



An Absence of Assignable Cause, 2007, Bindis on fibreglass, 68 1/8 x 118 1/8 x 45 5/8 in
Installation view, 'Indian Highway', Astrup Fearnley Museum, Oslo, Norway, 2009, Courtesy Bharti Kher and Hauser & Wirth, Photo: Genevieve Hanson



The messenger, 2011, Fibreglass, wooden rake, saree, resin, 74" x 53 1/2" x 33 1/8"
Courtesy Bharti Kher and Hauser & Wirth, Photo: Genevieve Hanson

IDOL PURSUITS - BHARTI KHER

When given to considering sculpture and public art in the Indian sub-continent, it is impossible not to become aware of one of the current luminaries of contemporary Indian art, Bharti Kher has very quickly come to the fore as one of the leading female protagonists of the new generation of contemporary Indian artists holding her own internationally. Having broken upon the British art scene with her work *The Skin Speaks a Language Not Its Own* 2006 that comprises of a fibreglass elephant recoiling to the floor, covered from head to toe in silver bindis, the work came about, as many good ideas do, from a found photograph of a collapsed elephant being manhandled and manoeuvred into an awaiting truck. This tragic imposition upon this allying mammal was perceived by Kher to be the origin of an artwork and as a tragic work of immense beauty it proved to be a sensation among the international art collective and was acquired impulsively by philanthropist and collector Frank Cohen for his Wolverhampton collection, which is included in a new show at Manchester City Art Gallery, aptly entitled *Looking East* in which Cohen has opened up a very small part of his sizable collection for the public.

Bharti Kher is concurrently included in Charles Saatchi's significant new exhibition of contemporary Indian art at Saatchi Gallery with her seminal work *The Nemesis of Nations* 2008, which is a work that has become as synonymous to Kher's practice as the vinyl floor works were to British artist Jim Lambie or

the auto-destructive art of Michael Landy has become his own. Multi-layered and multi-coloured, these circles of felt are concentrated onto gallery walls and canvas as many as possible. For Kher their cultural significance is central to her art practice. A reoccurring motif, like the wheel rooted to the centre of the Indian flag the bindi is at the centre of all social and cultural identity and a sign of the marital woman and her place in society. Kher explains "The bindi has become many things now after using it for so long: a marker of time: It functions as both a material that transforms the surface of a work like text or codes and reinvents the clarity of a ritual that signifies, that you open your eye and see. The visual aesthetic is really not something I can ignore and yes it's one of my signatures." For that reason Kher's repeated bindis, the distorted layering and over-layering of the form, disorientates and destabilises the motif, one among so many, makes for a beguiling complexity to what is on offer. With this work Kher goes some way to suggest symbolism is subject to social change and challenges the role of the woman in a continent rooted in tradition. Comfortable with her position as a leading contemporary artist in India, Kher is more interested in the processes that have become inherent in her works and appears to demonstrate a curious modesty for herself that encourages her to derail any conversations that begin with the terms 'more important' or 'leading artist'.

With works like *Hungry Dogs Eat Dirty Pudding* 2004 we are reminded of Swiss artist Méret Oppenheim and her early Dada and Surrealist interests. Hugely influential to her contemporaries in and outside of the surrealist movement Oppenheim was a leading female protagonist whose works consisted of everyday objects arranged as such that they alluded to female sexuality and feminine exploration by the opposite sex. For Kher such associations are rudimentary, "In the tea sets series her (Oppenheim's) hair covered tea cups bore the same strange fruits of the tea ceremony that I wanted to explore. Meetings and encounters that are somehow neutralised in a ritual handed down over centuries to talk and share. My piece took the twist like Oppenheim's but in my own way."

