NICOLE FARHI

THE HUMAN HAND

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BOWMAN SCULPTURE

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INTRODUCTION

Judith Collins

In the early 1980s, Nicole Farhi made a sculpture of a large outstretched hand set on top of a craggy pyramid. This, her first sculpture of a hand, was a covert self-portrait, acknowledging and celebrating the fact that she had begun to work as a sculptor, alongside her successful career as a fashion designer (*Reaching Out*, illustrated overleaf).

She had had some training in art. As a teenager in Nice, she attended painting classes after the lycée, and remembers that her paintings were thick with pigment, laid on with a palette knife. She realised later that this adding on and cutting into malleable material showed that she was more interested in three dimensions than two. When she moved to Paris in 1965 aged eighteen, she studied to become a fashion designer and also attended life drawing classes at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. Her design sketches were quickly appreciated, her career in the fashion world consuming her energy and attention for decades.

However, she found herself wanting to return to making art and a sculptor friend introduced her to Jean Gibson, (1935-1991) a gifted artist and inspirational teacher. Farhi recalls that Gibson gave her some clay, asked her to make a torso and admired the result. Farhi then attended Gibson's evening classes twice a week throughout the 1980s. Two lumpy, earthy female torsos made by Farhi at this time echo the strength and simplicity of Neolithic clay female torsos; they have an ageless quality to them and remind the viewer that clay is the primeval material that comes straight out of the earth, and was the first material man used to make sculpture. Farhi's engagement with clay is very visceral and emotional, and she loves to work with it.

Farhi went on to make semi-abstract pieces which set out to convey bodily emotions, such as pairs of clenched fists conveying 'angst', (*Pure Force I*, illustrated overleaf) while another with a rhythmic ribbon snaking upward from a tight little base is the material equivalent of an orgasm (illustrated overleaf). Farhi took this orgasm sculpture to be cast into bronze at the Royal College of Art bronze foundry, where she encountered the renowned sculptor Sir Eduardo Paolozzi (1924-2005). He was interested in her sculpture and offered to tutor and encourage her, and then became a very close friend. He urged her to try out other media such as plaster and wax, but she quickly knew they were not for her.

Reaching Out

Pure Force I

Orgasm

When her daughter Candice, a student at Chelsea School of Art, had to do a photography project, Paolozzi suggested she take photographs of his hands in various positions. He had huge strong hands, with chubby yet nimble fingers capable of making delicate movements. The experience of Paolozzi offering his hands as a theme for an art project prompted Farhi to make a series of sculptures that commemorated them. She also made some imaginary portraits of him.

Farhi enjoys portraiture, both real and invented, and in 2014 several portraits of close friends were included in her first gallery exhibition at Bowman Sculpture, London. This event inspired Farhi to make further sculptures of friends and acquaintances, concentrating just on their hands, building on the ones she had made of Paolozzi. 'I was drawn to the idea of sculpting the hand because it represented such a huge challenge. From the beginning of mankind, the first marks left on the walls of caves were made by the human hand.' The stupendous examples of cave art in French and Spanish caves dating back around 28,000 years, made by Homo habilis, more commonly known as 'hand man', not only depicted animals but also numerous hand prints. These were either made by stenciling around the outstretched hand with coloured pigments, or by covering the palm and fingers with pigments and a fixative and pressing the hand against the cave wall. Sometimes the fingers of these early artists were bent into a gestural language. It is assumed these gestures were part of a ritual, not necessarily spontaneous and expressive but possibly bearing a symbolic meaning.

People's hands are, besides their facial movements, the most expressive part of their body, and in many cases their gestures are instinctive and spontaneous, which lends them great charm. The French 18th century philosopher and art critic Denis Diderot maintained that 'There are some gestures so sublime that the noblest eloquence can never translate them.'

There was a growing interest in hand gestures in early Renaissance Italian painting and sculpture, beginning with Giotto in the thirteenth century, and amplified by the architect Alberti, who wrote a treatise in the 1440s on the depiction of emotions through bodily movements. Leonardo da Vinci's Treatise on Painting also dealt with this issue, and who can forget the play of hand gestures that ripple across his fresco of The Last Supper in Milan. The most amazing book on the human hand was John Bulwer's Chirologia-Chironomia of 1644 with its descriptive glossary and woodcut illustrations of sixty-four gestures of the hand, plus twenty-five gestures of fingers, followed by an additional eighty-one gestures to use during discourse, nearly all compiled from his study of Renaissance paintings. Bulwer was fascinated by the idea of a universal language – one that could be used and shared by all – and described hands and their gestures as 'the only speech that is natural to man which may well be called the Tongue of Human Nature, which, without teaching, men in all regions of the habitable world do at the first sight most easily understand.'

