

# Nic

Thirty years after founding a fashion label that still bears her name, *Nicole Farhi* walked away and did not look back. Now, in a studio at the bottom of her garden in London, she's channeling all of her creative energy, inimitable style and eye for form and materiality into a robust second act as a sculptor.

*Words by Sarah Moroz, Photography by Marsý Hild Þórsdóttir & Styling by Emily Whitmore*

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What happens when you sell your name? Nicole Farhi, the woman, no longer has any involvement with the brand that still bears her namesake. Following three decades at the helm of a successful fashion label, Farhi walked away in 2012 in favor of transforming an avid hobby—sculpture—into her life’s work.

Initially, sculpture was a practice that simply overlapped with design, a pastime that necessarily had to be sidelined so that Farhi could power her business. Today, there is no other activity that can vie for her attention: Sculpture is the sole, impassioned nexus of her life. “This is it. This is what I wanted to do,” she says.

Her delight in sculpture is articulated through her devoted routine: She wakes up early and gets into the studio, working mostly on her feet. She pauses to lunch with her centenarian mother, whom she also takes care of full time on weekends, before returning to the studio in the afternoon. When she struggles with a commission for a museum, as she recently has with a bust of English painter Thomas Gainsborough (it fell, and she had to start over), she says: “I’ll get there. I’m stubborn.”

When we meet, she is dressed in a white crew neck shirt, black trousers and white sneakers: ele-

gant in her simplicity. Her hair is free-flowing and wild. Farhi has a gentle manner, but can also be delightfully tart. (“I’ll stay online but I would kill myself rather than inflict myself on others,” she recently responded to a question from *The Financial Times* about sharing her summer experiences on social media.)

She makes coffee from behind the fully functional vintage bar she brought over from France, reclaimed from a café near Les Halles that she used to frequent in Paris. Alongside strong coffee, she offers some madeleines—a sweet afternoon snack à la française.

Farhi lives with her husband, Sir David Hare, an English writer and director. His adapted screenplay for *The Hours* was nominated for an Academy Award in 2002, and he’s been behind many Tony Award-winning plays since the 1970s, notably *Plenty*. Farhi’s mother lives with them, and the trio resides in Hampstead, in north London. The peaceable environs seem like a context in which one could get serious work done: Hampstead has the ready-to-exhale feel of a retreat. There is very little foot traffic and more noise from birds than humans. The centuries-old houses are of stately brick and boast their own names (Brabourne House, Bay Tree Cottage). The Hampstead

Parish Church and a small overgrown cemetery are down the way, each solemn and charming.

Farhi’s home is 18th-century Georgian: warm, lived-in and replete with books and art. Overlooking her stairway are small statues and busts dotted along the wall. Sculptures of severed feet are used as doorstops. They were made by Farhi’s mentor, Eduardo Paolozzi, a Scottish-born artist with a diverse art catalog. (He is perhaps best known for his bronze sculpture of Isaac Newton in the piazza of the British Library.) He was also instrumental in Farhi’s path toward full-time sculpture.

Although renowned for fashion, Farhi has always been attracted to the art world. With the first large amount of money she ever made, she bought a two-level atelier in the 16th arrondissement of Paris. A storied space, it used to belong to French painter and critic Françoise Gilot, Picasso’s lover and muse for nearly a decade. Farhi still owns that property, but she now works from a luminous conservatory that runs along the garden in Hampstead, which is partially invaded by a vigorously healthy, blossoming fig tree.

Farhi goes to museums and galleries frequently: “I love to see what people have done,” she says. Last year, she was especially seduced

Right: Nicole’s 18th-century Georgian home is warm, lived-in and filled with books and art, including sculptures of severed feet by artist Eduardo Paolozzi, which Nicole uses as doorstops.

