Issue 16 | Winter 2026

THE VIEW

for women with conviction

SILENT EXECUTION

Women denied cancer care in English prisons

Lily Allen

Pop, feminism and creative destruction

OPCAT Watchdogs

Rose-tinted reports, justice denied

Art as a form of resistance

by Nicole Farhi

Christine Foster
Dr Ciara Greene
Farah Damji
Jonathan Aitken
Lara Dizeyee
Lynn Elmsley
Kim Kardashian

NEWS, VIEWS AND TRUES BY WOMEN IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

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Art as an act of resistance

An interview with Nicole Farhi

Nicole Farhi is synonymous with British fashion, arguably best known for her partnership with the brand French Connection. Recently, her sculptures are thoughtful, provocative and often confrontational pieces, exploring important issues of injustice, abuse and false imprisonment. Alongside her artistry, Farhi has become a crucial voice of, and advocate for, the forgotten people, shining a light on those who are silenced through her exhibitions.

She is in conversation with Christine Foster about her recent unveiling of a bronze bust of Victor Hugo, her significant contribution to justice activism with her exhibition *J'Accuse*, the impact of imprisonment on people, her upcoming exhibition series, The Children of Gaza, and the impact of being Jewish in this time of particular conflict and tension.

The View Magazine appreciates Nicole dedicating time from her exceptionally busy schedule to participate in this insightful interview.

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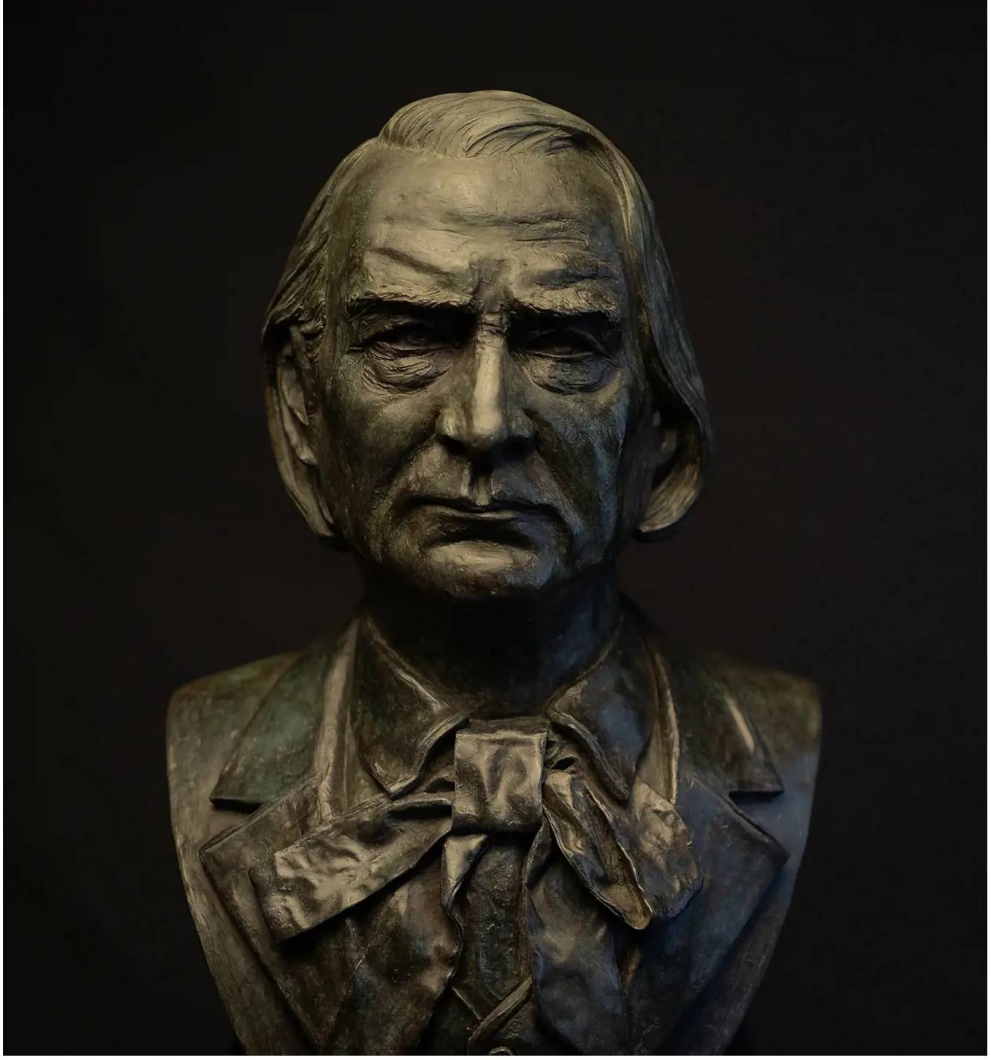

VICTOR HUGO

What inspiration did you take in sculpting the bust of Victor Hugo?

