The body has been a thread running through Bharti Kher’s dazzlingly eclectic oeuvre, especially the female body – enclosed, prised open, vulnerable, resilient, hybridised, brutally broken and tenderly held. This ambitious exhibition at the Arnolfini picked up this thread to bind together four rooms of exhibits from different phases of her work, gathering up a range of her hallmark styles, idioms and materials. But here, embodiment was the place of encounter between the artworks and the viewer; it located belonging in the mobile apparatus we carry in us, cut loose from material borders and geopolitical identities.

The walls of the Arnolfini’s lower gallery were mounted with Kher’s _Body Incantatory Drawings_, 2019 – a ritual experiment of colour visiting and revisiting flat white paper, activating presence, habitation and encounter at the dynamic interface between resistant acrylic pigment and the pristine surface it challenges through splash, splatter and spill. From the sparse discipline of the Agnes Martinesque first study – eight parallel lines of grey wash fading out of the darker concentration on the left – the series spirals into reckless abandon and risky play. If these works channel the unutterable inside us to speak through the artist-as-medium, they frame the energetic palimpsests of word and image that turn social constructions and taxonomies outside in – her early bindi-work series, _Links in a Chain_, double-sided drawings mounted on freestanding metal frames and clustered in the centre of the room.

These drawings are witty and unsettling riffs on the _Dick and Jane_ public school reading primers popular in America in the 1930s to ’60s, with an emphatically limited vocabulary, clear visual illustrations for each word or phrase and the ‘look-say’ method for instant legibility. Kher sends up the fantasy of vision as a cognitive shortcut by dotting the apparently innocent, anodyne images with bindis which she uses as blind spots that, like the optic disc which lacks photoreceptor cells, redirect our vision, recoding it with her own rewritings, overwritings and obscurings of the _Dick and Jane_ books’ directives. _Look_ – a seemingly opaque whirl of dizzying purple, blue, brown and yellow – challenges us to look the complexity of seeing in the face. _Bindis_ – one of Kher’s signature components – are the round dots Indian women wear on their foreheads, originally indicative of the supposed felicity of marital status but now increasingly ornamental, ranging from liquid colour or vermilion to adhesive spots, from the auspicious to
the tacky. Here, they appear in their multiform variety – including white dots like white, particulate semen simulating light-particles, imbued with deep, iconoclastic and Freudian mischief – showering upon children, or forming the lens for defamiliarising the stereotypical Western child with their stock puppy and cuddly bear. ‘Look, look./Oh look’ is the caption to the shape of a child with a huge belly (pregnant, or covered by Father’s giant hat?) – a grotesque anti-Ophelia colourfully drowning in a stream dotted with fish, which turn out, on a harder look, to be spermatoid bindis.
The simplicism of the ‘Up-Down’ flashcards used to train children in at-a-glance recognition take on creepy adult meaning in this enigmatic image of the supposedly transparent pre-person Jane, with the deceptively innocuous addition of ‘underneath’ in *Look, Jane./Look, look./See Dick underneath*. Two spots fly behind the frame of the face, like sticky plasters, while the third – third eye? – drops under Jane’s chin, and seeps into paler replicas going down to that id-space of plaything and dark matter. Yet in this image, the blonde, bland, all-American girl is replaced by a culturally hybrid and sensually sinister woman’s face with almond eyes, parted pink lips, a dappled blueish-yellow complexion, dark and high-arched brows and a hint of dark hair cupping the face which holds back more than it reveals. The relocation of the spot as a footnote to the defiantly pensive visage is not only a semiotic payback but also a retaliation against the cultural homogeneity and nationalism of reading practices. Identities that were fixed are layered and unmoored from their safe and salutary habitations, as Kher relives the ironies of her own immigrant childhood in a suburban England through these American schoolbooks. The spots that could have linked a linear chain and managed the scene instead jump, judder and swerve off course to get stuck in the several faces of the blonde little girl – obstructing her view as well as our access to it. The human brain gets in the way, too, with its nerve cells, sources of desire and memory, disrupting the chain of spots: so ‘I See SpotS inside your head’, when Jane was supposed to see Spot the dog. After all, the children’s books came together with an eighteenth-century Parisian book of medical drawings of the brain in Kher’s studio to produce this series – a series that is, in many ways, a laboratory of her ideas and processes.

The cerebral turns darkly visceral when Tim the teddy bear lies splayed on the floor as *Vic/Tim*, as the handwritten ‘Vic’ makes the static name move out of childworld safety into the
pathos and menace of children’s games, prefiguring the games we play as grown-ups – with our others, our selves, their shadows and their names. Spot, the children’s dog, has stepped into his afterlife as DES/Spot and is sleeping the sleep of the unjust, exhausted with his work on Tim. In a further twist, the ‘S’ of ‘DES’ is crossed out so that language estranges itself into the French ‘De’, defamiliarising the very domestic American mutt into a dog of unknowable origin. As he hovers between the passive agency of a plaything and the child’s distributed personhood, the baleful unassimilables of the child-mind are passed on from boy to bear by puppy through doll-play. The yellow spots, which evoke a twee child’s poster, acting as pins at top left and right corners, turn out to have leaked into the sickly yellow light of an infantile crime scene between cuddly toy and bouncy pet. The wooden triangle inserts a point of view into the geometry of the scene: playpen and Fatherl/and at once. Un-heimlich, it also denies the comfort of circles, and resonates with the suspended triangle in *Body Incantatory 15*.

