

Reframing Femininity: Bharti Kher

Whether through reinterpretations of religious and mythical narratives or by exploring social practices, Bharti Kher's works invite considerations of the human condition. Kher was born in London in 1969, and has lived and worked in India since the early 1990s. Part of the British Indian diaspora, her practice is rooted in personal experience and observations of contemporary Indian life. Let's look at some of her works that address subjects spanning womanhood, creation and mortality.

Animating Everyday Symbols

This life-sized work, *The Skin Speaks a Language Not its Own* (2006), features a female elephant sprawled on the floor. Its inert position makes us instantly question whether it is resting peacefully or dying. Elephants have long been an archetype of India in sacred and secular realms. A closer look at this sculpture reveals that its skin is covered in another cultural signifier, the bindi. A bindi is traditionally a mark applied to a woman's forehead to designate the third eye that can see beyond the material world, and simultaneously indicate her status as married.

Today these are available as stickers in different shapes and colours. Here we see thousands of white bindis that are shaped like sperm, traditionally symbolising fertility. They animate the sculpture's surface, lending a sense of dynamism to the elephant's still body. In presenting these two symbols of Indian culture and development together, Kher's sculpture could represent India weighed down by modernisation and over-commercialisation. Over time, bindis have become disposable accessories, while elephants are now synonymous with the tourist industry and the exoticisation of the country. We can see how this seemingly simple work makes us reassess social roles, traditional rituals and popular culture in the country. Let's turn to some more of Kher's sculptural works.

Transforming Mythic Divinity

Pushing back against conventional perceptions of femininity and mythology, Kher's figurative sculptures often take on hybrid and even monstrous forms. In this work, for instance, she presents a grotesque, life-sized version of Chinnamasta, the Hindu goddess of contradictions. She is known as a life-taker, associated with death, destruction and temporality as well as a life-giver, representing fertility, immortality and creation. Here, she squats headless and naked on a tree stump, holding a dainty tea cup in one hand, possibly a witty reference to British civility. In the other, she holds a cast reproduction of a fossilised skull of one of our oldest known human ancestors, commonly known as 'Lucy'.

A closer look reveals how the skull is also covered in sperm-shaped bindis. Through the inclusion of the skull, Kher conflates the notions of mortality and divinity, allowing us to draw parallels between the origins of humankind and the story of Chinnamasta as a representation of the cycle of life. Traditional representations of Chinnamasta depict her standing on a divine copulating couple and flanked by blood-thirsty female attendants, for whom she has cut open her throat. Kher eliminates the attendants and the copulating couple, detaching Chinnamasta from characteristics of self-sacrifice and life-giving, leaving behind only her role as a destroyer.

In sharp contrast to the dramatic and gory depictions of mythological figures, Kher's representation of ordinary women are often more subtle and muted. This brings us to the next work we'll look at.

Un-Adorning the Female Body

In *Six Women* (2014), we see a grouping of plaster of Paris casts of nude figures. Each woman sits with her hands resting on her knees, with an expression ranging from solemn to completely blank. The figures are unpainted and unadorned, with no markers indicating their background or occupation, even as these aspects are key to understanding the work. To create the sculptures, Kher travelled to Kolkata and selected women engaged in sex work to be brought to her studio. Having paid them to pose for her and cast their bodies, the artist has noted her own discomfort with this process in how it echoes the transactional model between prostitute and client.

'What then makes me different from the client... in this and most cases the man? Does my empathy count for anything? Does my work as an artist give validity to the role I play in the circus of meaning? [...]'

By stripping the women off any cultural specificity and judgement, Kher also invites discussions around the long tradition of representing female bodies, including courtesans, in South Asian and global art history, which has typically been done by male artists.

Kher's figurations explore a kaleidoscope of meanings and narratives. She renders the female body with both outward defiance and a quiet fortitude. Through her bold visual language, she continues to contest social and cultural norms, constraints of traditions and perceptions of femininity.

Bharti Kher (b. 1969) currently divides her time between London and Gurgaon, located southwest of New Delhi. Being a part of the British diaspora, and doubly displaced by her moves between India and the UK, her practice too moves between geographic and social milieus, informed by her unique perspective.

Bindis feature recurrently across Kher's practice, whether in her sculptures or two-dimensional works. According to Kher, 'many people believe it's a traditional symbol of marriage while others, in the West particularly, see it as a fashion accessory...But actually the bindi is meant to represent a third eye — one that forges a link between the real and the spiritual-conceptual worlds.' While these are familiar objects, Kher transforms them — often rendering them uncanny — so they can contribute towards wider narratives in her works, by taking on new meaning.

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