Photography Assistant: Gwen Trannoy







by a retrospective of the work of Lynda Benglis, a bold and long-practicing artist, who has been dabbling in ceramic sculpture since the 1990s. The two even met up in New York, when Benglis tried to lure Farhi to start a new ceramic practice in her Santa Fe studio. Farhi describes Benglis' work as "colorful and twisted and organic," and says she was impressed by the evocative potential Benglis' ceramics elicited. "I thought, 'This is something I would like to do. I wouldn't do pots, but I would like to do ceramic sculpture.'" Farhi marvels: "It's exciting to see that there could be so much more to explore."

Farhi's debut exhibition as a sculptor was *From the Neck Up*, held in 2014 at Bowman Sculpture in London. Situated between Christie's and the Royal Academy of Arts, the gallery spotlights everything from 19th-century European romantic sculpture (Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse, Aimé-Jules Dalou) to 20th-century British modern pieces (Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth). Farhi joined the ranks of that legacy with a 12-piece series of busts of her friends—an inspired entourage

that includes Helena Bonham Carter and Anna Wintour.

Now, two years later, Bowman Sculpture is presenting Farhi's second solo exhibition—*The Human Hand*—a single-minded study by way of 24 sculptures. "I really enjoy doing just the limb. I think it's fantastic to concentrate on just one thing. It's small, but means so much," Farhi says. Though the expressions of her busts were intimate and telling, she feels that hands can convey secret, significant things—ones that the face just might convincingly hide.

Farhi made a list of the people that she wanted to depict and their professions, all drawn from the cultural world. These included three pianists, a conductor, a flutist, a violinist, a ceramicist, a painter, and three ballet dancers. It's a celebration of the artisan and the artisanal: people connected to their bodies and to careful craft. Each sculpture is formulated "in the position of their art or profession—they're very expressive of what they do," Farhi emphasizes. She did her research—attending a ballet rehearsal to get the pose for the dancers, going to a concert to hear and observe the pianist—to witness

people doing what they excel at.

"It's important to know how it works," she says of learning the hand's bone structure. *Drawing Hands & Feet: Form, Proportions, Gestures and Actions*, the pragmatic how-to by Giovanni Civardi, is among the books on her studio's shelves. "I spent a few months just looking at the anatomy and the place of the hand in the cortex," she says. (The hand is operational thanks to communication between the motor cortex and the cerebellum.) "You don't have to be completely accurate," Farhi says. "You can do what you want. But if I didn't know all the little bones in the wrist, that there is a junction here, and that you have all the articulations in the fingers..." She traces the lines on her own hand to illustrate.

Farhi magnified the hands for symbolic reasons: "I feel that the hand is so much larger than life! It is much bigger than just the action." She explains that the sculpture of her friend Eduardo's bearish paws conveys "much more about what I *felt* about him." He had "padded, fleshy, thick fingers—and at the same time they were soft, and articulate." Emotion trumps realism: "With him,

I forgot about the anatomy and wanted to show the power."

Farhi's material choices are deliberate. The ceramicist is cast in glass. For the dancers, Farhi decided to include their arms for the beauty of their musculature. The writer is modeled on her husband, David. An embroiderer, with whom she previously collaborated for her clothing label, was integrated long-distance: he sent photographs of his hands sewing beads onto fabric. The hands belonging to a baker work a phantom ball of dough, and resonate with Farhi's active gestures as she shapes clay. She made the baker's hands white, a wink to flour ("beautiful hands, very soft," Farhi murmurs appreciatively). A glazier is encapsulated in a single thumb, the arch of his finger curved as while applying putty along the edge of a glass pane. Inspired when a glazier came to change a windowpane in her studio, she was in awe at the way his profession had deformed his finger.

Farhi's own hands, with her fingers extended, are cast as a kind of self-portrait. She also cast the hands of her mother, whose age lines from a century of living are extremely poignant to examine.

*"Maybe I see things from a little bit farther away—which is a good thing. If you're an artist, you see things differently from most people anyway."*



Accompanying the hands of the women are those of a little boy—a budding musician, learning to play the drums. Placed together on a shelf in Farhi’s studio, the three sculptures form a moving triptych: the dawn, middle and dusk of life.

