

Analysing Bharti Kher's Evocative Sculptures

Image no: 1

Caption: Bharti Kher, *Shit heads from the Intermediaires Series*, 2019, Cement, clay, wax, brass, copper Dimensions variable, Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Link: N/A

Image no: 2

Caption: Bharti Kher, *The Intermediary*, 2019, Clay, 420 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Link: N/A

Image no: 3

Caption: Bharti Kher, *Confess*, 2009–2010, Mixed media, 244 x 244 x 244 cm, Courtesy of the artist.

Link: <https://bhartikher.com/#/confess/>

Image no: 4

Caption: Bharti Kher, *Warrior with Cloak and Shield*, 2008, Mixed media, Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Link: N/A

Image no: 5

Caption: Bharti Kher, *Not all who wander are lost*, 2010, Motorised antique globe, 98 x 50 x 43 cm, Photographed by Alex Defanne, Courtesy of the artist.

Link: <https://bhartikher.com/#/not-all-who-wander/>

Image no: 6

Caption: Bharti Kher, *The half-spectral thing*, 2016, Wax, concrete, plaster, hessian fibre, brass, 132 x 29 x 29 cm, Photographed by Jeetin Sharma, Courtesy of the artist.

Link: <https://bhartikher.com/#/the-halfspectral-thing/>

Image no: 7

Caption: Bharti Kher, *An absence of assignable cause*, 2007, Bindis, fibreglass, 173 x 300 x 116 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Nature Morte, New Delhi.

Link: <https://bhartikher.com/#/an-absence-of-assignable-cause/>

Image no: 8

Caption: Bharti Kher, *Many ways to say the same thing*, 2010, Saris, resin, 86 x 157 x 147 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Link: <https://bhartikher.com/#/many-ways-to-say-the-same-thing/>

Image no: 9

Caption: Bharti Kher, *Installation view of three decimal points. of a minute. of a second. of a degree at the Kochi Biennale*, 2014, Wood, metal, granite, rope, Dimensions variable, Photographed by Dheeraj Thakur, Courtesy of the artist.

Link: <https://bhartikher.com/#/threedecimalpoints/>

Image no: 10

Caption: Bharti Kher, *Mrs Hera Moon*, 2006, Mixed media, 145 x 94 x 78.5 cm, Courtesy of the artist.

Link: <https://bhartikher.com/#/mrs-hera-moon/>

Image no: 11

Caption: *Bharti Kher at work*, Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol.

Link: <https://arnolfini.org.uk/artists/bhartikher/>

Image no: 12

Caption: *View of Bharti Kher in her studio in New Delhi, a multi-storey space where Bharti produces her artworks, which also houses her collection of Indian artifacts and heritage that inspire her process*, Photographed by Bharti Kher Studio, Joburg Contemporary Art Foundation, Johannesburg.

Link: <https://jcaf.org.za/exhibition/bharti-kher/>

Image no: 13

Caption: Bharti Kher, *The Skin Speaks A Language Not Its Own*, 2006, Bindis on life-size fibreglass elephant, 148 x 432 x 183 cm, Courtesy of the artist.

Link: <https://bhartikher.com/#/the-skin-speaks-a-language-not-its-own/>

Image no: 14

Caption: Nuruddin, *Maharana Jagat Singh II riding the elephant Bhramargaj*, 1750, 55.6 x 68 cm, 1990.628, The San Diego Museum of Art. Edwin Binney 3rd Collection.

Link:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maharana_Jagat_Singh_II_riding_the_elephant_Bhramargaj_\(6125048058\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maharana_Jagat_Singh_II_riding_the_elephant_Bhramargaj_(6125048058).jpg)

Image no: 15

Caption: LH de Rudder, *Lithograph of the Raja of Tranvancore's elephants at Trivandrum*, British Library, United Kingdom.

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Raja_of_Tranvancore%27s_elephants.jpg

Image no: 16

Caption: Lala Deen Dayal, *The Great Elephant Saluting, between 1885 and 1900*, Albumen silver print from glass negative, 21.1 x 27.3 cm, 2011.599.1a, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Cynthia Hazen Polsky, 2011.

