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Nicole Farhi: 'I love art profoundly in a way I never loved fashion'

Designer who sold her fashion label to be a sculptor showcases her work in the house she shares with her husband, Sir David Hare

At her home in April

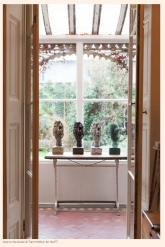
Penne Lavender Cake 10 YEARS AGO

It is difficult to know where to look. There is a bronze arm here, a bust depicting Giacometti there; sculptures above, sculptures below, irreverently veering at close stops. Paintings and etchings cloak the walls — and we have not yet got beyond the hall.

Nicole Farhi leads me through a covered veranda and past a wisteria that is trying to force its way into the adjoining stable. This is where Farhi spends every day, working from 9am until the sun goes down, modelling in clay, making plaster moulds and casting in cement finals while her husband — playwright Sir David Hare — works from his own studio nearby.

"I am always committed to what I am doing," she says. "Both then it was fashion and now it is sculpture. But I love art profoundly in a way I never loved fashion."

It is a candid admission from Farhi, 74, who, for more than 30 years, had been at the forefront of the fashion industry. Farhi launched her eponymous clothing brand with her then-partner Stephen Marks in 1978, under the ownership of his company French Connection. At its height, Nicole Farhi boutiques spanned from New York to Japan. But it suffered in the global recession and in 2010, the brand was sold to a US-based private equity firm for £50m. In 2012, Farhi left the label behind — and with it the fashion industry.



Farhi's studio, where she works every day, is filled with sculptures

Within two years, she had held her first solo sculpture exhibition at the Bevanus Gallery in central London. The work, a collection of 12 busts of famous people in clay, bronze and aluminium, featured actress Bill Nighy, Dame Judi Dench and Helena Bonham Carter, as well as Vogue editor Anna Wintour — many of whom attended the launch party.

"To be honest" she says, "it helped that I was known as a fashion designer. People were curious."

Does this ever make her self-conscious about her work? "No," she replies. "I don't really care what people think. If they like what I am doing it is great; if they don't, I will carry on whatever. The point is not to be popular," she says. "It's to be good."

Farhi's studio, located by an old ceramic stove, used to be the orangerie. On one side are sculptures of heads and expressive hands of musicians, artists and dancers, which are bound for a solo exhibition at Gainsborough's House museum in Suffolk, which opens on February 23. Elsewhere, there sit some two-dozen six-foot high painted plaster busts of 20th-century literary figures, from Beckett to Bonavoir — complete with attributes of glasses or cigarettes — which will be shown in Edinburgh in July.

Farhi — born in Nice into a Sephardic Jewish family from Turkey — has lived in this corners of Hampstead, north London, for some 40 years. She bought the house, which was built in 1700, with Marks, when she finally decided to settle permanently in London. "I loved the commute I used to do, to and from Paris," she says, "but our daughter Candice was four, and had to go to school."

Her sartorial "uniform" of black trousers and white shirt has been honed over many years. "It is what I have always worn," Bianca has it the former fashion designer has not bought an item of clothing for five years. Although, as she says, "Now my daughter buys me clothes, and my wonderful ex-assistants sometimes turn up at the house with sweaters they've designed, or trousers, or scarves. I love it."

Nicole Farhi: a Parisian boutique and beyond, by the banks of the Seine © Tom Wilkins for the FT

Farhi's passion for sculpture goes back to her thirties. "By the late 1970s, I was already feeling that fashion was not enough," she says. "Then one evening, I met a lady at a dinner, who talked of her work as a sculptor. And I thought, 'yes, that is what I would like to do!' She introduced me to [sculptor] Joan Gibson, who became my teacher."

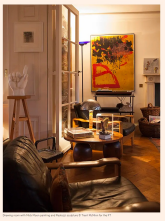
Gibson taught her to cast her work in cement finals. It was when she progressed to casting her first bronze, at the RCA Foundry, that she met the man who was to become her mentor — the late artist, Sir Eduardo Paolozzi. "Eduardo became my friend," she says, "generous with his genius, where Joan was more strict, more classical. It was wonderful to have them both."

From the sitting-room overlooking the garden, I notice a few white roses have defied the winter frost as we sit at an art-deco bar. Here, there is a coffee machine so complicated it might have been designed by Heath Robinson and a drawer full of French fancies. "The owner's last tips" — which Farhi took from a closing-down sale that she used to frequent in the Marais.

Farhi's sitting room, with its collection of Paolozzi busts © Tom Wilkins for the FT

The room is homely and eclectic, filled with artwork by friends — there is a sculptured tableau by Gibson, and paintings by Gibson's husband, Anthony Whishaw. A Louis Vuitton trunk and a pair of 1930s wooden armchairs were secured at Saint-Ouen ("I love flea markets — David tells it my hobby-hunt"), a marble chemb's head liberated from a skip.

Colourful Kilim rugs and cushions recall her heritage: when her father left Turkey for Marseille as a young man, he sold carpets for a living. A pair of rabbits sit above a classical fireplace. "They're by Rimaldo," says Farhi. "There." Just the penny drops.



Farhi's studio, with Paolozzi's sculptures and a Tracey Emin piece © Tom Wilkins for the FT

She talks me how she and her husband first met. In 1991, "I had done a couple of costumes for [Hare's play] *Murmuring Judges*, and [director] Richard Eyre invited me to the premiere and dinner afterwards. It was a *coup de foudre*, for both of us," she says. They were married the following year. Packnett was their witness. His daughter, Emma, a jeweller, made their wedding rings, to a design by Farhi: a pair of bars bounding hand to tail in a circle of eternity.

On one wall of the broad mahogany staircase, an entire cast of disembodied heads float on wooden shelves, many of which featured in her 2014 show Christopher Wilkes, Rupert Everett and more. The theatrical stairwell is also home to rare signs of her husband's work — large photographic stills of Dame Judi Dench and other actors in character, from his plays. A handsome bronze of her husband perches in the kitchen. "Somebody bought it, but I decided I didn't want to sell," she says. "That caused a problem."

> **People have an idea of the perfect woman, 'Fiddy' was a liberation**

Of all, it is Paolozzi's presence that looms largest. The dining room, wood-panelled around a monumental table of limestone, shipped from a quarry in France, is dubbed "Paolozzi's room". filled with his sculptures and works on paper — all gifts of the artist. He did not live to see Farhi's transition to professional sculptor but, as early fan of her "sexy pieces", he would no doubt have approved of her solo exhibition, Fiddy, currently showing at London's Bowes Arts gallery.

I have a sneak preview of it in her studio. Cast in gleaming white Jesmonite and dark bronze, this collection of tender, intimate fragments of the female form is redolent of the classical fertility goddesses after whom each piece is named.

'People have an idea of the perfect woman, Fiddy was a liberation — freedom to express the beauty underneath the clothes: folds of flesh, breasts, stomachs, bums — not slinky women,' says the former fashion designer. 'It's about letting go of the conception of beauty.'

Favourite thing

A Two Fishes by Hart

Farhi's favourite piece: maquette of the wedding ring she designed, composed of two hands, one with her husband's name — forming a circle in place from of a window on the staircase landing, alongside two small bronze maquettes that were subsequently made by Sir Eduardo Paolozzi's daughter, before the rings were crafted in gold.

'Fiddy' is showing at the Bowes Arts Gallery, London, until March 31

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