By the end of the nineteenth century, without the need for a glossary and illustrations, it was generally acknowledged that the master of sculpting hands was Auguste Rodin. He modelled hundreds of them, both as independent sculptures and as part of other complex compositions. He carefully modelled their musculature, balance, gesture, implied movement and the texture of their flesh, and demonstrated that hands alone could convey profound emotion, from anger to despair to compassion and tenderness. The hands Rodin modelled were usually from his imagination but occasionally he would use a model, as can be seen in his hand of a pianist. In this instance he offered a portrait of a profession, of a hand that worked for a living and functioned through a set of definite and repeated actions.

Farhi decided this would provide the basis for her approach and made an ideal list of the people and their professions that she would like to depict. The largest number of models hail from the cultural world, with three pianists, a conductor, a flautist, a violinist, a ceramicist, a painter (Anthony Whishaw, the husband of her teacher Jean Gibson), and three ballet dancers. One of the pianists, Stephen Kovacevich, told Farhi that he can hear the notes of the Beethoven piece he was playing when he looks at her sculpture of his hand, a ringing endorsement of her capacity to catch the fleeting moment. For the dancers Farhi decided in two cases to include their arms, outstretched in a darkly patinated bronze in one, and delicately bent with an ethereal silver white patination in another. Farhi chose to cast the upright hand and arm of her ceramicist sitter into glass, a thoughtful connection to the sitter's profession, since both ceramic and glass involve trial by fire.

It is more difficult to ascertain the professions of two of the male sitters, with one a writer (her husband David Hare), and the other the investment banker and noted philanthropist (Sir Jacob Rothschild). Sir Jacob has stoically endured sitting for a large number of portraits, most notably by Lucian Freud, and his hands folded on top of one another speak of composure and quiet restraint. One modelled hand harks back to her fashion designer days, when she used to travel to India to seek out embroiderers and beaders for her clothing range, and she contacted an old colleague who sent photographs of his hands in action sewing beads onto fabric.

A fascinating pair of hands compose themselves into a gentle cupping pose, and look as though they enclose something fragile and precious. These belong to a baker moulding a dough ball, and it is not far from the active gestures Farhi must make each time she begins work on a soft ball of clay. The most prosaic of all Farhi's arrested hand gestures belongs to the one dedicated to the single thumb. Her sculpture studio is a long row of ancient greenhouses, whose glass planes are old and regularly need replacing. Watching a glazier press a coil of putty along the edge of a glass pane in her studio was the inspiration for this lively representation of a digit, and again, like the baker, the glazier was working with a soft malleable material not unlike clay. This homage to the thumb reminds the viewer that it is the only digit in our hand that is opposable to the other four. Not uniquely human, the opposable thumb is shared by apes, pandas and some frogs. However, it is the thing that empowers us humans to function as makers of the things that fill our world.

Two of the hands in this show have not been modelled in clay by Farhi. She made the decision to have them cast from life, first in plaster and then in bronze. They are the most personal, being that of Farhi herself and her centenarian mother, who lives with her. It is almost impossible to model one's own hand as two hands are needed to shape the clay, and one hand would be disabled from doing this by posing. So a life cast is the answer, and Farhi's right hand is captured, palm down and fingers extended, as though ready to hold or caress something, reminding us that sculpture appeals to both our visual and our tactile senses.

Another female sculptor, Barbara Hepworth, had a plaster cast made of her left hand since she too saw the human hand as a vital symbol of the creative sensibility of the artist. Hepworth was a carver of stone and wood more than a modeller in clay, and described her left hand as her 'thinking' hand while her right hand was her 'motor' hand, wielding the hammer. Being an original and creative individual requires a unique combination of manual dexterity and cognitive ability. Muscle control plays a crucial part, and when she was preparing for these hand sculptures, Farhi consulted lots of anatomy books, to understand the complex interplay of bone, muscle and tendon.

At eighty-one, Henry Moore made drawings of his hands when ill health prevented him from working with clay, and he said of these drawings: 'Hands can convey so much, they can beg or refuse, take or give, be open or clenched, show content or anxiety. They can be young or old, beautiful or deformed'. Farhi's life cast of her mother's right hand fits in with Moore's thoughts as he considers his mortality and the waning of his creative powers. Her mother's hand looks closed yet appears ready to perform some action. Farhi's youngest sitter was the one year old child of a friend, a cheery little chap who gives Farhi a confident 'high-five' as his contribution, a symbolic gesture universally recognised.

