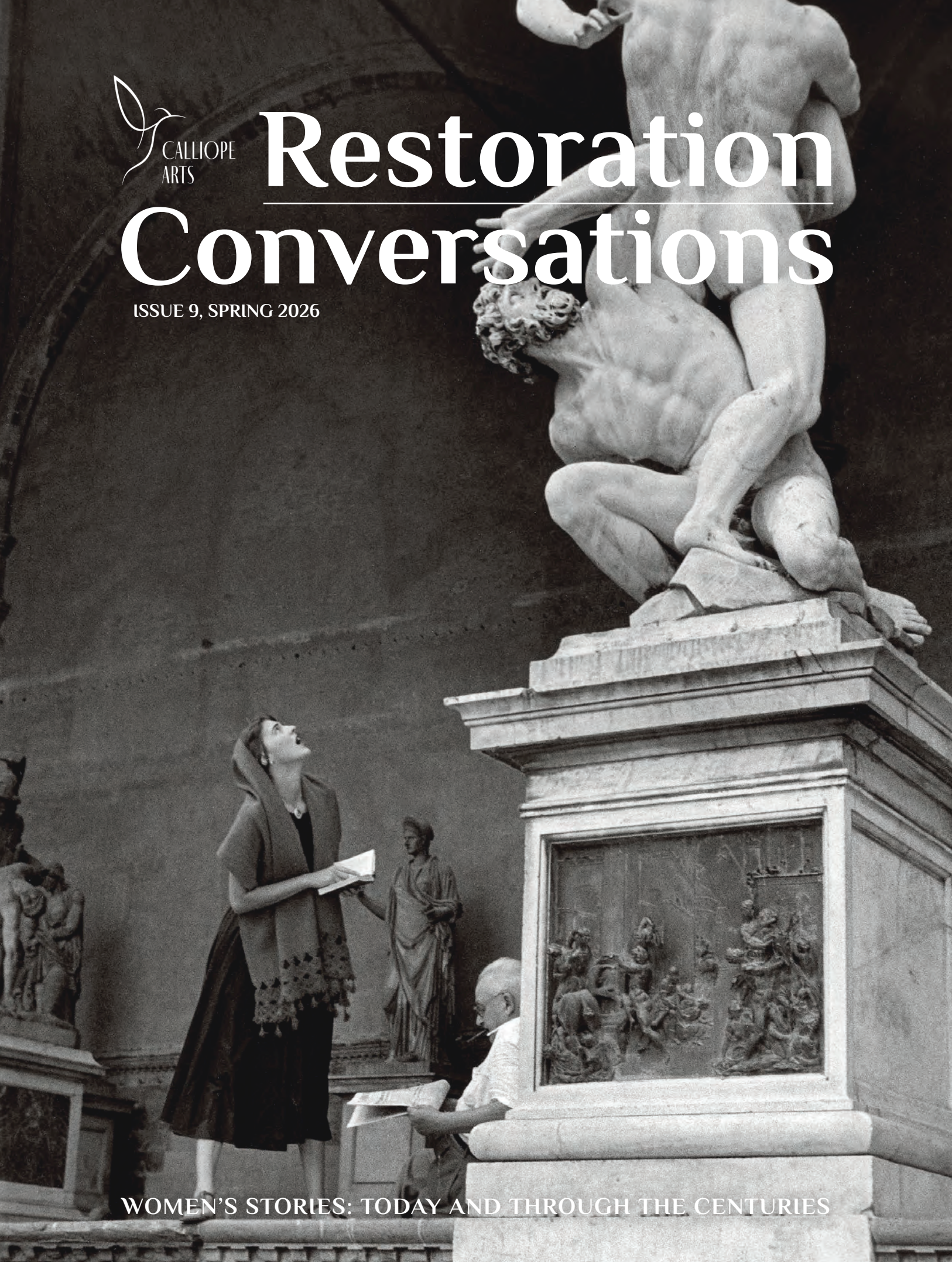




Restoration Conversations

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WOMEN'S STORIES: TODAY AND THROUGH THE CENTURIES



“This work refuses silence”

A conversation with sculptor Nicole Farhi



Above: Nicole Farhi's Children of Gaza series, 2025, ph. Alexandra Dao

Nicole Farhi left her hometown of Nice, in the south of France, to study fashion and art in Paris in the late 1960's. From there, she moved to London where she eventually started her award-winning eponymous fashion brand. She has since left fashion behind to concentrate on her artistic practice, with a focus on sculpture. As an artist who feels compelled to respond to life's joys and despair, Farhi meets the human condition head on. Here, she talks to *Restoration Conversations* about her practice and some of her recent projects.

Restoration Conversations: After your successful career in fashion, you decided to devote yourself full-time to your first love, art. Why were you drawn to sculpture in particular?

Nicole Farhi: I have been sculpting since the early 80s. Sculpture was never something I 'turned to later'. It existed alongside my primary career in fashion. Fashion absorbed a lot of energy and visibility, but sculpture remained constant, a practice in private during the time that belonged to me. I loved painting, but nothing compares to the physical truth of sculpture. The pleasure of putting my hands in clay, of making something that will have a presence in our space, that's when I feel at home.

RC: What was your training and who were your major influences?

NF: Through a friend, I met the sculptor Jean Gibson in 1983, I went to her evening classes twice a week for two years. The second year, while casting my first bronze at The Royal College Foundry, I met Eduardo Paolozzi who became my friend and mentor. He gave me assurance in myself as a sculptor.