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Great_Elephant_Saluting_MET_DP273658.jpg

Image no: 17

Caption: Manoj, *Views of Thrissur*, 2011, Wikimedia Commons. [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:916_Cheru_Pooram_Choorakkottukaavu_By_ManojK.JPG

Image no: 18

Caption: Bharti Kher, Detail, *The Skin Speaks A Language Not Its Own*, 2006, Bindis on life-size fibreglass elephant, 148 x 432 cm x 183 cm, Courtesy of the artist.

Link: <https://bhartikher.com/#/the-skin-speaks-a-language-not-its-own/>

Image no: 19

Caption: Sylvester DSouza, *Woman Leaning on Brown Bricked Wall*, 2018, Unsplash.

Link: <https://unsplash.com/photos/LAprsXXH-Nc>

Image no: 20

Caption: Asoqpathak, *A Typical Jumli Woman Smiles on the Camera*, 2020, Wikimedia Commons. [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Beauty_within.jpg

Image no: 21

Caption: Steve Evans, *Indian Woman with Bindi*, 2005, Wikimedia Commons. [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/).

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indian_Woman_with_bindi.jpg

Image no: 22

Caption: Meena Kadri, *Worli Worker*, 2011, Flickr. [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/).

Link: <https://flic.kr/p/9761aG>

Image no: 23

Caption: Simone D. McCourtie & World Bank, *Portrait of Woman*, 2009, Flickr. [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/)

Link: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/worldbank/3491853029>

Image no: 24

Caption: *Bindi*, PNG Wing.

Link: <https://www.pngwing.com/en/free-png-bindi/download?width=1000>

Image no: 25

Caption: *Simple Bindi*, Fancy Bindi.

Link: <http://www.fancybindi.com/product/red-bindi-psi010/>

Image no: 26

Caption: *Bindi*, Bindi Shop.

Link:

<https://bindishop.com/home/1115-bollywood-fashion-women-s-stick-on-sticker-body-jewelry-fancy-tilak-bindi-es389.html>

Image no: 27

Caption: *Bindi*, PNG Find.

Link: https://www.pngfind.com/mpng/IRwTow_bindi-nath-gold-plated-body-jewelry-hd-png/

Image no: 28

Caption: *Designer Bindi*, Fancy Bindi.

Link: <http://www.fancybindi.com/product/designer-single-bindi-vde115/>

Image no: 29

Caption: *Red Fancy Bindi*, Fancy Bindi.

Link: <http://www.fancybindi.com/product/red-bindis-vfa103/>

Image no: 30

Caption: *Saffron and White Stone Studded Designer Bindi*, Dolls of India.

Link:

<https://www.dollsofindia.com/product/bindis/saffron-and-white-stone-studded-designer-bindi-sticker-bindi-LT45.html>

Image no: 31

Caption: *Single Black and White Stone Bindi*, Dolls of India.

Link:

<https://www.dollsofindia.com/product/bindis/single-black-and-white-stone-bindi-sticker-bindi-NB51.html>

Image no: 32

Caption: Bharti Kher, Detail, *The Skin Speaks A Language Not Its Own*, 2006, Bindis on life-size fibreglass elephant, 148 x 432 cm x 183 cm, Courtesy of the artist.

Link: <https://bhartikher.com/#/the-skin-speaks-a-language-not-its-own/>

Image no: 33

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Image no: 34

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Link: <https://bhartikher.com/#/the-skin-speaks-a-language-not-its-own/>

Image no: 35

Caption: Bharti Kher, Detail, *The Skin Speaks A Language Not Its Own*, 2006, Bindis on life-size fibreglass elephant, 148 x 432 cm x 183 cm, Courtesy of the artist.

Link: <https://bhartikher.com/#/the-skin-speaks-a-language-not-its-own/>

Image no: 36

Caption: Bharti Kher, Detail, *The Skin Speaks A Language Not Its Own*, 2006, Bindis on life-size fibreglass elephant, 148 x 432 cm x 183 cm, Courtesy of the artist.

Link: <https://bhartikher.com/#/the-skin-speaks-a-language-not-its-own/>

Image no: 37

Caption: Bharti Kher, *Kali from the Sari Women series*, 2018, Sari, resin, metal, 94 x 94 x 191.7 cm, Courtesy of the artist.

