

Injurious Forms: Review of Bharti Kher's *Strange Attractors*

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Bharti Kher, *Strange Attractor*, 2021.

As one enters the main exhibition space of Nature Morte's new gallery in a converted granary at Chattarpur, Delhi, minimalistically designed by Tushant Bansal, one is confronted by a *Strange Attractor*. She welcomes the visitor with a clay dish perched on her proto-phallic shaft—except that the dish does not offer canapés but the replica of a home. The miniature of house and tree picks up on the plastic fluorescence of the halo above the creature's head, blending sanctity with kitsch. Meanwhile, the unhoused, pre-formal, pre-sacralized hybrid body—woman and priapic progenitor, shaman and ape—holds out the dream of form, and of home, as its future perfect. But the wooden semi-arc curving out of her nether orifice also takes the viewer on a reverse journey, back from the synthetic to the organic, from the modern to the primal. Like Shakespeare's enigmatic monster Caliban who alone is blessed with the sound of heaven's music and cries to dream again when awake, it is the monkey-woman to whom the dream belongs, her eyes closed, face rapt in yearning. The commercially reproducible images of domestic cosiness and divine light are ours. Material mimes the

movement of the mind, as so often seen in Bharti Kher's work: the resin that forms this creature is cast from clay modelled on a gorilla-skeleton replica.

This frontal piece embeds the core themes that tie together the eight sculptures in this show, which ran from December 2021 to February 2022 and displayed Kher's dizzying range with media and matter. Her mature work has grown out of an intimate exploration of bodies: their outsides and insides. Criss-crossing the main space are non-identical twin works, presenting bodies made almost absent by the wrapping of multiple saris evoking varieties of textures, regions, classes and tastes. Yet the dance between abstract and figurative, political and psychic, makes identities stir, acutest at their vanishing point.



Bharti Kher, *Benazir*, 2021.



Bharti Kher, *Cloak for MM*, 2018, sari, resin, metal, 205 x 92 x 92 cm.

“**Benazir**” alludes to one of the many disruptive, powerful women Kher is drawn to: the late Pakistani political leader, Benazir Bhutto. If one peers close enough through the folds of the fabric wrapping the sculpture, one glimpses five holes in a dark body, representing the five bullet shots that pierced and emptied Benazir —wounds through which the saris pour out, wounds also stifled by the saris. But the Urdu word “benazir” means “matchless”, singular, unique. Saris are culturally located things, overdetermining female identity in South Asia. Kher mines their complex associations as both material and language to transform them through resin coating to a third substance: one that turns the fragility and loneliness of the female body into a site of precarious individuality.

If “Benazir” negotiates lostness, “**Cloak for MM**” enfolds the unlost, quickening the absent back into presence. Using saris culled from the posthumous wardrobe of Kher’s friend, the artist Mrinalini Mukherjee – pioneer in sculpting with textiles and organic materials like

hemp – it creates layers and knots of pale, translucent, resonated drapes, at once baffling and enticing the gaze, obscuring the body yet holding out the lure of things that may be opened.

The “sari-women” see Kher claiming not only a political but also an artistic affiliation—a history of belonging, gendered and geographical. Yet, erupting through the delicacy of the folds, in baroque overflow, are gloopy whirls of red fabric which recall the livid hearts and visceral fluids of the European Counter-Reformation. Among Kher’s self-confessed influences are medieval Christian art, the Cranachs and Bernini. “**Animus Mundi**” – the ordinary Venus with a buffalo-head dotted with bindis and a crimson sari flowing out of her mouth – is Botticelli twisted and Ovid transformed; shape caught in shift before form can freeze it.



Bharti Kher, *Animus Mundi*.

Such influences, as well as her father’s textile trade, her mother’s sari shops in Streatham, her move from Britain to India at the age of twenty-two, and her immersion in Indian artisanal and imaginative traditions, form the cosmopolis of Kher’s mythic mind and her border-crossing art.



Bharti Kher, *Cause and Effect (Office room)*, 2020, bindi mirror, 10 x 4 feet.

Bindis, from the Sanskrit “bindu” (meaning particle), are the ornamental dots Indian women wear on their foreheads. In Hindu tradition, they evoke the third eye which is meant to serve as a gateway to the realm of spirit. These become Kher’s signature motif, appearing most spectacularly in this show in “**Cause and Effect**”, installed on the wall of an ante-room, conjoined with broken mirrors. A vast sheet of shattered glass, with a deep crack down its middle, is covered over by thousands of red bindis, forming a regenerative skin rather than an obscuring veil. The smashed glass inscribes the vulnerability of the art-object, its infinite openness, its surrender to change, before it changes us; the mirrors cannot anticipate or control who will look at them, at what angle, and from where. But the fractures also free up this body to be plural and mobile. The resplendent dots, meanwhile, makes us see with parted eyes, rearranging themselves into shifting patterns as one moves, light splintering at their edges while the larger shape holds. This monumental and the particulate shimmer into relation, breakage held together by design in brittle poise.



Bharti Kher, *Pietà*.

The tension between control, abandon and abandonment reaches a poignant climax in the sculpture called “**Pietà**”. Like Max Ernst’s “Pietà or Revolution by Night” (1923), where the father carries the sleeping son, Kher’s masterpiece inverts the Renaissance iconography of the young mother cradling her dead son. Here, it is the daughter whose shaping hands hold the ageing mother in her artwork; the figure is cast from Kher’s mother’s body which, she tells me, she wanted to go inside, again. To open it up, she threw the figure from a height, inflicting an injury on form that also offered an occasion of hospitality, inviting chance, risk and grace. The fall cracked open the heart-space but preserved the rest of the body. But the maternal body prised open is the dream of home turned *unheimlich* (uncanny). Is the artist here a violent anatomist or a dispossessed refugee? Playing on the double meaning of “casting”—crafting but also throwing out—Kher places this work between accident and essence, residue and invention. This Pietà is part of art’s endless grief-work, as the daughter’s meditation on her mother’s mortality turns into a journey inward. Pristine as marble when seen from a distance, the plinth on which the eviscerated body rests turns out to be waxen, alive to warmth and pressure, holding her inner wilds with tenderness. The fugitive synchrony between the chaos of human life and the human need to shape it offers Kher’s “Pietà” the condition of its miracle.



Bharti Kher, *A Natural Unity of Opposites*, 2021.



Bharti Kher, *Crushed breathless*, 2018, wax metal, 55 x 39 x 60 cm each.

The large suspended installation in the main space, “**A Natural Unity of Opposites**”, distils Kher’s ceaseless search for balance: an assemblage of disparate materials, from soft blue wool to magnet, rope, wooden wheels and stiletto, is held in a triangular equilibrium. It mirrors the paradoxical attachment between crunched ambulance-metal and moulded wax that the adjoining piece, “**Crushed Breathless**”, presents like a sculptural pun. The unearthed correspondences of these works movingly write in the cost of equivalence: staggeringly weighty ballasts of temple stones are needed to hold the hanging piece in place. For all the trickster-artist’s longing for impossible geometry, pushing material to produce magic, matter is fragile as well as unruly and resistant. Despite the inevitable presence of Freud in ruptures of form and the underlayers of “Pietà” (this is an artist who once put her plaster-cast parents across a couch in the Freud Museum in London), the impassioned exactitude of her craft lets the show dwell, sublimely and defencelessly, in mystery.

Strange Attractors remains an ecology of what Barthes called “pensive texts”, holding back their last, unknowable meaning.

All images are installation views from the exhibition “Strange Attractors”, 2021 at Nature Morte, New Delhi. Courtesy of the artist.