In her annex studio—luminous with multiple skylights—Farhi shows me a mood board of hands from different angles. Farhi uses photographs as a work tool and the mood board is a key methodology that carries over from her days in fashion, when she used them “to make sure that everything was different enough, and worked.” For her current series, she drew around the hands of each person in the same way that a child might make a drawing of a Thanksgiving turkey from the outline of their fingers and palm.

Photography is also an important component of her exhibition: she collaborated with Walter van Dyk, who photographed each sitter. The portrait images will be shown separately in the gallery, to satisfy any curiosity about who is “behind” each hand. “Who do they belong to? Everybody wants to know who they are,” Farhi sighs. “Some of the people who sat are well-known, some are less well-known, but what they do is terribly important,” she says. “I didn’t want people to come and see the show and say, ‘Is this the hand of a famous dancer?’ Or, ‘Are these the hands of that famous violinist?’ I wanted them to just be attracted by the sculpture for what it means—its giving, its softness, its generosity.”

Although based in England for her entire adult life, Farhi says,

“Obviously I feel different from English people. I feel very French still.” Not just French: “My parents came from Turkey, and my heritage is Jewish Turkish, and from Spain and Egypt. I feel quite fortunate, in a way, to come from so many different places,” she notes. “Maybe I see things from a little bit farther away—which is a good thing,” she says. “If you’re an artist, you see things differently from most people anyway.”

Farhi was raised in Nice, the sunny French city on the lip of the Mediterranean. She did not come from an artistic background or family; her father ran a lighting business. She gravitated toward art “probably to be antagonistic, and not wanting to be the same,” she concedes. “I went the other way.” Her parents liked music, theater and film, but were not compelled by art and “certainly not sculpture.” She still returns to Nice to see her brother, who lives in the same building and on the same floor as the painter Henri Matisse once did, even sharing the artist’s same view over the city.

Farhi’s desire to study art drove her to Paris; she moved there at the age of 18 and lived in an attic apartment. Paris in 1968 was an exuberant time and place for a student, rife with political action and rebellion. To earn money, Farhi sketched drawings of catwalk shows for a fashion magazine. After graduating, she freelanced as a designer for other labels until she met and fell for Stephen Marks, an entrepreneur. “Fashion took over,” Farhi recalls. “At the time, in the late ’60s, it was easy to start and I wanted to earn a living. It was simple to do it this way.”

Marks persuaded her to move to London to start French Connection in the early 1970s, and she did. “I wanted to go to America when I was young,” she reminisces. “I went to New York for a fashion show with the first company I worked for, Pierre D’Alby. I was totally in love with that town. But I was already working, so I thought that I couldn’t start all over again.” She founded her eponymous label, Nicole Farhi, in the early 1980s, with the backing of Marks.

Asked if she sees a relationship between making anatomically correct sculptures and garments that adhere to the realities of the body, she finds the parallel apt, but admits: “There are so many things you don’t know consciously that you do!” Of any creative endeavor, she states: “The structure is so important. I need to know what’s inside before I do the outside. You need to know the proportions.” Still, she feels the overlap between her former life as a fashion designer and her current life as a sculptor stops at the structural level. “I like doing things not for commercial use,” she says. “Because I’m older, and I’ve done one thing, I can afford to do what I’m doing—happily, peacefully,” she says. “I never think I’m going to sell so if I do, it’s a bonus. Whereas before, if I didn’t sell my clothes, it was terrible—it was tragic. It’s a different attitude.”

If selling her work is incidental, being part of the conversation is not. “I still want to exhibit my work,” she emphasizes of putting her sculpture out there. “I wouldn’t want to just sculpt in the dark. I want to hear what people think.”



Right: In Nicole’s sculpture, the human body is expressed in a variety of forms and media, from a ballerina’s slender musculature to busts of Helena Bonham Carter and Anna Wintour.