

Nicole Farhi On Her 35-Year Love Affair With Sculpture

Models, media and collectors are the muse of Nicole Farhi. But fashion, so many years after selling her eponymous label, the French-born, 72-year-old is wholly dedicated to her longest love affair: sculpture. Over green tea, and in sight of her immediate contemporary contemporary room models in her north London home, Farhi sits down with Farhi to discuss her new exhibition FOLDS, being screened by the late sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi, and sharing the love on fashion.

BY YOUNG LING

27th FEB 2019



Nicole Farhi in her home in north London. ©CHRISTOPHER LEE

What is a typical start to the day for you?

I am in bed at breakfast, with YouTube. It's for research for portraits. Then emails, and I am in the studio by 9am sharp. It is really important to have a routine, especially working from home. But I have never been lazy – and I love it here. If you go to the studio, the idea will come. My friend [the sculptor] Eduardo Paolozzi used to tell me how he would go to bed surrounded by objects and articles, to trigger his imagination. "Never finish a piece in the evening, always leave something to do," he would say. Such good advice.

Tell me about when you first met Paolozzi.

We met at the foundry over 30 years ago, around Christmas time. He loved good food, so would be here almost every week to enjoy my French cooking. He was my friend and mentor for so many years. He is in my soul, I will never lose him.



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Your approaches, as sculptors, are very different.

He was instrumental – not by telling me what to do, but in opening my eyes. And he never criticised, he simply taught me to express myself. He encouraged trying different mediums, but it turns out I only like clay! When I first touched clay, I thought, "This is it. This is my medium."

This new collection, FOLDS, comprises casts directly from the model. What led to you this new process?

Lifecasts are a different way of working, but I have worked before with fragments of hair, then hands. First, I do magazines, then take photographs, blow them up, and cut the model in that little room at the back of my studio. One of my models is Susan Tilley, who is a painter, but sat for Lucien Freud. We had simply met for a cup of tea, but she was curious about my process.



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Is there still a nod to fashion in your work?

FOLDS is truly my attention to the world of fashion. I believe there is beauty everywhere, and wanted to show parts of the body you don't even know you have. The fold of the back, for example, is so beautiful and harmonious, the lines become abstract. And the works are sensual, too. I am interested in the rough against the smooth. It is like the beginning of a dress where the edges are rough, or like treating a limb... but not in a frightening way!



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For 35 years you were sculpting on the side of a full-time career in fashion. Is being wholly dedicated to sculpture how you imagined it might be?

I never thought I would be so happy. So fulfilled. I don't know what to expect anymore, but I just keep going. I talk to the clay, and eventually a recognisable form emerges... It is a miracle! A wonderful thing. Certainly, you don't feel that miracle in fashion!



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Do you miss anything about your former life?

I miss nothing. I missed that page, but I will see my mistakes – I would hate to lose contact. I was lucky when I started in fashion. Back then, it was practically the beginning of prêt-à-porter, so everything was allowed. When I came to London, it was mind-blowing to go to the King Road. In Paris, women were much more conservative, they only wanted to be chic. I was lucky, too, to meet Stephen Masko who gave me total freedom. Nobody today would tell that to a designer.



FOLDS will be on display at *Bonus Arts London*, 40 Maddox Street, from January 21 until March 2 2019. Farhi's first women's show, *Nicole Farhi Hands and Hands* opens February 23 at *Gainsborough's House* in Sudbury, Suffolk.