

# Fashionably *Late*

At the age most people retire, Nicole Farhi turned her back on design to start sculpting. She tells *HANNAH LEMON* what it's like to break the mould



“I don't buy clothes. I have enough old clothes. I've just sent three sweaters to be mended because they are full of holes.” It's not quite the opening you would expect from a woman who made a name for herself in fashion – designer for French Connection in 1978, founder of her eponymous brand in 1983, awarded an honorary CBE for her services to fashion in 2007 and three years later the Légion d'Honneur by her native France. But Nicole Farhi's life couldn't be further removed from stressful catwalk calls and the intense scrutiny that comes with running a public business.

Nestled among the winding, hilly, cobbled streets of Hampstead, Farhi's house looks as if it has sprouted out of the English countryside. The large Georgian building sprawls around a big garden and there isn't a peep to be heard from the city hubbub around us, just the occasional twitter from a passing bird.

A maid opens the front door and quietly ushers me into a sitting room. My eyes are overwhelmed by the enchantingly comfortable and colourful set-up. Sculptures hang, lean and rest on every inch of space; some are her own and others, including a giant ear protruding from a wall, I don't recognise. Books crowd around the room and I notice volumes detailing Henry Moore's work piled on a bottom shelf. Turkish kilim carpets soften the landing for my feet and throws and cushions provide a cosy welcome on the sofa.

Farhi appears a few seconds later, wrapping up the end of a phone call, her recognisable fiery frizz of hair glowing like a cumbersome halo. I am surprised (and delighted) by her refreshingly unfussy appearance; a grey polo-neck jumper, black trousers and shoes, and a hint of lipstick and mascara. This relaxed, elegant French style is what made waves those 30 years ago. Demure beige shapes, billowing blush materials draping from sophisticated ▶







Judi Dench



► silhouettes – her effortless designs could be thrown on in a moment, disregarding the hours that it takes most normal people to get the casual-chic look.

Born to Turkish parents in France, Nicole Farhi's family was far from creative, making a living by selling rugs and lamps, but it wasn't long before Farhi enrolled as an art student in Paris. "I was doing painting and fashion," she tells me. "Fashion took over and I was lucky – I could immediately sell my work as a fashion designer, while no one was interested in my drawings or paintings." Her accent is still thick with Parisian texture, rolling Rs and guttural vowels. Work quickly snowballed, but it was easy then, she says, far easier than for today's generation of designers, and before she knew it she was a designer at French Connection.

However, it's her trained eye in sculpting that has me interested. When she handed in her sewing kit back in 2012,

Farhi had already been practising pottery. "I loved it from the first time I touched the clay and I thought: this is it. I had found what I wanted to do in life." A friend at a dinner party introduced her to classes, which Farhi attended two or three times a week. Then, when she was casting her first bronze work, she met Eduardo Paolozzi, the godfather of pop art and sculptor insurmountable. "He was interested in what I was doing and he invited me to go to his studio. Then he came to mine and we became friends. For years and years I saw him practically every week." Farhi attributes her successful new start to this less formal education. "He taught me to be aware of the world – to open my eyes. You can look at a tree or a flower and find shapes in them."

It was in 2013 that Farhi launched her first exhibition with Bowman Sculpture. "It was like my first fashion show," she recalls. "I had tears in my eyes because it was the first time I had such a big show in such a beautiful gallery. I started crying." The show received critical acclaim, not only because of her natural talent, but also because of her subjects: Judi Dench, Bill Nighy, Christopher Walken, Stephen Frears, Lucian Freud, Tom Stoppard – many of them friends. As we walk through her studio I spy Anna Wintour perched on a shelf, glaring out into the room. "She's always looking at what I am doing," smiles Farhi. A sure-fire way to speed up productivity, I imagine.

Also floating and clinging along the walls is Farhi's next collection and a work in progress. "I decided to sculpt creative hands," she explains. "Hands of dancers, painters, sculptors, violinists, musicians, flutists and ceramists. Some of them I knew, most I did not. But I got to know them through different sittings and they became friends. I go to their concerts and ballets, which has opened up another world." Her immersion



into this unique creative fold seems inevitable, particularly with her marriage to playwright David Hare back in 1992.

Across the garden in her second studio she shows me a giant builder's thumb that she is midway through moulding and photos of clay doppelgängers of her mother's hands and Eduardo Paolozzi's fist. Each is made up with a different material, be it marble, glass, ceramic or metal, depending on Farhi's encounter with the subject. "It has to suit the person," she says. "They all talk to you. Eduardo Paolozzi's hand is in bronze, because it is strong and powerful – I wanted a metal for him." This intense, insightful and slightly romantic perception of humans has led Farhi into more abstract forms. "I want to do voices one day. Voices are so important – not only for what they say but how they sound. I have a friend who is an opera singer and I want to sculpt what I feel when I hear her voice."

I try not to ask her too much about her previous life, but it's not long before a question creeps out. Doesn't she find it strange that her name is still on billboards? "No," she smiles knowingly, "but I think everyone else does. I am asked that question non-stop. It's not me. I don't look in the window. I don't want to see what they are doing. I am not in touch with the company at all."

## "It was the first time I had such a big show in a gallery. I started crying"

Does she have any regrets? "Sometimes I think I should have started sculpting professionally a bit earlier. I think I regret my last two years in fashion. When my company was sold, I was not happy with the people who bought it. I think I should have left before I saw this change. That was sad. But I don't regret the work I put in and the people who helped me."

The door to the past has been left ajar; she keeps in touch with her pattern cutter and assistants. "We had 20 years of our life working together. You can't turn the page. I have reunions with my old team and it's great. I love them." She also keeps in touch with her ex-husband Stephen Marks, with whom she started her label. "I am seeing him tonight. We are very close to our daughter. She is in town at the moment and so we are having dinner. It's a good example to families that have split up. You can make it work and it's great."

There is a serenity, a calmness and a strength that Farhi emanates throughout our conversation. Her steady gaze, passion, enthusiasm and thirst for her newfound love are captivating. She works every day of the week, only cutting it down to mornings on Saturday and Sunday. I tentatively ask if she thinks she will get bored of it eventually, to which she laughs, "If I reach that point in 40 years – as I did with fashion – I'll be dead, so I don't care. It's probably why I am working

so much and so hard because I am not young and I don't have that many years to do it." Farhi feels an unbreakable confidence about her future – something very few people are able to find once in a lifetime, let alone twice. ■

*Nicole Farhi is part of a group exhibition Meaning at Candida Stevens Fine Art, Chichester (21 May–2 July), and her solo exhibition HANDS will be at Bowman Sculpture, Dukes Street in September*

