to miss things, in order to contemplate them better than they really were.*

**BK:** But that is another part of it that then becomes a lifestyle choice. Art then becomes your life.

**RP:** *I think the danger as an artist, (obviously as a critic and correspondent I need to still attempt to engage with everything in order to be aware of what is happening and current to the contemporary art scene); is that such pursuits can be very distracting from the work. I think of Andy Warhol who embraced all of that, or more historically Van Gogh who indulged in art by isolation.*

**BK:** It is very distracting, just a noise. And there is so little time now to finish everything, and execute all of the ideas that you have. There is so little time to watch the hundred films that you need to see; so little time to read all of the books that you need to read in between making all of your work. You feel sometimes that you have to be a bit calmer, and I realise I like being in my studio more than anything else. I like getting up in the morning and doing the same thing everyday, because it gives me a lot of comfort in some strange way. Maybe I am just a creature of habit and I like it. So I like going to my studio everyday at ten o'clock and working the whole day, and of going home and thinking today I started

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*View of the exhibition / Vue de l'exposition  
Bharti Kher, "The laws of reversed effort" at  
Galerie Perrotin, Paris from October 19 to  
December 23, 2016*

*Photo : Claire Dorn,  
Courtesy Galerie Perrotin*

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*Bharti Kher  
"Still life" 2016, Cement, granite, ceramic,  
fibre / Ciment, granit, céramique, fibre, bois  
117 x 91 x 23 cm, Photo : Claire Dorn  
Courtesy of the Artist & Galerie Perrotin*

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a new project; I did something. And I like materials, to push them to do things that they are not supposed to do. I like the challenge of creating imagery that doesn't look like anything you have seen before. And then I have within my practice so many different types of languages that function as methods of working, which after a while when you have established them you can start to speak them. So you can create your own codes and your own ways of communicating that is different. Which is not about being self-referential, it is really about communication, and the act of communicating.

**RP:** *So by definition you see the works as a set of languages.*

**BK:** I see the 'bindi' works, which for a long time I wasn't entirely sure of them myself, as a language. You can say 'what am I doing?' 'Why am I looking at this, and why am I carrying on being so repetitive, in the sense of just the action of applying a bindi to a panel?' As placid as they appear I see them as action paintings that are about time. And by concentrating on them you start to think that they (the bindis) are letters, and that I have conceived of a language. So those works become a text, like a morse code that I have created, and through them I can actually speak in tongue, I can speak in code, I can speak in secret. But also by titling them I can be more ambiguous and more open.

**RP:** *Upon arriving at the exhibition space I saw two more of your bindi works, so you continue with those in parallel to new works?*

**BK:** Yes I still make them. I think every now and then I think I am done now. Those bindi pieces are titled the Heriodes series, and I have made two of them so far, relating to a book written by (Publius Ovidius Naso) Ovid in the fourth century.

**RP:** *Incredible.*



**BK:** Are you reading it?

**RP:** *No I admire your reading a Roman poet.*

**BK:** It's amazing. I read a lot of things. I haven't actually finished reading that yet, but I bought a beautiful edition at the Harvard University Press, with a translation. And essentially Ovid wrote out a series of letters that were from the point of view of women. And when I first read it I thought these accounts were true, so I was incredibly excited. Asking 'how has he got hold of these letters?' then I realised that actually this was a fictional work, which is also really interesting because he created something. He was one of the first writers of

the fourth century who wrote as a woman. Ovid as fourteen women writing letters to long lost lovers; the men who left them, that betrayed them, who went off with other women, who found other lovers. Some of those letters are angry, some of them are bitter, others are beautiful; some of them are about death. Which were collectively called Amores. And I thought wow what an amazing idea to have these poems together in one place. So I started writing them out.

**RP:** *And all from a male perspective.*

**BK:** Ovid was one of the first men in history to have written as a woman. It is almost understood now that every writer becomes the character. It is okay for a man to write in the third person, as somebody else. Now, when did it happen, that writers started changing tenses, past, future, present, so that they could speak in the voice of many? And then there was this whole thing with George Eliot, (the English female writer), of how a woman could have the voice of a man? But then men have always had the voice of women haven't they historically. So I found Ovid's work incredibly interesting because he was one of the first. And actually he wasn't really that bad at it.

**RP:** *Clearly a very sensitive and astute man of his generation.*

**BK:** The series I refer to, together with Amores was called Heroides or The Heroines. So they (the bindi works) are representative of that. I see them as letters; letters to people I have written to.

**RP:** *And the bindi works are individually unique? I see a pattern to them.*

**BK:** Writing is also like a pattern, a process.

**RP:** *I would endeavour to say that writing is comparable to making art. Words can have as much of*

*a physical presence as an object rooted to a plinth. A word is a building block, whereby if you remove a word from a sentence it changes the sentence entirely, changing the paragraph entirely; by which we explain ourselves as we wish to be understood.*

**BK:** Of course it is, poetry more so I would say.

**RP:** *Poetry is something else entirely.*

**BK:** I see some of my bindi works as poems, and as a language I see a lot in the layout.

**RP:** *And of perception, I am incredibly intrigued by your works' geography, by which I mean of how your works are received in New Delhi in relation to their being present in Paris?*

**BK:** I think that gap, which sounds impressive is really small now, and to be honest and perfectly fair some works are better received in India than in Europe; it just depends on which works because everything becomes so desperate. So there could be something that is slightly more abstract that has a reference to classical art history say, and maybe that is a little more complex, but it is so small. I think that people who look at art know art. It is its own language.

**RP:** *Crucially do you feel that you are learning a greater number of uncertainties than anything certain?*

**BK:** I think I am much happier to embrace that now, of the condition of uncertainty, because I think this idea of constantly ticking all of your boxes and being right about everything is not interesting. I think making art is really about searching for the chalice, and you will never find it, which is part of the whole thing of knowing that you are looking for something. It's like the philosopher's stone or a search for

the Holy Grail. I think it is as stupid as that sometimes, and the prize becomes the folly, the distraction from what you are really doing. I think that the journey is in the making.



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