One of my main influences is Alberto Giacometti. His work is about distance, fragility, the impossibility of understanding fully the human presence; he taught me that sculpture is an act of questioning, not affirming. Another important influence is Germaine Richier. Her work leaves us uncomfortable, it is totally honest, it is



Above: Nicole Farhi with her *J'Accuse* series, a statement against wrongful accusation and the miscarriage of justice, ph. Iona Wolff



Nicole Farhi's sculptures, *Virevolte* and *Pile ou Face*, from the series *Shapeshifting*, shown at the 'Second Lives' exhibition, 2025, phs. Iona Wolff



"I am drawn to the sensuality of flesh, to the emotional charge carried by a pose, and to the abstract forms that emerge when the body is truly observed rather than described."

Nicole Farhi

about violence, vulnerability and deformation, it is about being alive. Then there is Auguste Rodin, who totally freed the body in his sculpture. Through his love of clay, movement, tension and emotion remain alive. And, as an artist who shows us freedom to construct sculpture away from convention, there is no one like Picasso; his approach to sculpture is different. It is radical, playful, irreverent.

RC: Art practice seems like a very solitary occupation to me. Did you or do you miss the collaborative aspect of working in fashion?

NF: I have never experienced sculpture as a solitary practice. It is intimate when it begins but never solitary. When I work, I am in constant dialogue with the material, the clay is not passive, it responds, my thoughts become physical. And when the sculpture is done, it moves from my studio to a foundry, and there it goes through many hands. Casting involves technicians, mould makers, metal experts ... sculpture is really a collective process.

RC: You recently took part in a group show in London called *Second Lives*, featuring artists who are better known for an earlier or parallel career in a field other than art. Your pieces in this show, which are large, semi-abstract forms, seem to be a departure from your portraiture work.

NF: Alongside portraiture, there has always been another strand in my work – one that moves away from the face and toward the body. I am drawn to the sensuality of flesh, to the emotional charge carried by a pose, and to the abstract forms that

emerge when the body is truly observed rather than described.

Even when the work is large in scale, I rarely think in terms of the whole. I work through fragments. I zoom in on a shoulder, a back, the curve of a thigh, the tension in a hand. By isolating parts, I try to reach something essential – the way flesh holds emotion. Through fragmentation, I come closer to abstraction.

These fragments are not reductions; they are intensifications. They allow me to focus on what makes us human – weight, softness, sensuality, resistance, vulnerability. When the body is partially isolated, it stops being illustrative and becomes a landscape, a rhythm, a structure. The viewer completes it mentally, physically, emotionally.

RC: Your portraits include a series of small busts of famous writers and actors. Another series focusses on individuals, both historic and contemporary, who have been wrongly convicted, then later exonerated. That series takes its name, *J'Accuse*, from Emile Zola's 1898 open letter to the president of the French Republic about the wrongful conviction for treason of army officer Alfred Dreyfus, in which antisemitism played a major part. What was the impetus for that series and how has it been received?

NF: *J'Accuse* was born out of outrage and responsibility. I wanted to confront the violence of wrongful accusation – the moment when institutions fail and a human being is reduced to a case, a suspicion, a verdict. Sculpture felt



Above: Nicole Farhi in her studio, ph. Iona Wolff

essential, because it restores weight, presence, and dignity to people who were denied all three. Each bust insists on individuality. These are not symbols or abstract injustices; they are faces that demand to be looked at. The title *J'Accuse* is, of course, a declaration – not only against judicial failure, but against indifference.

The reception of the series has been deeply moving. In London and Edinburgh, audiences responded with an intensity I hadn't anticipated – not only intellectually, but emotionally. People stayed, read, returned, brought others. Many spoke of recognition rather than shock. The work continues its journey: the series was shown in Bristol in March. That sustained response tells me something important – that there is a profound need, today, for work that insists on moral attention without spectacle.

RC: Tell us about your latest series of busts, *The Children of Gaza*.

NF: This series was not conceived as a political statement but as a human response. These busts do not seek to explain a conflict, assign blame, or claim moral authority. They insist instead on presence. Each face is an act of attention, a refusal to allow suffering to remain abstract, distant, or reduced to numbers. Because I am Jewish, I am deeply alarmed by the erosion of compassion. Jewish history has taught us where the dehumanisation of civilians – especially children – leads. When I see it repeated, even in my own name, I cannot remain silent.

What is happening in Gaza confronts us with an unbearable reality: the systematic destruction of civilian life, and above all the lives of children who bear no responsibility for the world they

inherit. I do not minimise the horror of October 7th, nor the murder of Israeli children. That trauma is real, and it is part of my history too. But acknowledging that suffering cannot become a justification for the destruction of other children.

Children do not belong to a 'side'. They do not choose borders, ideologies, or wars. When they are wounded or killed, the tragedy supersedes any political interpretation. To look at their faces is not to take a position in a debate, but to acknowledge a shared humanity that exists before – and beyond – ideology.

The choice to focus on Gaza is not an act of exclusion, but one of proximity. Artists do not respond to the entirety of the world's suffering; they respond to what arrests them, what they cannot turn away from. Silence, too, is a position – and this work refuses silence.

This work is about children. Children are never responsible for the violence that surrounds them.

When they suffer, the question is not 'why here?' but 'how did we allow this to become normal?' *The Children of Gaza* asks for something simple and difficult: to look, to stay, and to remember that compassion does not require neutrality – it requires recognition.

RC: Unlike the figures in *J'Accuse*, the children in this series remain unnamed. Why did you make that choice?

NF: Only two of the ten children I sculpted are named in the Press photographs I encountered. The absence of names is part of the tragedy. The violence of disappearance. I decided not to individualise the sculptures through naming, because none of these works stands for one child only. Each figure is carrying the weight of many lives lost or damaged. These ten children are symbols in the deepest sense of the word: fragments of reality that point beyond themselves.

MARGIE MACKINNON



Above: Girls from Nicole Farhi's Children of Gaza series, 2025, phs. Alexandra Dao