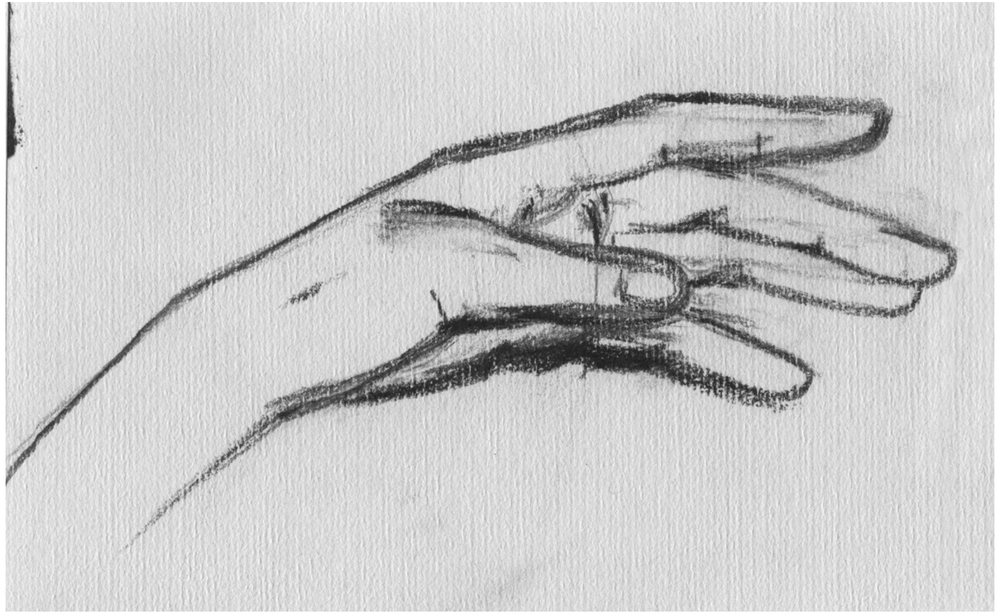
Also in her early eighties, the noted American sculptor Louise Bourgeois focused her creative attention on the subject of human hands. The twenty-four sculptures created for this exhibition 'The Human Hand' in many respects echo the Henry Moore quote above and also what Bourgeois said of herself as an artist: ' I am not what I am, I am what I do with my hands.' A sentiment that Farhi and this exhibition's focus wholeheartedly endorse.

Ed Watson

Principal Dancer Bronze, edition of 9, height including base: 75cm

Lauren Cuthbertson

Prima Ballerina Jesmonite with marble dust, edition of 9, height: 32cm



Artist's sketch

Port de Bras Marble resin, edition of 9, length: 85cm

Marianela Nùñez

Danseuse Étoile Bronze with white patina, edition of 9, height: 40cm

Anthony Marwood

Violinist Bronze, edition of 9, height: 34cm

Stephen Kovacevich

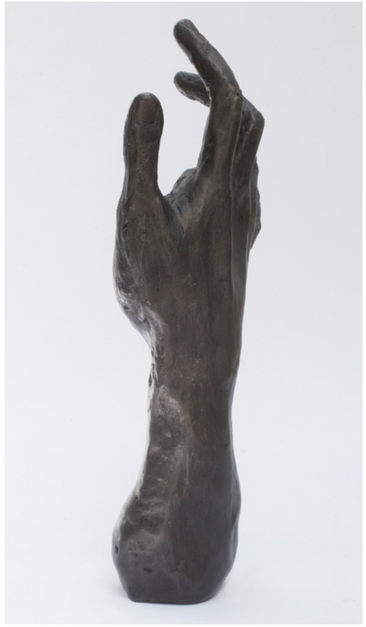
Pianist Bronze, edition of 9, height: 15cm

