

CLOUD WALKER

Breaking down the everyday life of Bharti Kher what one finds is an anomalistic life filled with truth. This is the answer to the question she constantly asks herself.

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PROFILE

Bharti Kher, one of the most prominent Indian contemporary artists, was born in 1969 in London. After graduating from Newcastle Polytechnic where she studied painting, Bharti traveled to India where she met her husband, renowned Indian artist Subodh Gupta. She has lived there ever since. She is very interested in objets d'art and superstitions with interesting stories to tell. She gathers various references to these and uses them in her art works.

There is a great mist that covers the immense earth and mountains. Amidst this mist stands an enormous woman. The blue-tinged woman seems to almost transcend time as she steps in slow, controlled movements over the large sari that once covered her body. The hair resting on her forehead is actually a stone of uncertain size. The beautiful lines of her body and expression, indifferent to the worries of the world, are simultaneously magnificent and imposing.

The name of this piece is Cloud Walker and it stands an impressive 186 cm tall. It is one piece in the Goddess Series that British Indian Bharti Kher has been working on for the past seven years. "This series began with

a tiny statue of a goddess I once saw. She was a goddess powerful enough to walk among the clouds. The sari is a part of body and it also serves as a shield. The pitchfork in her hand could be either a tool or a weapon." Cloud Walker's mood seemed deeply entrenched in the upright body of Bharti Kher as she stood there with a serious expression, slightly raised head and both hands in her pant pockets explaining her work through well-chosen words. In that moment she didn't appear to have any self-doubt whatsoever. From the moment I entered the exhibition hall and during the entirety of Bharti Kher's explanation of her work, I couldn't take my eyes off Cloud Walker. I was completely

absorbed in it. Later she would explain that to her, it was moments like these where time seemed to stand still. "I have no objections to people saying they have felt something spiritual from my work. I have no reservations or objections to saying that art is spiritual. I think that it is possible to experience a moment when time stands still with truly incredible art. However, I prefer to think of this as a moment to experience a sort of universality as opposed to being just a mere spiritual experience." She refers to these moments of frozen time as time lags. The time lags that exists between the cause and the result. The door and pillar placed in the middle of the exhibition hall symbolize a

house. These two objects leaning against each other are a representative of one such time lag. The fact that they are fixed in position is intertwined with contradiction. It's these contradictions--these things that collide in everyday life and somehow join together without falling apart--on which she focuses. That is the reason the title for her first solo exhibition in Korea held at the Kukje Gallery is entitled "Anomalies." Bharti stated, "I think you could call every exhibition I will ever hold in the future anomalies and it wouldn't matter."

At the entrance to the gallery, visitors gaze upon various groups of statues and idols set up on a table. Visitors will look at these statues. Originally used for religious purposes these statues now no longer serve any purpose. However, the original meaning of the statues has compounded over time, giving rise to new meaning as the statues look back at the gallery visitors. The place where the eyes of the statues and visitors meet--the place where past meets present--is one of the anomalies referred to by Bharti Kher.

Bharti Kher is well known for her use of various colored bindi (the sanskrit word for the dot) on some of her larger sculptures and pieces. While some of her works are considered extremely descriptive, the works which include bindi on their surfaces also manage to defy description. They are simultaneously abstract and minimal and yet really not minimal at all. The bindi, which Indian women place on their foreheads, carry a wealth of symbolic meaning. By adding the bindi one by one she creates several layers of textures and tones that challenge our understanding and perceptions of paintings. Time and labor intensive to produce, the artist refers to her process as "sleight of hand." This creates abstract marks that work together to suggest movement, typographical maps, people, mappings and codes. These can be mistaken from afar for brush strokes and when seen up close trap the visitors' gaze in the labyrinth complexities produced by the

innumerable bindi. "You could call this piece Nature's Silent Law of Action. It's made using bindi, of course. Bindi are also a sort of metaphor for the third-eye and that aspect feels almost like a code to me. If you look at this piece there are countless dots, but all of them are in fixed recurring patterns. It's describing one of the hidden laws of nature. Bindi are just one of the tools I use in my art. Though my use of them has expanded in the past 15 years since I first became interested in them. That's because as an artist I can express my interest in the subject matter and tell many stories while using just a small amount of substance. I can expand it to describe existence or to serve as a symbol or even use it to discuss codes or scientific diagrams. It is not art to express something you already know. Art is the creation and imagination of what you feel."

Ultimately the use of bindi in her works is like the excavation of buried treasure for Bharti Kher. That's because opening the box gives rise to a myriad of possibilities. By applying bindi on objects, altering the meanings of domestic construction elements, she conflates the vocabularies of home and femininity. By leaping beyond what is ordinarily visible and discussing the chaos, she brings what was once absent to the forefront. "In Asia and India, the house and domestic space constitute a female domain, and this is where women are able to truly assert more 'self' within a space. But a house is also fraught with social, economic and sexual excesses that can obscure or even threaten to obliterate the spiritual connections that are our greatest resource."

As Bharti Kher's explanation came to an end it was followed by a question and answer session. Most of the journalists gathered around her. As she had previously raised questions about memories, literary mythologies, and social class structures during her explanation, they bombarded her with questions about the spiritual fulfillment or spiritual experiences she felt from her art.

A substance as spiritual as bindi had peaked curiosity in the mythological. However, her answer was always the same. "From an anthropological standpoint I have a strong interest in religion. While I don't follow any spiritual practices, it should be noted that even science and math have their own sort of practices and rituals. Writers write every day, just as I go to my studio. I am not pursuing some spiritual ritual, but rather I am pursuing truth through everyday rituals. It just so happens that breaking down everyday life is the process by which I come to truth. She answered the same question time and again with an unchanging expression. The expression, which left her inner thoughts unreadable, was cause for additional curiosity. I was left flustered as an interviewer when she shrugged her shoulders at my request for a separate one-on-one interview. My mind momentarily went blank as I hurled my last question at her. I asked her what question she most often asks herself. Her answer was simple. "Why am I going to the studio? What am I doing?" At that moment I saw a Bharti Kher asking herself these same questions repeatedly about the everyday things she was doing and seeing--I saw another Cloud Walker approaching truth.