



ACT TWO

An artistic urge led to self-discovery when, at the age of 65, veteran designer **NICOLE FARHI** up and quit the fashion industry to become a full-time sculptor, finds **SHAHNAZ SIGANPORIA**

Amid a blur of women in handlooms and men draped in woven shawls and tweed, her casual elegance and auburn curls are easy to spot. Surrounded by painters, poets and a crown prince or two, I meet veteran fashion designer and new sculptor Nicole Farhi near the sprawling gardens of the Rambagh Palace in Jaipur, where she's accompanied by her playwright husband, David Hare. The 71-year-old Farhi is used to the glamour and buzz but she finds us a quiet spot and recalls her first visit to India: "It was the early 1970s. I had just started working in fashion and had come here to find embroiderers and manufacturers. I fell in love almost immediately—the textiles, crafts and fabrics... It was the most unique experience." We exchange travel notes on unknown weaver studios in Benares and young designer ateliers in Paris. Between her hushed tone and broad smile, Farhi's warmth and intimacy is infectious, and as the night comes to a close, we plan another run-in for the next day. The honorary CBE and Legion of Honour awardee embarked on a new career at the age of 65. Farhi has a story to tell, and I'm eager to know more.

WILD CHILD

She arrives on time the next morning, and we find ourselves a spot on a sunny terrace in yet another palace-turned-hotel in Jaipur and carry on our conversation. Dressed in shades of navy and white, Farhi embodies the careless sophistication of quintessential French style. She was, after all, raised in Nice, and moved to Paris at age 18. "It must have been the late '60s. I was a young art student and it was a wonderful time. And I made crazy clothes. But these days everybody is rehashing the same ideas. It's so rare that you see something you've never seen before." For a while she was a free agent, designing for various brands, but sometime during the late 1970s she met Stephen Marks, fell in love and moved to London (where she still lives) to head French Connection (FCUK) with him.

Years of crazed schedules and path-breaking work followed but Farhi wanted more and soon started her eponymous label. "I was very lucky. With French Connection and my label, I was working with my boyfriend; it was personal and I loved that. There was this sense of freedom about what we were creating. But times change, and we sold the company and soon there were new people running it. The briefs changed; they wanted to cater to the market, not surprise them. That was awful for me," says Farhi of her four decades in fashion. So about five years ago, she realised she was done with fashion. Not one to be confined, Farhi says, "Fashion just stopped being important to me...so I stopped doing it." >



Vogue's Anna Wintour is part of Farhi's debut sculpture series, From The Neck Up (2014)

NEW LEAP

At 65, she decided to go another way—Farhi was ready to pursue the life of a full-time sculptor. It was an art form she'd picked up in her thirties, after a dinner where she was serendipitously seated near a sculptor. "I remember that conversation like it happened yesterday. I asked her what she did, and she said, 'I'm a sculptor.' I told her there and then, 'I want to do that.'" Soon she started training with one of the masters of modern sculpture, the late Sir Eduardo Paolozzi. "Even back then, he never introduced me as a fashion designer, always as a sculptor. And somewhere I knew one day I would stop my work in fashion and just sculpt. Sadly, he passed away before I could make the shift," she recalls.

Today, Farhi's art remains focused on the human form; her fashion eye playing into her sculptures. Human heads and hands make up the bulk of her latest work, which includes a gallery of familiar faces as subjects—artistic legends like Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon, creative stars like Tom Stoppard and silver-screen favourites like Christopher Walken, Helena Bonham Carter and Judi Dench, along with her close friend, *Vogue's* very own Anna Wintour. In turn, her series of sublimely sculpted hands includes those of a flautist, an embroiderer from Mumbai and a prima ballerina. Ask her about her obsession with the human body, and she explains, "It seems like the body is what I know best. After all, I've spent most of my life dressing it."

For Farhi, the sensuality of sculpting is at the core of her passion, that feeling of having your hands in earth, moulding and shaping your art into the form you imagine. The intimacy of getting to know her models, observing the minutiae of their anatomy and life as she moulds their contours into her work, is all part of her narrative. Her latest project is sculpting women, concentrating not on the face but on the folds of the body: "It's the imperfections that I love to capture—the flap of a belly, the curve of a chin... It's what makes the body distinct." Her work has a raw lyricism to it—mature in its narrative yet almost youthful in its approach—much like the artist herself. No surprise that Farhi is far from done with her artistic quest. She's thinking of painting now. "Life is very long and it's very exciting because you can discover something new at any stage of your life."



Farhi's Helena Bonham Carter bust from *From The Neck Up* (2014)

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—NICOLE FARHI

JUST LIKE OLD FRIENDS

On the set of his new film, actor ALI FAZAL struck an unlikely companionship with co-star JUDI DENCH. He shares with *Vogue* the fresh insights in his career and life that this cross-generation friendship brought along



Fazal (30) and Dench (82) on the sets of *Victoria & Abdul*

"Ahmad Saeed was my first friend. He's still my buddy and a mentor who has stood by me through the years. To the world outside, he's my grandfather. Zipping along the streets of Lucknow in a chocolate-brown Maruti as he hit the accelerator on my demand or slicing open cans of Kraft cheese and gobbling up as much as we could before we were found out on the breakfast table—every now and again, I recall our time together. Our bond seemed unique, separated across generations by age but still one of equals. I never thought I'd find another just like it.

FRESH OFF THE BOAT

Cut to June 2016. I got a call from British producer Beeban Kidron, offering me the part of Abdul Karim in a biopic about his relationship with Queen Victoria, the empress of India. Directed by Stephen Frears, the film is based on Shrabani Basu's book *Victoria & Abdul: The True Story Of The Queen's Closest Confidant* (2010), and offers a rare insight into a little-known yet beautiful relationship between the queen and her beloved Indian attendant. I was going to play Abdul, and my Victoria was >