Victor Hugo came to me as a continuation of *J'Accuse* [my work on Miscarriages of Justice] rather than as a separate subject. I was deeply inspired by his fierce moral voice — his insistence that art must not only describe the world but stand against injustice.

I chose to portray Victor Hugo at the age of 53, when he arrived in Guernsey, rather than the older, iconic image made famous by Rodin with the longv beard. I wanted to step away from that monumental, almost mythic representation and return to the man himself — at a pivotal moment of exile, displacement, and renewed creative fire.

My first visit to Guernsey was for the unveiling of the bust. I had been several times to Jersey, where I had exhibitions of my work at CCA International Galleries, but never to Guernsey. I did, however, visit Hugo's house in Paris during the making of the bust.

How did you find the people and pace of life in Guernsey? Did you agree with Victor Hugo's description of Guernsey as 'severe yet kind'.

I understand why Hugo described Guernsey as 'severe yet kind' — the island has a rawness, a dramatic landscape, and an intense light that can feel austere. But personally, during my stay, I encountered nothing but warmth and generosity from the people. My experience was overwhelmingly kind. The crucial difference, of course, is purpose. Hugo arrived as an exile — wounded, defiant, and politically isolated. I was invited as an artist, welcomed rather than banished.

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THE EXHIBITION J'ACCUSE

What inspired you at this stage of your career to do such a powerful exhibition?

J'Accuse came at a moment when I felt both urgency and clarity. After years of sculpting the human figure and exploring intimacy, I became less interested in beauty for its own sake and more compelled to engage directly with moral questions. I wanted to use sculpture not only to observe humanity, but to defend it.

This exhibition grew from outrage at the stories of people wrongly accused — ordinary lives crushed by systems that refused to listen or admit error. At this stage of my career, I felt a responsibility rather than a hesitation: the freedom to step beyond comfort and make work that speaks plainly. ***J'Accuse.***

Did you feel a sense of relief when it was completed that you had managed to shine a light on this important issue?

No — I didn't feel relief at all. Because the work isn't complete, and sadly it never will be. As long as injustice continues, the need to bear witness remains. *J'Accuse* doesn't offer closure; it exists precisely because the problem hasn't ended.

Completing the exhibition simply marked a pause, not an ending — a moment to breathe before acknowledging that there are still countless untold stories. The sculptures are not a resolution; they are a continuing call to attention. In that sense, there was no sense of relief — only a renewed awareness of how necessary the work still is.

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La Douceur

What impact do you hope it will have? Are you content to raise awareness of the issue or is your end goal/hope that fundamental change seeds will be sown?

I don't carry an expectation that the exhibition will change systems or produce immediate reform — that would be an illusion of scale. My role as an artist is not to legislate or solve, but to speak honestly. I wanted to give form to what I feel: outrage, compassion, and refusal to look away.

If the work raises awareness, that's meaningful — but more than that, I hope it creates a 'shared feeling'. That some people stand in front of these faces and recognise the same emotions I carried while making them. Even a quiet moment of connection matters. Change doesn't always begin with policy; sometimes it begins when a feeling is transmitted, when someone leaves seeing the world a little differently. That is enough for me.

IMPACT OF IMPRISONMENT AND BEING PREVENTED FROM DOING ART

The founder of The Feminist Justice Coalition ('FJC') and The View Magazine is Farah Damji, inspired by her own experiences of inequality in the justice system. As I write, Farah is in prison in HMP Eastwood Park, and she is not being permitted to take art classes at the prison. The FJC sent in watercolour paper and brushes over a month ago, which have not been given to her.

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How would you feel if you were imprisoned and unjustly prevented from doing art?

