

Builder of Mysteries

Through the ephemeral materiality of her works, sculptor Diana Al-Hadid explores inspiration, illusions, and process. *By Julie L. Belcove*

Straddling the divides of figuration and abstraction, massiveness and delicacy, and history and modernity, artist Diana Al-Hadid's sculptures defy classical constraints. *Antonym*, her hollow cast of a woman, headless and fractured in places, reclines onto a soft-seeming pedestal, which in turn splinters into in gravity-defying fragments; striations of pigment drip down the figure and form a puddle at her feet. *Divided Line*, an architectural piece, pierces a wall with scores of mysteriously irregular and narrow slits, allowing a veiled glimpse through to the other side. A room-size sculpture in Al-Hadid's signature pale palette is an off-kilter amalgam of oversize body parts sinking into a set of steps—a baroquely elaborate chunk flowing like a waterfall, with negative space serving as the intricate foundation.

Walking through her recent exhibition at Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York's Chelsea neighborhood, where these and other works attracted a new fan base for the artist this fall, Al-Hadid says she seeks to create “moments of confusion.”

Indeed, as Al-Hadid, 31, describes her process, a visitor politely approaches and asks with some astonishment, “How did you get these in?” Smiling, the dark-eyed Al-Hadid explains that she designed the pieces to assemble and disassemble without leaving any telltale seams. “That’s what occupies my mind: How do I build it? How do I get it in? I find that stuff fun.”

But installation nuts and bolts are only one of several how-did-she-do-that questions that arise from viewing her work. Many of her pieces appear to challenge the laws of physics, with heavier elements held up by fragile drips of plaster and polymer. There’s an openness and lightness to her structures. “I need as much transparency as possible,” she says.

Much of her inspiration comes from paintings. Painters, she says with some envy, have far more freedom to create imagined space. Her references, though, are not necessarily meant as allusions. She based the aforementioned waterfall-like element in *Suspended After Image*, for instance, on a photo she snapped of a painting at the Prado museum in Madrid. “I didn’t know who had painted it,” she admits. “I took the picture on my phone.” It wasn’t even the whole canvas that caught her eye, but a cloak on a figure—and more specifically, an ornament on that cloak. As if zooming in with a camera, she slowly blew up the detail to many times its original size and created a 3-D model of it to work from.

Asked why she doesn’t paint, since she is clearly besotted with the medium,

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—DIANA AL-HADID



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Al-Hadid laughs and replies, “Because I’m not good at painting, maybe.”

Born in Saudi Arabia, where she lived until emigrating with her family at age 5, Al-Hadid grew up in Canton, Ohio, and moved to New York soon after graduate school. For a while, she stayed with her brother between hopping around to various artist residencies. “I was couch-surfing for a year and a half,” she says, and working out of a small studio that had no natural light and barely any heat.

Somehow, though, whenever she was most desperate, a sale or a grant would come through as if by kismet. Such was the case with a \$50,000 USA Fellowship, which enabled her to complete work on her 2010 solo exhibition at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. One critic there wrote of her sprawling *Water Thief* piece: “Its diffuse chaos has its own curious beauty.”

Like her sculptures, Al-Hadid’s drawings are built with transparent layers. Drawing, though, provides a welcome counterbalance to sculpting: “[The drawings] are quick and they’re immediate.” She uses mylar because it doesn’t absorb materials such as charcoal and pastel; instead, it allows the materials to “float on the surface.” And she favors her eraser as a drawing implement. “I make really hard marks, then erase them and make soft marks.”

Of late, Al-Hadid has recently finished a series of bronze busts, parts of which she says she fashioned while blindfolded, forcing herself to feel rather than look. “I wanted to offer myself a different set of decisions and have a more intimate experience,” she says. The upshot: “They look really weird, kind of like monsters.” **ABMB**