Kher’s obsession with geometry is more intensely focused in the balance sculptures that were in the Arnolfini’s upper gallery, weighing approximately the same as Kher’s body, often captured at tipping point. The centrepiece, *Consummate Joy and a Sisyphian Task*, counterpoints wood and stone, copper and steel, circle, triangle, rectangle, arc and pendulum, gravitation and suspension, to forge an infinitely delicate poise that could only emerge from the communion of distinct materials, opposed textures and contrary movements. The preciousness of the equilibrium is proportional to its fragility. The hanging and the hovering animate the objects and emplot them in a narrative alive with history and possibility. Rewiring Western myth through Eastern philosophy, Kher presents Sisyphus’s stone as an emblem not of punishment but persistence.
The boulder Sisyphus was condemned to roll up a hill only for it to roll back down every time it reached the top is represented in rich red jasper, a precious, protective stone that refigures repetition as meditative ritual, and failure as spiritual vigilance. From this consummate joy to the hard-earned stillness of *When darkness becomes light*, 2016, in the adjacent room was a continuum: the massy sledgehammer suspended above a cement plinth stells time and motion between the trickster’s strain for impossible geometry and an improbable lightness that can only be dis-covered in matter, not created. The *Alchemy Drawings* (2016 onwards) on the walls of the antechamber are fascinating explorations of the limits of lines on ledger paper. Playing with the symmetrical division of French double entry books in *Doit and Avoir* (*Alchemy Drawing 16*, 2019), Kher probes the poetics of accounting and the fantasies of equivalence, but this series felt like one thing too many in an already diverse show, stretching the concept of the body as a unifying thread.

The surrounding walls of the main room, meanwhile, more intuitively picked up the bindis of the *Links* downstairs to recreate the cellular atoms of the body that migrate through the cartographic to the cosmic, telescoping incommensurate scales and connecting the molecular to the galactic. These large, seductive painted boards layered with spots of many sizes, colours and textures, invite the cognitive to meet the optical as we look, see, think and feel. From the dizzying tapestried recesses of *I've been to hell and back*, 2012, to the poignant pixellation that evokes the real absence at the heart of the epistolary abstraction of *Heroides*, 2014–16, to the obscure cloudy rhythms of *Lenticularis over mountain*, 2014, these hypnotic blends of science and spirit, gendered intimacy and impersonal magnitude, culturally specific and planetary, repeatedly place our bounded selves in the macrocosm, which we dot and fill, and where we are found and lost. After all, the Sanskrit root of ‘bindi’ is ‘bindu’ or particle.
A site-specific version of *Virus* in the final room – the quietly cumulative, ongoing, thirty-year series begun in 2010 – united ‘old’ materials to bring into focus in an altogether new way the relation between the particulate and the monumental that glimmers through much of Kher’s œuvre. This project accretes annually, through the addition – or release, like a virus – of a fragment of prewritten, prophetic text with an autobiographical reference point in each entry, edited minimally at the point of insertion in response to time, to accompany vast bindi-patterned canvases. This slow repetition with difference is almost a metaphor for Kher’s artistic evolution and for her cyclical leitmotifs. The subterranean consonance underlying her life’s work emerges slowly, demands a minute, meditative attention and belongs to a deeper intuition of interconnection across disparate matter, ‘[piercing] us with strange relation’, as Wallace Stevens might say.¹

The hint of musical accumulation in Kher’s work is not, I think, accidental. Glenn Gould once observed that ‘the purpose of art is not the momentary ejection of adrenaline but… the gradual, lifelong construction of a state of wonder and serenity’.² While *Virus* constructs this process most visibly, for me it is in *The Chimera* series, 2016, where the conceptual freight of *Virus* gives way to something like breath, that we come closest to achieved wonder and serenity. A densely material exploration of the very texture of invisible interiority, the *Chimeras* are plastercasts of heads and faces that are covered up by wax, and then broken open to reveal

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¹ From Wallace Stevens’s long poem, ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’, originally published in 1942

Bharti Kher, *The Chimera* series, 2016; *from right to left: The Chimera (3),* 2016, wax, concrete, plaster, hessian fibre, 121 x 29 x 29 cm; *The Chimera (4),* 2016, wax, concrete, plaster, hessian fibre, brass, 116 x 29 x 29 cm; *The Chimera (5),* 2016, wax, concrete, plaster, hessian fibre, brass, 130.5 x 24.3 x 24.3 cm; photo by Lisa Whiting Photography, courtesy of the Arnolfini.

Bharti Kher, *The half spectral thing,* 2016, wax, concrete, plaster, hessian fibre, brass, 127 x 29 x 29 cm, photo by Lisa Whiting Photography, courtesy of the Arnolfini.
strata of wax, hessian and plaster. But this almost archaeological incision leads not to perfect knowledge but an encounter with the irreducible strangeness of our inner matter, the simultaneous reality and unyieldingness of the essence that the artist as caster seeks. A poignant example is *The half-spectral thing*, 2016, a cast of Kher’s mother’s head, enacting a return to the source through a kind of matriliny of form. Here we see the outlines of the shape of the face, an intimate *exuvia* – capturing in a mould the residues her mother casts away. But look in on the reverse side, and you see rough, organic, resistant, illegible substance lining a deep hole. The impression of the bodily, here, becomes at once a place of memory and desire, and a space of surrender to mystery and the otherness of life itself. It is significant that Kher has talked about her compulsion to stare at Beethoven’s death-mask during her 2015 residency at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. Death-masks preserve the absent through a vivid memory of their living forms. Kher’s *Chimeras* are life-masks. The half spectral head of her mother turns presence inside out, dwelling on the absent at the heart of the animate, meditating on the mortality of the self through an archaeology of its sources and their ultimate unknowability: it is not the place arrived at, but a longing for home.

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