It would feel like a second sentence — the removal not only of freedom, but of voice. For many of us, art is how we breathe and think; to take that away is to isolate someone even further from their own humanity.

That's why the work of *The Art of Innocence in Bristol* moves me so deeply. They restore something essential by helping wrongly imprisoned people create — not as therapy alone, but as an affirmation that their voices still matter, that they are more than the crime attributed to them.

I will be showing *J'Accuse* alongside the prisoners' work in 2026. It feels necessary. Their art isn't commentary — it's lived experience. My sculptures are acts of witness from the outside; their works come from the inside. Bringing both together creates a dialogue between representation and reality — between telling the story and actually surviving it.

What would the impact on your mental health be?

It would be devastating. Art isn't just my profession — it's how I make sense of the world and stay mentally upright. Being unjustly imprisoned and unable to create would mean a profound erosion of identity. You would start to lose not only freedom of movement, but freedom of thought — the sense that you still matter, that your inner life has value.

To go back to **Farah Damji**, guilty or not guilty, to prevent her from making art is wrong and deeply unjust. Creativity is vital for mental survival inside prison. Making art becomes a form of resistance — a way to preserve dignity, to hold onto sanity, to remind yourself that you still exist beyond the walls. Without that outlet, the psychological damage would be immense."

I will tell Farah:

Even when the world closes a door, the imagination remains a room no one can lock. Your creative spirit is innocent, and it survives. Hold on to the knowledge that the impulse to make, to express, to transform pain into form, is already an act of freedom.

L'Etreinte

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INFLUENCE OF FAITH ON YOUR ART

How has being Jewish impacted your life from childhood to your career in fashion and art?

I don't feel that my Jewish identity consciously shaped my path in fashion or art. It wasn't something that acted as a guiding framework or a theme in my work. Growing up, I was aware of cultural difference, of course, but I don't connect my creative drive to that identity in any direct way.

What has shaped me more clearly are universal values rather than heritage alone — humanism, compassion, and a refusal of injustice wherever it appears. Those feelings belong to no single culture. If my work resonates with ideas of resistance or moral duty, I see that as coming from a shared human vocabulary rather than from a specifically Jewish one.

Do you take any inspiration from Jewish culture or tradition that can be seen in your work?

No — not in any direct or conscious way. I don't draw from religious texts, or cultural references in my work. My inspiration comes from lived human experience — injustice, tenderness, vulnerability, resistance — which transcends any single tradition or identity.

What you see in my sculptures is not an expression of a particular heritage, but of a universal human impulse to witness and to care.

How has being the child of a family that endured concentration camps during the Second World War impacted your art?

I wouldn't say it has shaped my work directly. I've never positioned my art as a response to inherited trauma or personal lineage. My subjects are chosen from the present tense — from what's happening now, not from what happened to my family decades ago.

However, I do feel a moral continuity across generations. The next series, The Children of Gaza, comes from a painful awareness that history can be forgotten — even by those whose families once suffered the most extreme injustices. That forgetting troubles me deeply.

La Tendresse

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The series isn't an accusation directed at identities or peoples — it's a cry against selective memory. Suffering should sharpen our compassion, not narrow it. For me, the work is about refusing hierarchy in grief — every child's suffering matters equally.

You are part of the Independent Jewish Voices (IJV) launched on 5 February 2007 by 150 prominent British Jews. Have you experienced a backlash from some Members of the Jewish Community who view the actions of the Israeli Government as "beyond reproach"? What is your response to them?

I haven't experienced backlash — I'm no longer in those circles. But I don't approve of the current politics of Israel, and I don't believe any government should be beyond criticism when human lives are at stake. My position comes from conscience, not from identity.

Are you hopeful that in your lifetime you will see a resolution to the conflict?

Hope is difficult, but I try to keep a small one. I don't expect a perfect resolution in my lifetime — the history and the wounds are too deep. But I do hope to see moments of humanity break through, moments where compassion outweighs fear and revenge. Even small steps matter.

You are Lady Hare by virtue of your marriage to Sir David Rippon Hare FRSL. How do you feel about being part of Britain's establishment? In what circumstances would you use the title i.e. restaurant bookings?

I do not feel part of Britain's establishment; my name is Nicole Farhi. Sometimes Farhi is followed by Hare. Never Lady Hare. I have never used the title.

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