Link: <https://bhartikher.com/#/mother/>

Image no: 38

Caption: Bharti Kher, *Strange Attractor*, 2021, Fibre, wood, wool, light, 106 x 172 x 71cm, Courtesy of the artist and Nature Morte, New Delhi.

Link: <https://naturemorte.com/exhibitions/strangeattractors/selectedartworks/9978/>

Image no: 39

Caption: Bharti Kher, *And All the While the Benevolent Slept*, 2008, Fibre glass, porcelain, plastic pedestal in Mahogany wood, copper wire, 180 x 180 x 100 cm, Courtesy of the artist.

Link: N/A

Image no: 40

Caption: Calcutta Art Studio, *Shorhasi and Chinnamasta*, c.1885-1890, Chromolithograph, 30.5 x 40.5 cm, POP.01321, Museum of Art & Photography, Bengaluru.

Link:

https://map.cumulus.co.in/client/map/collection#/search/8774?src=srh&q=POP.01321&oq=12&qt_p=_flt&department=&view=grid&searchField=Department&page=1&sortBy=UserNumber3&sortOrder=ASC

Image no: 41

Caption: *Goddess Chinnamastā*, 19th century, Lithograph, 28 x 23 cm, 1993,1008,0.2, British Museum, London.

Link: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1993-1008-0-2

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Caption: Bharti Kher, Detail, *And All the While the Benevolent Slept*, 2008, Fibre glass, porcelain, plastic pedestal in Mahogany wood, copper wire, 180 x 180 x 100 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Link: <http://exchamber-memo4.seesaa.net/article/288929943.html>

Image no: 43

Caption: Bone Clones, *Cast of Australopithecus afarensis "Lucy"*, 2000, Wikimedia Commons. [CC BY-SA 3.0](#).

Link: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:BH-021-T-A-afarensis-Lucy-3qtrR-Lo.jpg>

Image no: 44

Caption: Bharti Kher, *And All the While the Benevolent Slept*, 2008, Fibre glass, porcelain, plastic pedestal in Mahogany wood, copper wire, 180 x 180 x 100 cm, Courtesy of the artist.

Link: <https://infomag.es/2022/09/25/bharti-kher-y-el-bindi-tradicional-de-la-india/#jp-carousel-78641>

Image no: 45

Caption: Bharti Kher, *And All the While the Benevolent Slept*, 2008, Fibre glass, porcelain, plastic pedestal in Mahogany wood, copper wire, 180 x 180 x 100 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Link: N/A

Image no: 46

Caption: *Chinnamasta*, Late 19th century, Opaque watercolor with gold on paper, 27 x 21.3 cm, 1994-148-499, Philadelphia Museum of Art. Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994.

Link: <https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/88389>

Image no: 47

Caption: Chitra Slim Co, *Goddess Chinnamasta*, c. 1880's, Lithograph, Wikimedia Commons.

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Goddess_Chinnamasta.jpg

Image no: 48

Caption: *Devi*, c. 1890, Watercolour and tin alloy on cardboard, 13.7 x 8.7 cm, IS.295-1961, Victoria & Albert Museum, London. South & South East Asia Collection.

Link: <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O432558/devi-painting-unknown/>

Image no: 49

Caption: Bharti Kher, *And All the While the Benevolent Slept*, 2008, Fibre glass, porcelain, plastic pedestal in Mahogany wood, copper wire, 180 x 180 x 100 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Link: N/A

Image no: 50

Caption: Bharti Kher, *And All the While the Benevolent Slept*, 2008, Fibre glass, porcelain, plastic pedestal in Mahogany wood, copper wire, 180 x 180 x 100 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Link: N/A

Image no: 51

Caption: Bharti Kher, Detail, *And All the While the Benevolent Slept*, 2008, Fibre glass, porcelain, plastic pedestal in Mahogany wood, copper wire, 180 x 180 x 100 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Link: N/A

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Caption: Bharti Kher, *Strange Attractor*, 2021, Fibre, wood, wool, light, 106 x 172 x 71cm, Courtesy of the artist and Nature Morte, New Delhi.

