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Nicole Farhi walked away from fashion to discover sculpture – and she didn't look back

'It's like falling in love. You don't know why. Something happens and your life is going to change.' **William Cook** meets the artisan at her Hampstead home



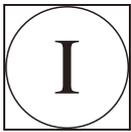
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The French creative tried to fit her art around business for nearly 30 years (*Julian Jans*)



n Gainsborough’s House in Sudbury, where Britain’s greatest portrait artist was born and raised, there’s a bust of that great artist which captures his personality as well any painting. His expression is quizzical. There’s a hint of mischief in his eyes. Seeing it for the first time you might suppose it was made 250 years ago – the result of numerous painstaking sittings. In fact, it was made just a few years ago, by the sculptor **Nicole Farhi**.

Nicole Farhi, sculptor? Wait a minute – I thought she was a **fashion** designer? Well, yes and no. It’s true that she made her reputation with her chic yet comfy clothes, but although her name remains a byword for casual elegance she’s not involved in fashion anymore. Instead she’s making **sculpture** now, full-time, and in February she has a new show at Gainsborough’s House, in Suffolk, where her Gainsborough bust has pride of place.

I know nothing about fashion, but I liked that Gainsborough bust a lot. It was conscientious and unpretentious. The focus was on the subject not the sculptor, the way such sculptures ought to be. So when my friend Tracy wangled me an invite to Farhi’s Hampstead home, I jumped at the chance to meet her. I wanted to find out if her new career as a sculptor was for real. I wanted to know if that Gainsborough bust was just a one-off.

She meets me in the doorway of her Georgian house. You wouldn’t know she’s 72. Her huge mane of wavy hair is as thick and wild as ever. Her eyes are bright. Her skin is clear. She’s dressed simply, in white pumps, blue jeans and a blue jumper. On anyone else her age, these plain clothes would look dowdy. On her, they’re stylish. How does she pull it off? A pointless question, no need to ask. She’s a famous **fashion designer**, after all.

She was also an interior designer – everything from furnishing to kitchenware – and so, as you’d expect, her home is pretty stylish too: lots of brightly coloured drapes; lots of paintings on the walls; lots of books and classy bric-a-brac, and lots of sculptures too. She shows me a bust she made of a friend, sculpted when he was in deep despair, a face misshapen with pain and grief. “He looked so torn

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– his wife had left him.” It’s a world away from her Gainsborough bust, so discreet and delicate by comparison. I never knew her work had such range. I’m pleasantly surprised. I’m also quite impressed.

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Of course it’s terribly unfair, as I know all too well. My mother is a sculptor, about the same age as Nicole. She’s been slogging away throughout her life, ever since art school, and has never broken through. Yet no one’s life is easy. Nicole’s fame has opened doors, but those doors would soon close again if the work wasn’t any good. Britons distrust polymaths and are suspicious of second careers. It may be a bit easier for Nicole to get to first base with her sculpture. It may be a lot

harder for her to get beyond second base.

It’s not as if sculpture is a newfound fancy. She’s been hard at it for over half her life – 37 years. She shows me a small torso, the first sculpture she ever made. As she holds it in her hand she tells me how she came to make it. She’d gone to see the sculptor Jean Gibson, to ask if she could be her pupil. “I’ll only take you if you have something to say – otherwise, it’s a waste of time,” said Jean as she handed Nicole a piece of clay. Jean told Nicole to sculpt a torso, there and then. When Nicole had finished, Jean took a good look at it. “I’m taking you on – come back on Wednesday,” she said.

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Farhi also sculpts hands and torsos (Walter van Dyk)

“I went to my car and I burst into tears – I was so emotional,” recalls Nicole. “You see a door opening to another world. I’m emotional just to think about it.” As she retells the story, her eyes well up with tears.

No, this is no passing fad. “It’s like falling in love. You don’t know why. Something happens and your life is going to change.” For over 30 years she had to fit her sculpture around fashion, but then in 2012, she walked away. “Now I

It’s like falling in love. You don’t know why.



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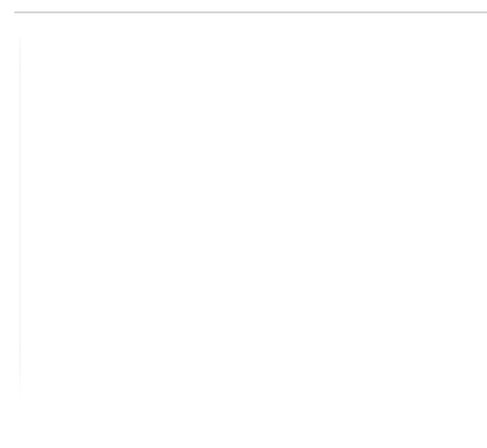
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sculpt every day.”

She takes me to her studio, an orangery in the garden. There are rows and rows of busts in here, of famous friends: Bill Nighy, **Judi Dench**, **Anna Wintour**, Wallace Shawn, Stephen Frears... these busts are full of character. She sculpts hands too, and the torsos of voluptuous women, some of which will be shown at the Beaux Arts London gallery in January. “Large women are beautiful – flesh is wonderful!” she exclaims.

These Rubenesque women are a world away from the models she used to work with during her previous career. “It’s about the sensuality of the flesh, the beauty that large women have,” she says. “For me, it’s a complete antidote, obviously, to everything I did before, to work on larger bodies. But it’s also very important for me to show that you expect to see beauty in a slim person, when beauty is in everything and everybody.”

Something happens and your life is going to change

Nicole Farhi



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The artist in her orangery-turned-studio (Julian Jans)

Discovering sculpture later on in life has made her determined not to waste a moment. “I don’t have 50 years in front of me,” she says. “I work every single day, but I don’t mind. I’m so happy that I have been able to stop fashion and just sculpt.” She loved art from an early age, and used to paint while she was a student, but when she was young she preferred the whirlwind of the fashion world to the isolation of the artist, so she’s philosophical about the time she’s lost.

