



FROM THE NECK UP Sculpture by NICOLE FARHI

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NICOLE FARHI AND BRITISH PORTRAIT SCULPTURE

Reg Gadney

This exhibition reveals Nicole Farhi to be one of the pre-eminent British portrait sculptors to have emerged in recent times.

Her highly individual sculptures are variously of writers, actors, artists, friends and intimate acquaintances. All are rooted in the European secular and figurative tradition demonstrating the prerequisites of fine sculpture: the sure sense of touch and the ordering of volume and surface. It would be misleading to say they are realistic. For they do not tally with our preconceived notions of what the head or torso should be. 'In almost every detail,' Kenneth Clark observed, 'the body is not the shape that art has led us to believe it should be.' Rather they are lifelike: they surprise us by subverting our expectations.

Nicole Farhi was born to Turkish parents in 1946 and brought up in Nice on the Côte d'Azur where her father sold rugs and lighting. At home, the Farhis spoke Ladino, a Spanish dialect used by Sephardic Jews.

In 1965 she left for Paris. 'I went to a fashion school for two years where I had a very eccentric teacher. We had hardly any technique classes; my teacher thought it more important that we drew freely and went to the movies and experienced life as a whole. When I was a student I didn't have much money, but very luckily I soon began to sell sketches. All the stores had *bureaux de style* and would buy sketches from young designers for 50 francs each. They liked my work, even in my first year. I might sell five, and then I'd take all my friends out to a restaurant. I never finished at college: I left after two years and worked first in Italy, designing children's clothes, and after that as a freelance for six or seven years, taking on all the work I could get: fabric design, menswear—if I knew somebody was looking for a designer I'd go for it.'



She first gained public recognition during the 1980s as a designer of clothing. She created her eponymous label in 1982. For three successive years (1995–97) she won the British Fashion Award for Best Contemporary Designer. At the time there were few if any public signs of her gifts as a portrait sculptor. There was perhaps one clue and this was not a portrait: rather the design for the small and exquisite pale blue hand-sculpted bottle (2007) containing the fragrance, Blue Intense. Meanwhile, in privacy if not the secrecy of her north London studio, a spacious rather damp converted greenhouse in woodland, she was sculpting portraits.

She had been drawn to sculpture initially during visits to the Fondation Maeght in Saint-Paul de Vence where she saw the work of Alberto Giacometti. ‘I was totally struck,’ she recalls, ‘by one of his early sculptures called ‘Woman with Her Throat Cut.’ It represents a woman but it’s *animalesque*. It’s probably his vision of the human condition, it’s extremely painful and it had an incredible impact on me.’ Giacometti’s sculpture, resembling a praying mantis, is a disturbing image of sexual pleasure and death. The body is disemboweled and splayed open. When Farhi eventually took up sculpting she says: ‘It all came from that piece of sculpture.’

The sculptor, Jean Gibson, a member of the London Group, taught Farhi in Kensington during the early 1980s. But it was Eduardo Paolozzi who triggered her full-scale pursuit of sculpture, more especially the head or portrait. They met during the mid-1980s at the Royal College of Art’s foundry on Queen’s Gate where Farhi had gone to cast her first sculpture in bronze under the supervision of Tissa Ranasinghe. Paolozzi became her friend and mentor. ‘He came for dinner almost once a week,’ she remembers. ‘He would invariably arrive loaded with plaster casts—little animals from his ‘Noah’s Ark,’ plaster heads of famous inventors. One night, during the time he was working on ‘Newton’, the sculpture which now guards the entrance to the British Library, he arrived weighed down by a very large maquette of that same Newton.’



Until she met Paolozzi, she had been modelling or sculpting exclusively in clay and was seeking to employ a wider range of materials. Paolozzi visited her studio with two shopping bags, green wax in one, some old battered casserole dishes and a burner in the other. He sat at a table near her, his unusually large fingers toying with small sculptures, at the same time watching her struggling to control melting wax. She disliked the medium and finally declared her commitment to using clay. Paolozzi had succeeded in making her do what she herself really wanted.

In 2000, Paolozzi suffered a massive stroke. 'He would look at me, desperate yet unable to communicate, with a gaze that was unbearable in its intensity.' He died in 2005. Perhaps of all the works in the present exhibition, Farhi's heads of Eduardo Paolozzi are the most moving and disturbing.

