

Feature

Coming face to face with the great and the good at Gainsborough's House

Gainsborough's House latest show is a portrait exhibition with a difference. Portrait sculptures allow you to get up close and personal with some very famous heads. Arts editor **Andrew Clarke** speaks to sculptor Nicole Farhi about her favourite heads and hands

When you are invited to see a new portrait exhibition you don't expect to come face-to-face with the people being immortalised. Step into the gallery space at Gainsborough's House in Sudbury and you will find yourself 'meeting' Dame Judi Dench, Bill Nighy, Tom Stoppard, David Hare, Helena Bonham Carter, Anna Wintour, Lucien Freud – even Thomas Gainsborough himself.

These are not portraits in the 'traditional' sense – painted in oils, then framed and hung on a wall – but it is 'traditional' in the way that ancient Greeks and Romans used to commission sculptures, portraits of their great and good, and put them on public display so they could be venerated by the populace at large.

Gainsborough House's latest exhibition, *Heads and Hands*, is by sculptor Nicole Farhi who is best known as a fashion designer but also studied with and was mentored by Sir Eduardo Paolozzi.

Farhi has been sculpting full-time for five years, and her relationship with Gainsborough's House began in 2015, when Farhi created a bronze bust of Thomas Gainsborough for the museum in support of their fundraising

campaign to build a new archive and study centre with additional exhibition space.

The *Heads and Hands* exhibition includes busts of some of the greatest artists of the past 100 years - Lucian Freud (1922-2011), Francis Bacon (1909-1992), and perhaps most notably, Sir Eduardo Paolozzi (1924-2005), Nicole Farhi's great friend and teacher.

Paolozzi lived for many years at Thorpe-le-Soken near Colchester and was a visiting professor at the well-regarded Ipswich Art School.

Influential figures from stage and screen are also represented through the heads of Tom Stoppard, Judi Dench, Helena Bonham Carter and Farhi's husband, playwright David Hare.

Talking about the process of creating her work, at the opening of the exhibition, Nicole said that the portrait busts emerge from a sitting in the studio where photographs are taken of the subject.

"I then start building an armature (a framework) and after a few hours sculpting in clay the structure of the face will appear, or not ... Once I have the structure the true character will follow – sometimes days later, weeks, sometimes months.



Bill Nighy with Nicole Farhi at the opening of her exhibition *Heads and Hands* which is currently on show at Gainsborough's House in Sudbury

Picture: JULIAN JANS

"To make a good portrait you have to try and capture the character of the person to come through," Farhi said of her experience portraying Gainsborough: "This was a challenge as there were very few portraits of the artist to be inspired by. Nevertheless, when I looked at Gainsborough's work, I found kindness and love for his native Suffolk in his beautiful landscapes, and a certain sense of humour in his portraits of the society around him. These two elements gave me the departure for the portrait."

The exhibition also includes portraits of hands and like the heads that they accompany; they show character and reflect the life and work of the sitter. They

portray the dexterous hands of musicians, the graceful hands of dancers, the experienced hands of a sculptor and the joyful hands of children. "Hands," Nicole says, "can be even more expressive than the face. They can tell you everything about who the person is, what they are like, what they do."

Nicole Farhi, Lady Hare, CBE is a French fashion designer and sculptor. She started her career as a freelance designer in Paris before settling in London in the 1970s, eventually joining the design team at French Connection in 1978. In 1982, she launched her own label – originally under the French Connection umbrella – and came to be known for her elegant, unstructured designs for

women and men. Since its inception, the Nicole Farhi brand has grown to include shoes, accessories, home décor, and even restaurants. Museum director Mark Bills says "Nicole is a huge supporter of Gainsborough's House and her bust of Thomas Gainsborough is exceptional – even though they are separated by more than 200 years, I think there is an understanding there, one artist to another. This is a quality she brings to all her sculptures, and why we are so delighted to be able to show much more of her work at the museum."

Nicole Farhi: *Heads and Hands*, a sculpture portrait exhibition, is at Gainsborough House, Sudbury until June 16 2019.