“Maybe I would not have been serious enough as artist then,” she says. “Sculpture is a much slower pace. I can take it now. Probably at the age of 20 I could not.” After 40 years in fashion, she relishes her new seclusion. “I don’t miss the world of fashion at all. I’m very happy on my own here.”

For me, it's a complete antidote, obviously, to

She was born in 1946 in Nice, the second of two children. Her parents were Sephardic Jews, immigrants from Turkey. There was no art in her childhood home. “None whatsoever.” Her father was a gentle man who saw the best in everyone.

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Nicole Farhi

He sold carpets for a living. “The house was full of rugs.”

Her father sounds a bit too nice to be a terribly successful businessman, but she adored him all the same. “My mother always fought with him because she thought he was too kind,” she says, “but he was at peace with it – he was a wise man.” Her relationship with her mother was more fiery, but her mother had more of an artistic sensibility than her father (“my dad never understood what I was doing”) and it was her mother who enabled her to go to Paris to study

fashion – her father wanted her to stay at home.

One of the reasons she chose to study fashion was because there were no fashion schools close to home. “Nice was a very small town,” she says. “I was dreaming of the capital.” In Paris, she soon made her mark, not by impressing her tutors but by cold-calling fashion houses, from public telephones in corner cafes, and asking to show them her drawings and designs. For an unknown teenager, that must have taken a lot of confidence, I say. “There was no other way,” she replies. “I didn't think I had anything to lose.”

It was in Paris, in 1972, that she met the founder of French Connection, the London fashion retailer Stephen Marks (“a fabulous businessman”). They started working together, became a couple, and had a child together – a daughter, Candice, now a photographic agent in America.

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‘Flesh is wonderful,’ Farhi says of her subjects (Walter van Dyk)

For a few years, Nicole remained in Paris with Candice, but eventually, she decided it would be best for Candice to go to school in Britain, so when Candice was four she brought her to London.

She's lived here ever since, but she still feels French rather than British (she still speaks with a strong French accent) and the clothes that she designed brought a

continental flair to British fashion. Yet she had no game plan, no grand design.

She was simply doing what came naturally. “I only did what I felt was right for me. I designed looser clothes because that’s what I liked wearing. I didn’t do very short dresses, because I didn’t think that was nice, to look at a girl and only see the thighs – when she’s dressed, of course. When she’s naked it’s a different thing!”

Nicole Farhi sculptures – in pictures

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What was it like working with the father of her only child? “It was good and bad because we argued a lot at work,” she says. “We were fighting a lot.” In the end, they separated, but they kept on working together. “And then things changed completely. We had the best relationship working together once we were not living together, and now we’re still very, very close friends. We had a lot of respect for each other, which we never lost. I think he helped me tremendously at becoming who I was.” They’re still close today.

In 1992 Nicole married the playwright [David Hare](#), with whom she shares this splendid house. It sounds like love at first sight, and, from the way she talks about him, it sounds as if their love has never faded. Yet they might so easily have never met. Nicole had designed some costumes for Hare’s play, *Murmuring Judges*, and was invited to the first night party. Yet she had no intention of going until she saw Hare on TV the night before. “He went straight to my heart!” she says. Entranced and intrigued, she went to the party, and he made a beeline for her table. “It was the same for him!”

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The artist working on a bust of Bill Nighy, just one of her famous friends (Julian Jans)

“You should have started earlier,” Hare said when he saw her sculptures. Maybe she should have met him earlier, too. When she was a fashion student in Paris, Hare was studying at the Sorbonne. They both used to skip classes to go to the movies, at the same cinemas, and yet their paths never crossed. “We could have been younger, had kids together,” she muses. Yet, as she says, quite rightly, there’s no point in crying over what you’ve missed.

While Nicole sculpts in the orangery, David writes in his own studio just down the road. For two creative artists in their early 70s, it sounds like an idyllic life. “We don’t meet during the day – he doesn’t come home for lunch,” she says. But they’re obviously besotted with each other. Clearly, a little absence makes the heart grow fonder as the years ebb away.

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For the last seven years, they’ve shared the house with Nicole’s mother, who moved in with them at the grand old age of 95. For Nicole, it was a poignant epilogue to a long and turbulent relationship. “She did tell me, perhaps for the first time in her life, when she was 101, that she loved me,” she says. “Because we fought so much, I was never sure.” She died six



Controversial uterus sculptures by Damien Hirst unveiled in Qatar

months ago, aged 102. Nicole shows me the bust she made of her, looking feisty and defiant, but the sculpture that really moves me is of her frail

little hand, cast when she was 100.

Stephen Marks sold the Nicole Farhi label in 2010. Nicole carried on working there, but it was never quite the same. She left a couple of years later. “I hoped one day I would stop, but I had no idea when that would be. It was only when my company was sold that I realised that was my way out.” For her, it was a liberation. When Nicole Farhi went into administration the following year she felt oddly detached from the brand that still bears her name. “It was not upsetting at all,” she says. “I could not wait to leave.”

No matter. Sculpture is what she does now, and she’s determined not to look back. As she shows me out, she stops to show me the bust of her friend and mentor, the great Italian-Scottish sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi. “He opened my eyes to everything,” she tells me, as we say goodbye. It’s a supremely expressive sculpture, full of life and love and suffering. There are several others I like a lot, but for me, this is the pick of the bunch. Before I met her, I couldn’t quite understand why she’d turned her back on fashion, but now I know she was right to do so. Nicole Farhi used to be a brilliant fashion designer, but that was then and this is now. She’s a proper sculptor now.

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