'The human face has always greatly interested me,' she says. 'I have a rather good memory for faces, even if in life I have seen them only once or twice as in the case of Freud and Bacon. Most of the time producing a portrait requires a rapport between the artist and the sitter.' Usually her sitters come to her studio to be photographed or she goes to them. 'I will then start building an armature 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.'

The summation of the subject's individuality, the authentic portrait sculpture has a unique physical aura to say nothing of the recognisable likeness. Unlike a portrait painting it requires to be seen in different lights and from different angles frequently viewed in 360 degrees. Simply, it stays put. 'Sculpture always arouses more violent emotions than, say, painting,' Henry Moore said, 'simply because it is three-dimensional. It cannot be ignored. It is there.'



These days in Britain the portrait sculpture genre is no longer as commonplace as it once was. Few modern offices, dining rooms, lobbies or corridors house them and it is unusual to encounter one in someone's home. Indeed, the tradition of commissioning a portrait sculpture of a loved one or even some national worthy destined for a public or institutional space seems to have all but disappeared.

Of course, most British cities do still boast sculpted portrait likenesses. Thousands remain in London alone. The statues and busts are motionless, melancholy erections invariably capped with pigeon shit. Almost all are of elderly white men. There are only half a dozen or so of women.

Some are very fine sculptors indeed. Take, for example, Alfred Gilbert (1854–1934) who made the magnificent subsequently vandalized 'Jubilee Memorial to Queen Victoria' (1887) now in Winchester; his 'Eros' (1892) in Piccadilly, the first ever aluminium cast: or Jacob Epstein (1880–1959), the brilliant portrait sculptor whose work was considered in its time primitive and too sexy. Henry Moore said of him: 'He took the brickbats, he took the insults, he took the howls of derision.'

Public sculpted portraits in different forms still excite great interest. Some three million people gaze annually at the waxwork figures in Madame Tussauds: home variously to likenesses of the Royal Family, Vladimir Putin, The Beatles, Michael Jackson, Tony Blair, Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein. In varying degrees, the interest in most of these waxwork figures depends upon ephemeral fame or notoriety. There is the sense of impermanence about them.



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In contrast, the creation of the finest permanent portrait sculpture requires the wider range of technical dexterity, perception, and the controlled awareness of the completed work’s compelling power. They persuade us not just to gaze but to see and understand.

Rilke said of Rodin that he had ‘an unerring knowledge of the human body.’ From the start of her careers as a designer and sculptor, Nicole Farhi has shown an essential unerring knowledge of the human body. However, fashion design isn’t required to reveal character. The cynic may observe that perhaps it goes some way to cover up a lack of it. The portrait sculptor is definitely required to reveal it. ‘Nothing in a portrait is a matter of indifference,’ Baudelaire tells us. ‘Gesture, grimace, clothing, decor even—all must combine to realize a character.’

In Nicole Farhi’s distinctive sculptures there is character, presence, energy in abundance, the sense of the *animalesque*, tenderness and humanity. As you look at these transcendent objects, you will see the working of Nicole Farhi’s hands, her mind, her heart and her aura made permanent.

Reg Gadney taught at the Royal College of Art for some fifteen years (1967-82) during which time he was Senior Tutor, Fellow and Pro-Rector.

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Anna Wintour Edition of 9





Bill Nighy Edition of 9





Bill Nighy Edition of 9





Christopher Walken Edition of 9





Stephen Frears Edition of 9





Judi Dench Edition of 9





Alberto Giacometti Edition of 9





Lucian Freud Edition of 9





Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon Edition of 9



Francis Bacon Edition of 9



Tom Stoppard Edition of 9





Jonathan Edition of 9





Homage to Eduardo Paolozzi Edition of 9





Homage to Eduardo Paolozzi Edition of 9





Helena Bonham-Carter Edition of 9





Rupert Everett Edition of 9





Pure Force I Edition of 9





Pure Force II Edition of 9



The Perrier-Jouët Arts Salon

Since its founding in 1811, Champagne Perrier-Jouët has enjoyed an association with the Arts. Its authentic creative heritage stems from Adele Jouët herself who was a great patron of the Arts and whose descendants commissioned leading Art Nouveau artist Emile Gallé in 1902 to design the iconic Belle Epoque anemone motif bottle design. Today the House continues to support leading creative minds and artistic institutions. Nicole Farhi is a member of The Perrier-Jouët Arts Salon, a diverse and dynamic body of individuals who share ideas and debate on developments in the Arts. The Perrier-Jouët Arts Salon was set-up to support the selection of an annual prize winner who receives a substantial sum to support him or her in the development of their career.

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