

## nicole farhi's notes on being a woman

After making her name in fashion, the French-born, London-based designer turned sculptor now makes her mark in clay.

**Zoé Dreadon**

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*Am I doing this woman thing right? Do you do this woman thing the same as me? Does it matter? Existential lady crisis -- we all have it. Notes on Being a Woman is an ongoing series that examines the many myths and meanings of what being a woman is all about.*



When writing about Nicole Farhi, the first thing that comes to mind is fashion. After all, the French-born, London-based designer has had an incredibly impressive career doing precisely that, whether it was launching the revered womenswear label French Connection with her then-boyfriend Stephen Marks during the 70s, or establishing her own eponymous label some ten years later.

By the early 90s, Nicole Farhi had become a household name -- synonymous with effortless cool and timeless yet approachable elegance. But as the brand's success grew, it became about so much more than fashion. She expanded into homewares and perfumes, and even opened a restaurant in Mayfair that became the go-to spot for power lunches. As one of the world's the very first lifestyle brands, Nicole Farhi was considered groundbreaking. As such, in 2007 Nicole was awarded an honorary CBE for her 30 year efforts in British fashion and received a Légion d'Honneur in France thereafter.

But in life all things must come to an end and in 2012, two years after Stephen Marks sold the label, and shortly before it went into administration, Nicole decided to take a step back from the fashion world to pursue a lifelong dream of creating art. She had always taken Wednesdays off to spend sculpting, but it turned into something she wanted to pursue full time.

Now in her seventies, she works from a studio in her house in Hampstead, sculpting the busts of friends or people she admires, including Anna Wintour, Judi Dench, and Bill Nighy. Her method involves taking photographs of her subjects, before inviting them to dinner to study them further in person. Her sculpture of Anna Wintour was recently exhibited as part of the ING Discerning Eye Exhibition in Mall Galleries, London, alongside works of other emerging and established artists.

Here Nicole offers her notes on being a woman...

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**The best thing about being a woman is being resilient.** Although women through history have faced some of the worst of humanity, they always have picked themselves up and kept moving on. I also believe they own the most functional piece of beauty in the world, the female body.

**I have never wished to be anything but a woman.** As a gender, I believe women to be totally equal to men, but I wish today -- after having fought for women's freedom and equality in the 70s -- we wouldn't still have to fight so hard to find equal pay at work, to apply for the same jobs and not get them, and we wouldn't still have to complain of sexual harassment.

**The best advice I've ever received about human bodies is** to keep my brain healthy, which is probably the best thing I learned from my years of practising yoga. My brain is always telling me when my body needs a rest or needs to keep moving, and which part of my body needs it more, my legs and feet, my arms or my back.

**Even if I could go back in time, and speak to my 16-year-old self,** I wouldn't change anything. I don't remember having ever had any wrong ideas about anything, as I was always so open to everything. I asked my mother, my daughter and my husband if they thought I had changed over the years they've known me, and they all had the same answer. Nothing has changed me. I have been the same wilful, stubborn, loving, independent, hard-working woman throughout my life.

**There are many things that I've seen and read that have made me the woman I am today.** The Second Sex by Simone de Beauvoir. It is a revolutionary book about the position of women in our society. She was an inspiration to women. I still find it incredibly relevant today.



**The most unexpected thing I've learnt about being a woman is** that men often seem to imagine you have hidden motives or some unspoken agenda. We don't. We say what we think because we think it, not for some ulterior reason. Why do they think we're not straight?

**I am the happiest in my studio,** on my own. In silence. Then I start sculpting. Lately I have been making a series of little busts of writers. I immerse myself in their world while I'm sculpting, think of them, their life, their work. They make me deeply calm.

**My favourite song about being a woman is** The Man I Love by George Gershwin, sung by Sarah Vaughan. I was given the record one month after having met my husband David, 26 years ago. I kept listening to it time and time again. It is so incredibly romantic. It may be a bit cheesy too...

**The women I admire most** do not complain about their life, they put their mind to doing as well as possible in whatever they want to do. Writers, thinkers, artists, women in sport.

**Some will say experience is the best thing about getting older.** I don't believe you learn through other people's experience or even through your own. Some will say contentment. What is there to be content about when you know you will soon not be with your loved ones? I am not sure there is anything great about getting older as every day takes you closer to the end of your life. Maybe the only positive thing is the longer you live the freer you are from the world's opinion.

**I felt like a grown-up when** I was recently asked to open the 2017 ING Discerning Eye exhibition. I love that event; every year it gives young and less established artists an opportunity to show their talent and exhibit work which wouldn't be necessarily shown in a commercial gallery. It is such a fantastic, generous thing to have created.

**Loves makes my heart grow bigger and bit stronger.** It is a wonderful feeling to have arrived somewhere where no harm can be done to you, to be profoundly at peace and calm. When you fall in love, it is like receiving a gift bestowed by another human being. It can also be a feeling you get from listening to music, looking at a painting, reading a wonderful book.

**Singer MØ asks: What is your opinion on sex education?**

You learn in practice, not in theory. But I'm all for children being told the truth of how exactly they got here, and how to have pleasure without fear.

**My question for the next woman doing this column would be:**

Do you ever envy men? If so, why?