Another work of considerable merit is *The Absence of Assignable Cause* 2007 in which Kher has recreated a disembodied whale's heart in fibreglass and decorated the enormous heart and the protruding arterioles with different coloured bindis, included in the 'Empire Strikes Back' show at Saatchi gallery. A speculative work based on images from maritime journals and obscure articles, Kher appears to have indulged, in this instance, in a fleeting interest in the wonder of a mammal's heart. The scale of the work is intentionally intrusive upon the space but it is Kher's ability to qualify such scale and significance that challenges her



*Reveal the secrets that you seek, 2011, 27 shattered mirrors, wooden frames, bindis, Various dimensions
Courtesy Bharti Kher and Hauser & Wirth, Photo: Genevieve Hanson*

reinvented episodes of reality from their perceived locations.

Bharti Kher is about to embark on her first solo show in London at Hauser & Wirth gallery. It is no coincidence that her husband, Subodh Gupta's gallerist is one and the same, and they will for a time be showing together, he at the Old Bond Street space. Far from being a lesser artist in the shadow of someone as successful as Gupta, Kher has carved out a position all her own that merits as much attention as the next man. Bharti Kher is an artist committed to exploring cultural misunderstandings and social codes, using the breadth and depth of contemporary art practice. Highly regarded for her sculptural works, Kher has also produced paintings and installations that purposefully challenge the cultural and social taboos that are intrinsic to the Indian sub-continent. Likening herself to the well intentioned ethnographer pouring over the machinery of her culture, Kher delivers a very forceful reinterpretation of modern India that shallows everything in sight, much like a typhoon and throws its back at us in such unfathomable reconfigurations. What motivates Kher now with the strength the artist has to achieve almost anything, is for an intimacy and simplicity to her works that was there from the beginning at art school in Newcastle. "I think I go backwards and forwards all the time. Most of my work refers to other pieces I have made because your concerns stay essentially the same whether they are naive or considered."

Reluctant to eulogise the painters and sculptors who have influenced her work, Kher is more democratic in her praise for the anatomy of the populous in her adopted city. "I look everywhere and copy everyone like a magpie who takes what it needs, turns an old shiny button into a beacon. Most of us are products of our lives." Therefore like her contemporary Jitish Kallat, art is a by-product of life. Kher borrows and rewards herself from the inventive sub-cultures that exist side by side in a country tittering somewhere between self-sufficient harmony and hazardous chaos.

Domestic Hoover's covered in garish animal skins and trees bearing the fruit of small unidentifiable creatures. These are the kind of signature morphings that Bharti Kher has made her own and in discussion with

Asian Art Newspaper it appears that Kher is influenced as much by Mondrian as she is by the machinery of domestic appliances. Given her panoramic influences that have allowed her to borrow as much from the grit and mortar of the underbelly of the city as much the more established cultures narratives of contemporary art, Kher confesses to 'never underestimating the power of a great piece of art'. Given to elaborating upon the significance of art history upon her practice Kher professes to an appreciation for the universality of the experience, 'If I can see Malevich I don't have to be Russian Supremacist avant garde or you don't have to be Dutch to love Mondrian' 'At college I looked at Francis Bacon, Francisco Goya, Diego Velasquez, 15th century Dutch painting, I looked at tons of books and art magazines. I was schooled in the UK so I didn't study Indian history of art. You fill in those gaps now on your own'.

Such motives for new works appears to suggest that art, for her generation of contemporary Indian artist is created in the everyday and not as it once was, in pockets of isolation, think Pablo Picasso and his working through his seminal 1937 work Guernica. Reality, in this instance, appears to have torn apart the divisions for creating a parallel world to the one that already exists. Obviously such actions and influences were the foundation for modern art history, from the chaotic misadventure of Dadaism in Europe at the turn of the century to the brash confidence of American abstract expressionism; art has become synonymous with the apparatus of reality. Reading over the correspondence of the

artist, it becomes apparent that there is even less loyalty to the historical influences and actions of the artists that have gone before. In her 'feelings for being from neither here or there' Kher is under the influence of a multitude of narratives that have given her the world to look over. When discussing the originality of her work Kher is quite adamant of her artistic autonomy, 'It doesn't bother me if people think it's been done before... authenticity is not something I adhere to. You have to see where and why the work is coming from where it does'. Kher's contemporary Jitish Kallat describes 'the city as his university', thus it appears that art is generated in and amongst us, for us and by us, by the poverty stricken workers and cleaners and then efficiently removed for the studio and delivered to the gallery.

