

The library of sculpted authors was first inspired by the Oscar Wilde bust she gifted to her husband, David Hare



A BUST-SEE COLLECTION

Globally famous as a fashion designer, Nicole Fahri is now starting a new career as a (very literary) sculptor

WORDS ANDREW DICKSON ARTWORK COURTESY OF NICOLE FAHRI



Anyone stepping inside the Fine Art Society on Dundas Street this August might wonder what they've got themselves into. There's someone who looks remarkably like Samuel Beckett, severe and inscrutable as ever. A white-bearded Ernest Hemingway broods nearby. Can that be Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus in conversation? Toni Morrison chatting away to Muriel Spark?

Entitled *Writing Heads*, the exhibition – 25 busts of famous literary folk, both living and dead – has been brought together by another name you might recognise, Nicole Fahri. But she's not here as a fashion designer, the career that made her a household name on catwalks across the globe: she's the artist. Every one of these busts, most only 12 cm tall, was sculpted by hand in Fahri's studio, a converted orangery at the rear of her Hampstead home.

"For many years, I was living a double life," Fahri laughs. "But at last I'm able to come out. I can do it full-time. I feel impossibly lucky."

Fahri, now 72, always had a hankering to make art. Even while studying fashion in Paris in the late 1960s she would pursue other interests: dutifully learning patterns and designs in the morning, and spending her afternoons at an easel or watching movies. But when she began to make a reputation as a designer, she had to leave her paints to one side.

It wasn't until a chance conversation in her thirties that Fahri began to wonder if her talents might lie in clay and bronze. On a friend's recommendation, she went to meet the sculptor Jean Gibson, who taught evening classes; Gibson made her sculpt something on the spot, to prove that she was serious.

"She thought I was a dilettante," Fahri reflects. "But I think I can say I became a favourite student. I never missed a class. When I touched the clay, I knew it was something important for me."

That was 35 years ago, when Fahri's fashion label was becoming a major international force. When she finally left the rag trade behind (the label was sold in 2010, and she cut her ties to it a few years later), her determination to spend more of her time making sculpture was a major part of the reason.

Though the disciplines have obvious differences, Fahri does feel the connection. "Making clothes, you work in the third dimension too. You use your eyes, you teach yourself to look, not only in front of you, but behind and above also. Maybe that's why I was drawn to sculpture. You go deep."

Writing Heads came about similarly by chance. In 2012, her husband, the playwright David Hare, was about to open a revival of his play *The Judas Kiss* in London; to celebrate, Fahri made him a tiny bust of Oscar Wilde, its hero and subject. Busts of Chekhov and Ibsen followed, each tied to new productions. While she was supposed to be working on other projects and exhibitions, Fahri kept adding to the collection. The literary menagerie – pantheon? party? – grew and grew. Fahri models each





Farhi in her studio, a converted orangery in Hampstead.

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head in clay before casting it in a concrete-like material, then painting it in cheerful acrylic.

Some of the busts capture major Anglo-American literary figures, among them Philip Roth, James Baldwin and Doris Lessing. Others reflect the artist's own French background and tastes: Françoise Sagan, Jean Cocteau, Camus, and – *naturellement* – De Beauvoir.

"When I was living in Paris in the 1970s, she was my heroine, like she was for a lot of women of my generation. Camus, too," Farhi says. "I'm a bit biased, I love the French ones."

A select few – notably playwright and *The Princess Bride* and *Toy Story* star Wallace Shawn, a good friend of both Farhi and Hare – are more personal. Unlike the majority of her subjects, where she had to work from archive footage and stills, Farhi was able to sketch Shawn from life.

"He has an incredible face, and he's the only one who is smiling," she says. "I sent him a photo."

There's more to Farhi's sculptural output than just these busts. The great Scottish artist Eduardo Paolozzi was a friend and mentor, and he pushed her to experiment in every way she could. In recent years, she's made a number of works celebrating folds of Rubenesque flesh, which are cast directly from her models' bodies, another series focusing on heads and hands, as well as more abstract compositions. One is a bronze called *Orgasm* – a blast of what might be flame tearing out from a small bomb-like sphere. "Explosive" seems the appropriate adjective.

She works at a relentless pace, and finds herself in her studio by 9am most mornings. "I'm not 20 years old any longer," she says. "I feel like I'm running."

WHERE & WHEN Writing Heads

The Fine Art Society, 6 Dundas Street, Edinburgh EH3. 25 July - 25 August 2019. Mon - Fri 10am - 6pm. Sat 11am - 4pm. fasedinburgh.com

One thing Farhi is clear on: she has little time for art-world vogues. Unlike a great deal of contemporary sculpture, these busts are unashamedly figurative, even a touch old-fashioned. She sees no reason to apologise.

"Even when I worked in fashion, I was never fashionable," she says, laughing again. "I like that."

