

## Between Being & Decay

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*Encounters: Giacometti x Huma Bhabha*. Installation View. 2025. Courtesy Max Creasy / The Barbican Centre.

Literary theorist Julia Kristeva coined the term intertextuality in 1960 to describe the way in which the meaning of a work is created not only through our personal experience but through its place alongside other works and references.

On the second level of The Barbican Centre's main complex, a sunlit gallery plays stage to the meeting between ancient modern and contemporary sculpture. *Encounters: Giacometti* positions the work of three female sculptors in dialogue with Alberto Giacometti's elongated figures. This is one of the rare moments a major institution has presented female artists' work alongside Giacometti, who has been long regarded as one of the most influential 20th-century European sculptors.

Pakistani artist Huma Bhabha's presentation is the first of the three rotational exhibitions at The Barbican lasting until February 2026. Bhabha's practice confronts the trauma of war, displacement, and the grotesque through assemblage-based sculptures, that pull from ancient art, science fiction, and contemporary geopolitics. Together in the same room, Bhabha and Giacometti's work creates a visceral experience, documenting the body's response to trauma. Giacometti, whose works in the exhibition were created during World War II, reveals a tactile reminiscent. Whereas his figures carry their pain overtop their skin and in their gesture toward movement, Bhabha's carry it in their mass.

Jean-Paul Sartre, Giacometti's close friend, once described his sculpture as "always halfway between nothingness and being." *Encounters: Giacometti* begins with a fragment of being. The exhibition constructs the body from head to toe in its dismembering of form. Giacometti's figures, on generous loan from the Foundation Giacometti, exude elongated, thin, cyclical arms, legs, and faces. Throughout his career, Giacometti made numerous sculptures of individual body parts including hands, legs, torsos, and most notably heads. In a glass case, *Large Head* (1960) welcomes visitors with its juxtaposing long neck and small base. Huma Bhabha, like Giacometti uses heads as a reference point in her psychological and physical dissection of the body. Her untitled head-like figures from

2022 lay on plinths, adjacent to Giacometti's *Large Head*, exuding a melancholic harshness against their orange terracotta exterior.

Moving past the agglomeration of heads and deeper into the gallery, the two artists' preoccupation with movement comes to fruition with Giacometti's assortment of walking men and women, and Bhabha's *Magic Carpet* (2003). Comprised of a pair of disembodied legs in found black rubber boots the pair appears in motion over a Bokhara carpet. A Plexiglass plinth below creates the illusion of their motion, described by Bhabha as "cheap special effects." Having acknowledged that Giacometti's own walking figures were a direct reference for this work, Bhabha further commented that the work is in fact about love. Each leg, a different color belonging to a different body, might finally meet in stride.

Bhabha, like Giacometti, is known to begin her sculptures by first building the armature, working directly with her material of choice, often utilizing no prior sketches or drawings. In the early 2000s, Bhabha began making solid armatures for standing figures, but it wasn't until 2008 that she made her first standing sculpture. Her now iconic standing figures recall a prehistoric era. Beyond their encrusted, rough outer material, Bhabha often abstracts gender in these figures through barely recognizable human-like features and external genitalia. Sculptures in the exhibition like *Scout* (2011) and *What Should it Be* (2024), as Bhabha has stated, can be read as "multi-gendered or hermaphrodites, allowing me to be creative in how I can display sexuality; it is also more open-ended in how the viewer can interpret them." For Giacometti, gender seems to be the case of a two-sided coin. Whether due to his own sexual tendencies or external influences, his figures leave no room for androgyny nor welcome a reflection toward fluidity between the sexes. They are rigid in their stance and identity.



Huma Bhabha. 2022. Photo by Daniel Dora. Courtesy David Zwirner.

*Mask of Dimitrios* (2019), a tender and seemingly incomplete seated figure is the most centrally located sculpture in the gallery. Bhabha crafted this being from a selection of found objects, clay, wood, acrylic, oil, oil stick, plastic rubber, steel, and wire, contributing to the fragile yet monumental experience of the work. Her use of various and immediate materials imbues the work with a sense of impermanence marked by decay. In this regard, Bhabha's material vocabulary far surpasses

Giacometti's academically trusted and formal bronze, introducing the context of organic, everyday material to their discourse.

Bhabha's figures dominate the small gallery with a monstrous vulnerability, taking up space with their sagging breasts, thick thighs, and high-set hips. Moving between the dismembered body and an undulating landscape, she surpasses Giacometti by leaps and bounds. While Giacometti's figures of women appear remote and fictitious, Bhabha's figures remain watchful and grounded, challenging the viewer's relationship to gender, sexuality, and the enduring effects of trauma and war. Her work doesn't just respond to Giacometti's or exist in the shadows of a canonical male sculptor but rather reclaims the body as a site of resilience.