Suzi Digby

Conductor Bronze, edition of 9, height: 36cm

Rosey Chan

Jeu d'Eau Bronze, edition of 9, height: 33cm



Jeu d'Eau Bronze, edition of 9, height: 33cm

Gareth Patrick Williams

Flautist Glass, edition of 9, height: 30cm

Riyad Nicolas

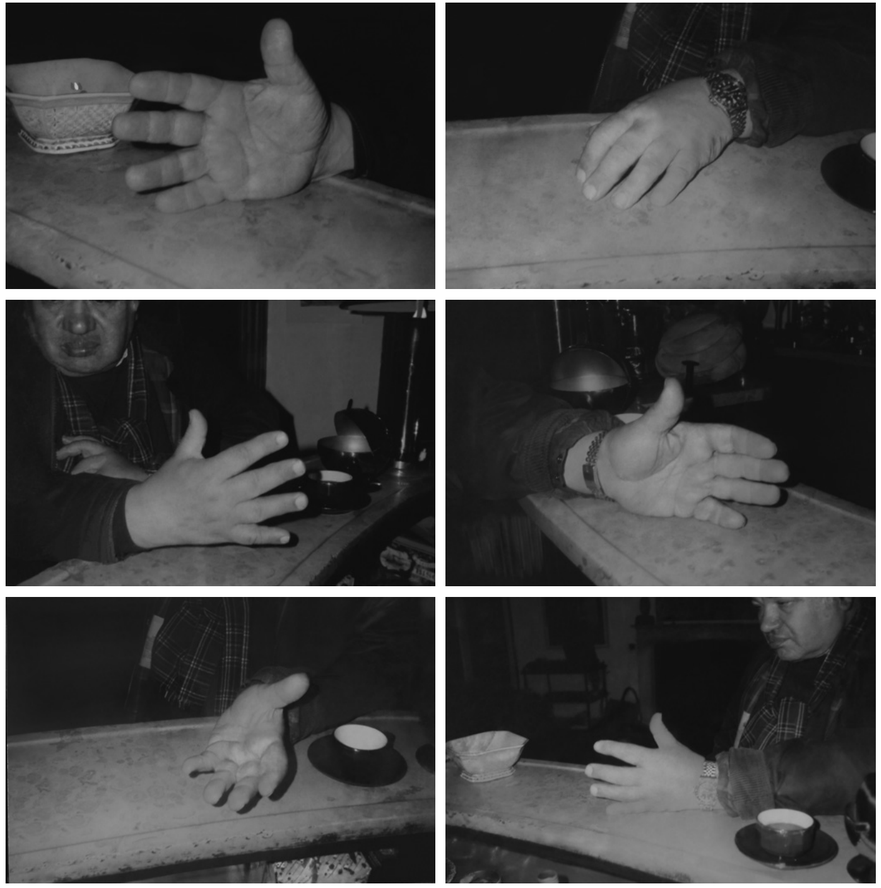
Last Chord Bronze, edition of 9, height: 38cm

Jacob Rothschild

Philanthropist Bronze, edition of 9, height: 20cm

Eduardo Paolozzi

Sculptor I Bronze, edition of 9, height: 26cm



Eduardo Paolozzi

Sculptor II Bronze, edition of 9, height: 16cm

Sculptor IV Bronze, edition of 9, height: 25cm

Sculptor III Bronze with a white patina, edition of 9, height: 24cm

Nicole Farhi

The Artist Bronze, edition of 9, height: 17cm

Ray

High Five Jesmonite with marble dust, edition of 9, height: 9cm

Anthony Whishaw

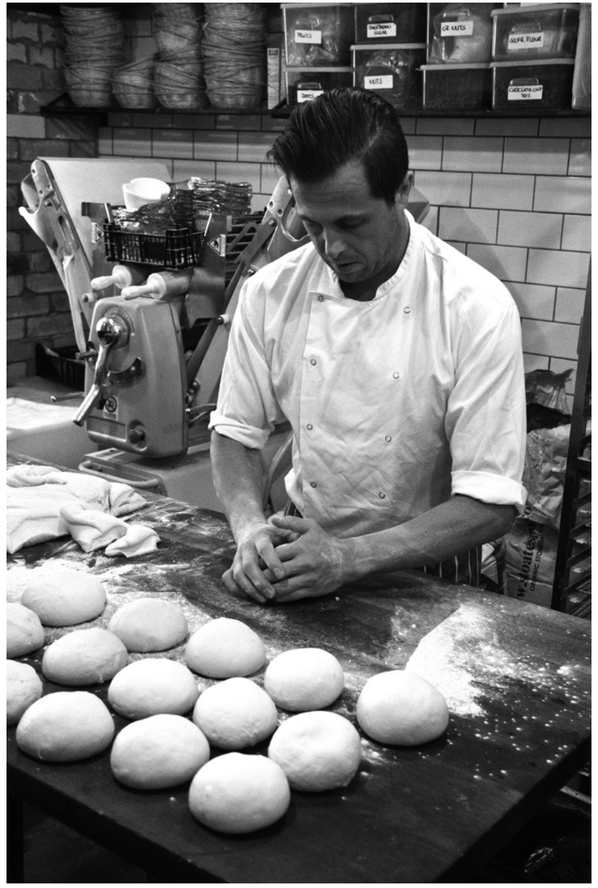
Painter Bronze, edition of 9, height: 28cm

Hitomi Hosono

Ceramicist Glass, edition of 9, height: 37cm

Paul Lambert

Glazier Concrete, edition of 9, height: 36cm



Julian Sciascia

Baker Marble resin, edition of 9, height: 19cm

David Hare

Dramatist Bronze, edition of 9, height: 9cm

Kamal Ansari

Beader Bronze, edition of 9, height: 12cm

Marcelle Farhi

Maman Marble resin, edition of 9, height: 7cm

Photographic Credits:
Portraits by Walter van Dyk, sculptures by Colin Mills, photographs of Eduardo Paolozzi by Candice Marks & introduction by Julian Jans

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