The fuel for such wondrous works is aplenty then in a city that thrives on the energies of such a diverse populous and on the infrastructures of a by-gone age, in which Kher has profited from her 'en plein-air' studio. Bharti Kher is of a generation that appears to belong to a new look India that has infiltrated these shores with such gusto that Saatchi might have been wise, after all, to title his new exhibition of contemporary Indian works, The Empire Strikes Back. Such confidence and profitable exuberance makes for exciting times for these artists of the Indian sub-continent. Such a swelling reception for contemporary Indian culture appears to have become a zeitgeist that has rewarded our original subjects under the 'Raj' and this new generation of upwardly mobile artists are even able to qualify such overwhelming



*The hot winds that blow from the West, 2011, 131 old radiators
76 3/4" x 103 7/8" x 100", Courtesy Bharti Kher and Hauser & Wirth, Photo: Genevieve Hanson*



The great chase, 2009 / 2010
Fibreglass, paint, mechanism, horn
43 3/4" x 71 5/8" x 13 3/8"
Courtesy Bharti Kher and Hauser & Wirth
Photo: Andy Keate

interest as something much deserved, without pomp and ceremony.

Kher appears to have matured hand in hand with her work, introducing grander scale, new materials, the use of the readymade, and profiting from the international reception of female artists like France's Louise Bourgeois, Palestinian Mona Hatoum and German Eva Hesse. Notably like British sculptor Rachel Whiteread, Kher's works collectively appear as testaments to lives lived, spaces inhabited; as her sculptural objects resonate the wear and tear of being over a period of time. Yet the artist's hand intervenes to reinvigorate everything as fossils of beauty.

Kher explains 'any interest is great for people here who incidentally have been practising for as long as anyone else, anywhere else. Parallel movements and cultures are open to any who wishes to involve themselves.' Less inclined to articulate her interest and abilities, Kher has a greater confidence in her works that make her an artist at ease with the international art arena as much as her husband Subodh Gupta. Kher has been described a protagonist at work in India right now influencing and effecting a new generation of artists competing with the un-relinquishing energy of 'Bollywood' and television for the attention of the masses. Like her contemporaries Bharti Kher has managed to take her work to all four corners of the world with an ability to translate her ideas to a larger audience like no other. For Kher the jarring juxtaposition in her works that have her create difficult and aesthetically involving works time and again make for absorbing visual relationships. In her sustained slippage from any affiliation to a modern movement, when given to discussing a new zeitgeist or the inherent influence of art history upon her practice, Kher appears to have created her own destiny that borrows as much from aesthetics as she does from the detritus of reality to deliver works that illuminate everything with an aura that radiates around the work like a radiant light. The confusion or impossibility that exists in Kher's works is precisely the point of departure for



A line through space and time, 2011, Wood, paint, bindis
217" x 38 1/2", Courtesy Bharti Kher and Hauser & Wirth,
Photo: Genevieve Hanson

artworks that allow Kher to act and react as she chooses and such dogged ability has her begin to write a new history for a new location of contemporary art.

In context in early 2012 in the refurbished white cube spaces of Hauser & Wirth's renovated townhouse on East 69th Street, New York; Bharti Kher introduces herself to an American audience, with dated and damaged furnishings that double up as sculptures. The hot winds that blow from the West 2011, may be referencing Kher's British origins or otherwise refer to the referential relationship Indian art has to Western art practice. Defined as a show dealing with notions of mythology, cultural, gender stereotypes, and the domestic; Kher introduced five sizable works that are constituted as ready-made objects, extracting existing elementary matter and re-positing it in the gallery space. Impressive for its referential qualities to a great deal of monumental western sculpture, with an equal level of ambition and wit, Kher quite cleverly appears to subverts the work with the title, *The hot winds that blow from the West*, suggesting that not all of what is manifest in the west is of such importance.

