



1.



2.

Bharti Kher

Photographed by Elaine W. Ng for ArtAsiaPacific

In the fashionable satellite city of Gurgaon, just outside New Delhi, Bharti Kher (SEE AAP 52, 56) navigates between the two adjacent three-story residences she converted into studios. Though it is September, it is still deep summer in India. The beating sun casts a dramatic light through the open doorway of her main studio and onto her latest work, *Warrior with Cloak and Shield* (2008), a life-size fiberglass sculpture of a half-woman, half-stag. Kher closely studies this majestic creature's calm, regal face as if she were examining herself. She explains, "A friend of mine let me cast her. It only took a day because she has this amazing Amazonian physique." The figure recalls neo-classical European sculpture, but Kher let her imagination go wild, adding outsized, curling antlers reminiscent of those belonging to Pan, the half-animal, half-human god worshipped by the ancient Greeks. Kher roots her warrior in reality by hanging an old work shirt on the figure's left horn to serve, symbolically, as a cloak. A radiator placed at its feet, not part of the finished work, keeps the satyress still.

Hybrids of humans, animals, cyborgs—the stuff of pure fantasy—are recurring themes in Kher's work. Born and raised in London, she has been fascinated by allegorical tales and images of beasts both real and fabled since a teacher introduced her to Bosch, Blake and Goya. She reflects, "It doesn't seem to matter when you're 12 years old, but those images stay with you forever." When Kher moved to India in 1993, her preoccupation with fantasy soared. A second-generation immigrant growing up in England, Kher moved to India at age 24, and there her clear British elocution marked Kher as a foreigner. Some of her most striking and uncomfortable works are part-women, part-beasts, whose oddity bear the imprint—even a decade later—of Kher's own feelings of estrangement during that period of her life. Often scantily clad—since when do animals wear clothes?—her figures stare at the viewer. *Arione* (2004) serves frosted cupcakes on a platter; the standing figure *Angel* (2004) shows off her bat-winged offspring, with an amalgamation of a vacuum cleaner and a German shepherd resting at her feet.

Today, 15 years later, on the eve of her first solo show at Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin in Paris, "Sing to Them That Will Listen," and recently signed by blue-chip dealers Hauser & Wirth in Zurich and in London, Kher stands confident—much like the

cross-species item in her foyer. She floats through the various rooms where the works for her French audience are being made. A pulley system she brought back from Berlin is rigged up to the ceiling in order to hang a cardboard box that she has re-fashioned as a cage. Peering up at the unfinished piece, she says, "I think I'll put some creature in there."

On the second story, she and a team of young women from a nearby village create her now-famous *bindi* paintings, canvases strewn with the South-Asian decoration worn by women on their foreheads. These *bindis*—some tadpole-shaped, others resembling arrows, in addition to the traditional circular ones in a full spectrum of colors—overflow from cabinets and are piled up on shelves, tables and chairs. The sequin-like objects have taken over the entire second floor. For her Paris debut on October 21, she elegantly reduced the colors to one: white *bindis* on a white canvas from which shapes and patterns slowly emerge.

The top floor is where Kher escapes from her assistants. Although clearly excited about the new direction of her work, Kher laments spending her days delegating tasks, whether training her staff how to adhere the *bindis* or asking her studio manager to begin arranging the crates for the work's long voyage. It's peaceful here, and the light is clear and bright. Unlike most of Gurgaon, which is undergoing massive development with megamalls and gated communities for the burgeoning middle class, Kher's little street has no towering developments to block the sun. It shines directly on another new work, *Dead Ruler*, a human skeleton strapped down with industrial duct-tape to an old, teak wooden chair and arched over as if in a yoga backbend. One of the skeleton's hands grasps a conch shell. Gazing out the window, Kher remarks, "If I wasn't an artist I would have been an archeologist or a paleontologist."

Nearby, her work table is strewn with the objects that inspire her: two pairs of kitschy high-heels, an embalmed gorilla's palm, an anatomical model of the human heart, a porcelain plate with fake teeth and grains of rice. Hidden in a corner, however, is a hastily painted canvas of a headless ape on a wagon holding her head in one hand and a cup of tea in the other. "I studied painting in university, but now I just use paintings as my sketch book."

—Elaine W. Ng

1. The artist's studio work table.

2. A selection of *bindis* in the artist's studio.

3. Bharti Kher with a work in progress.

4. Bharti Kher in her studio with *Warrior with Cloak and Shield*, 2008.

5. Bharti Kher at her work table.

6. Bharti Kher with assistants and *bindi* paintings.