Link: N/A

Image no: 53

Caption: Bharti Kher, *Mother from This Breathing House at Freud Museum London*, 2016, Plaster, wood, 140 x 63 x 96 cm, Photographed by Alex Delfanne, Courtesy of the artist.

Link: <https://bhartikher.com/#/motherandfather/>

Image no: 54

Caption: Bharti Kher, *Six Women*, 2014, Plaster of paris, wood, metal, Dimensions variable, Courtesy of the artist and Nature Morte, New Delhi.

Link: N/A

Image no: 55

Caption: Bharti Kher, *Six Women*, 2014, Plaster of paris, wood, metal, Dimensions variable, Courtesy of the artist and Nature Morte, New Delhi.

Link: N/A

Image no: 56

Caption: Bharti Kher, *Six Women*, 2014, Plaster of paris, wood, metal, Dimensions variable, Courtesy of the artist and Nature Morte, New Delhi.

Link: N/A

Image no: 57

Caption: Bharti Kher, *Six Women*, 2014, Plaster of paris, wood, metal, Dimensions variable, Courtesy of the artist and Nature Morte, New Delhi.

Link: N/A

Image no: 58

Caption: Bharti Kher, *Six women*, 2012-2014, Photographed by Claire Dorn, Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Link: <https://parisplus.artbasel.com/stories/bharti-kher-artist-portrait>

Image no: 59

Caption: Paul Cézanne, *The Large Bathers*, 1900-1906, Oil on canvas, 250.7 x 210.5 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Link: <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-large-bathers/owGszazN Eyyvw?hl=en-GB>

Image no: 60

Caption: Paul Gauguin, *Two Tahitian Women*, 1899, Oil on canvas, 94 x 72.4 cm, 49.58.1, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of William Church Osborn, 1949.

Link: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436446>

Image no: 61

Caption: Edgar Degas, *The Tub*, 1886, 60 x 83 cm, RF 4046, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Link:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edgar Germain Hilaire Degas 031.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edgar_Germain_Hilaire_Degas_031.jpg)

Image no: 62

Caption: *The Gopis Plead with Krishna to Return Their Clothing, Page from a Bhagavata Purana (Ancient Stories of Lord Vishnu) series*, c. 1610, Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 20.2 × 28.1 cm, 2001.437, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Cynthia Hazen Polsky and Leon B. Polsky Fund, 2001.

Link:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/60789?ft=krishna+painting&offset=40&brpp=40&bpos=53>

Image no: 63

Caption: Édouard Manet, *Luncheon on the Grass*, 1863, Oil on canvas, 208 x 264.5 cm, 904, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Link:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Edouard Manet - Luncheon on the Grass - Google Art Project .jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Edouard_Manet_-_Luncheon_on_the_Grass_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)

Image no: 64

Caption: *A woman completing her toilette*, c. 1725, 24 x 16.2 cm, 1990.524, The San Diego Museum of Art. Edwin Binney 3rd Collection.

Link:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A_woman_completing_her_toilette_\(6125088708\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A_woman_completing_her_toilette_(6125088708).jpg)

Image no: 65

Caption: *Pablo Picasso, Nude, Green Leaves and Bust*, 1932, Oil on canvas, 162 cm × 130 cm, Private Collection.

Link: <https://www.pablocicasso.org/nude-green-leaves-and-bust.jsp>

Image no: 66

Caption: *Sandro Botticelli, The birth of Venus*, 1483–1485, Tempera on panel, 278.5 x 172.5 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Firenze.

Link: <https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/uffizi-gallery>

Image no: 67

Caption: Bharti Kher, *Pieta*, 2018, Wax, Plaster, 175 x 76 x 76 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Nature Morte, New Delhi.

Link: N/A

Image no: 68

Caption: Bharti Kher, *The Messenger*, 2012, Fibreglass, saree, resin, wooden stake, granite, 188 x 136 x 84 cm, Photographed by Genevieve Hanson, Courtesy of the artist and Nature Morte, New Delhi.

Link: N/A

Image no: 69

Caption: Bharti Kher, *The Fallow*, 2019, Bronze, 390 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Nature Morte, New Delhi.

Link: N/A

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.

Postscript

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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<https://naturemorte.com/publications/thisbreathinghouse/>

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<https://www.studiointernational.com/bharti-kher-interview>

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