A vast and very substantial rectangular sculpture is a highlight, as Kher proficiently offers more than one hundred and thirty old and dilapidated radiators, sourced from the United States for the past six years; that are placed in a perfectly configured monolith. Horizontal and vertical ribs, this new work recalls the grandiose spirit of American sculptor Donald

Judd, as these domestic relics reference the dated apparatus of a cluttered Indian office and all the bureaucracy that it brings, and equally, from the vantage point of New York, radiators have been the corner furnishings of numerous studio spaces during the height of American modernism. The hot winds that blow from the West reads like an orchestrated intervention of such a fragment of domesticity. Separately *A line through space and time* 2011 had a wooden staircase cutting through the centre of the main gallery space, as these now defunct bindis covered steps reach from the floor to the ceiling and are meant for the heavens. Tellingly the original majesty of the staircase is all but muted its castration from its former location for the luminosity of this über modern space. Unlike the reconfigured radiators that appear to take on a grander identity, this tidy length of stairs appears more subtle. Kher clearly employs something of the automated actions of artists like American Robert Rauschenberg and French conceptualist Marcel Duchamp, when delivering her New York ready-mades that comparatively does not have a simplicity or lightness of touch about them, as Kher appears convinced that an artwork becomes so because of its re-location.

Bindis have become the staple signature of Kher's work, as she has, since 1995, applied them to everything that she claims her own, and *A line through space and time*, is no exception, as the staircase is laboured with black bindis that wash over this sculpture as they can be likened to an infestation of bees on a table of honey, with a splash of red paint.



*Confess, 2009 / 2010, Wood, bindis, light bulb
81 1/8" x 118 7/8" x 118 7/8"*

*Installation view, 'inevitable undeniable necessary',
Hauser & Wirth, London, England, 2010*

Courtesy Bharti Kher and Hauser & Wirth

Photo: Andy Keate

Incongruously located, *The Messenger* 2011, a life-sized fibre-glass figure appearing to revel in dance in an adjoining room; the uplifting spirit of this work comes from its idyllic reverence, as this middle-aged fibreglass figure stands precariously on one leg with a second intertwined with an outstretched arm; contorted and near naked but for a loosely arranged sari and a wooden rake. Likened to the Hindu Sadhvi, (saintly woman), who reject the formal trappings of life for the simplicity of religious beliefs, Kher's mannequin appears wholly meditative as the dislocation of one setting for another does little to disrupt the figure's perfect pose. For Kher *The Messenger* can be suited to 'an urban witch, a woman of both mythology and everyday life, a hybrid.'

Reveal the secrets that you seek 2011 is a work made up of twenty-seven shattered mirrors that are pinned to the walls of the upper gallery. As though fanciful paintings from a Parisian salon, their location proves immaterial, as the overall effect of this Alice in Wonderland styled room of multiple reflections reads like pure theatre. First shown at the 'Paris-Delhi-Bombay' exhibition at the Pompidou, Paris, in May 2011, this is a work that supposedly reflects more of its audience than the artist, as Kher defines the visual dynamic of seeing oneself within the work as the blueprint for one's own social and cultural displacement. Kher comments

that her 'motivation does not come from the usual issues of diaspora. I am always far more interested in the viewer's journey that my own. I get my ideas from you'. In detail these varying sized mirrors, propped at an angle, each with its own garish gold gilded frame, are all covered to a greater and less degree in black sequenced bindis, that decorate the glass as though a curtain into and out of a parallel universe.

In the last three years Kher has exhibited extensively, London, Paris, Hong Kong, New York, and Seoul, Korea. Delivering a staple diet of vast fibreglass and ready-made objects, she has mastered a predominantly male environment, of which her husband, Subodh Gupta is a leading protagonist. As a practitioner dealing in multiple mediums, Bharti Kher has successfully acquired her own language for contemporary art that is determined as much by the familiar, as it is motivated by the unnerving sensations of displacement, and of alienation, that would have befriended her parents upon their original migration from India to the United Kingdom some fifty years previously. Completing the circle by returning to India, after graduating from art school in 1992, Kher's work is a healthy mix of her need to explore and explain what it means to exist between cultures; acting as the ethnographer pouring over multiple influences, looking for more than one answer.