



Diana Al-Hadid at work  
on *Antonym* in her Brooklyn studio.

Like a classical sculpture, the woman lounging on a pedestal seems ageless, weathered by time but perpetually youthful. At first glance, the figure and her pedestal might be an exercise in white on white. But when you approach her and study her more closely, you see that this nude body is merely a shell, a composition of broken fragments, allowing you to peer inside. The secret is that the interior space is decorated with streams of pigment in various colors, more like rain falling than a vascular system.

"I call her *Antonym*. It was a gut reaction," says Syrian-born artist Diana Al-Hadid, who made this work over the course of the summer. "It sounds like a Greek goddess, my little

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# Diana Al-Hadid Makes a Sculpture

## THE BIRTH OF A MULTI-HUED VENUS

By Barbara Pollack

Photos by Rebecca Robertson

*Antonym.*” The title fits because in many ways this work is about opposites—solid and ephemeral, fragile and strong, ancient and contemporary. It is also clear that this shell of a body fits within an art history that has made a fetish of the female nude, yet it is the very reverse of a living, breathing, sexualized being. Al-Hadid is aware of all these layers; she consciously built them into the work.

Born in Aleppo, Syria, in 1981, Al-Hadid grew up in the American Midwest. She received an M.F.A. from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2005 and attended the prestigious Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2007. She has never been interested in focusing on her Middle Eastern identity in her art. Rather, she has been inspired by Renaissance painting, as she explained to me when we first met in July.

“I’m interested in these paintings not for religious reasons, but because I am an artist I respond—and I think a lot of people respond—to the shapes and the way they are painted,” she said. “I am not so interested in decoding the mythology, but I am interested in decoding the structure of the painting. Maybe I am a little jealous of what painting can do with space.”

However, instead of becoming a painter or working in marble or bronze, as an admirer of Renaissance art might have done, Al-Hadid uses industrial materials—fiberglass, polymer, steel, and plaster—in unique and creative ways. Entering her studio on a gritty stretch of Williamsburg for the first time, I was struck by the floor, covered in drips and pools of white. Then I became aware of how busy everyone was. Six studio assistants rushed to finish the works scheduled to be shown at

Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York in September. There was a wall relief, a room-size installation, and a much smaller sculpture of a woman. But despite the stress everyone was under, the atmosphere was upbeat, with a Motown mix blaring through the speakers.

*Antonym* began like many plaster casts. Al-Hadid posed a model in a lounging position, one leg bent under her and the other extended. She chose a young woman who was a yoga devotee, “so she could hold her pose” while a mold of her form was made. First the model was coated in plaster, which was allowed to dry and then removed. This hollow shell was filled to make a plaster cast. The team then made a rubber mold to use for subsequent casts.

The pedestal, which looks as if it is topped by a large pillow on which the model is resting, was in fact made by filling a frame with foam, covering the foam in plastic, and having the model sit down in the mushy material in the exact pose she had taken for the molds.

That might have been the end of the story, but for Al-Hadid it was just the beginning of her labor-intensive process. She poured layers of pigment into the rubber mold, tipping the mold rhythmically to make the streams of color fill every crevice of the interior.

**Several days later**, she opened the mold and removed the two halves of a hollow woman formed of hardened drips of pigment. They were stiff but flexible. Her assistants had already prepared steel armatures to hang the form on. I am in the studio when they complete this task, and the sculpture looks uncannily like a woman whose skin has been flayed, laying bare the arteries and the veins that flow through the body. It might be kitschy, but it is also fabulously delicate.

As wonderful as this cast looks, Al-Hadid is not satisfied, and two weeks later, when I return, she has already made a different version, literally turning the project inside out so that the armature will be on the outside and the streams of color will be visible only on the inside.

“I didn’t totally dislike the first one. I just thought it read differently than I initially imagined, which sometimes is Ok,” she says. “I wanted it to read a little bit more like the drips were pouring through her very vertically, as if she was an interruption in the space.” To create this effect, Al-Hadid poured the paint straight into the mold, this time not shifting it around inside.

I watch the cast being removed from the mold, and I admit that I am a little bit confused when I see it. The body now seems awkward and mechanical, like a Frankenstein monster in pieces. It bears no relation anymore to the lovely, graceful girl of the original cast, which sits off to the side on a table by the window.





Lined with a coating of pigment, molds made from the plaster cast of a seated woman rest on a table and hang from the studio ceiling (left) before Al-Hadid and assistants peel back the rubber to unmold one of the forms (below). They clip together the front and back (bottom). A metal armature supports the delicate structure (bottom left).





"I have a sense of the direction of what I am aiming to produce in a really broad sense, but I always leave some room, some kind of openness, for contingencies," Al-Hadid says. "I try to only make decisions that are absolutely necessary at the moment, not to overplan, because something like this can come up that sounds good in theory, but then in practice it's just a little bit off."

As much as Al-Hadid seems to be working by trial and error, testing different ideas, she has actually had an idea in mind from the beginning about what she wanted to achieve. She wants the color to be on the inside, and she will now work on the exterior of the cast to bring back its original

beauty. First, each stream of color must be reinforced with a strand of fiberglass.

Joined by two assistants, Al-Hadid works carefully, dipping threads in polymer and applying them one by one to the cast. The body is no longer in two halves, but laid out in sections across a table. The arm is partially visible, now broken and without its hand, as well as a length of the back. When the sections are strong enough, they are attached to an armature, which Al-Hadid secures in place with dabs of plaster. These body parts are then welded together, leaving the armature exposed. The interior of the body is now complete, but it still needs a skin to cover it.



Over the next two weeks, Al-Hadid applied plaster in tiny strokes to the surface, gradually covering the steel spokes of the armature. Slowly, the white silhouette began to reemerge, but this time with chunks of the body missing—a section of the chest above one breast, the back of a leg—so that the interior was exposed. It is proof of Al-Hadid's talent as a sculptor that she can reenvision the body; basically, she constructs the exterior from memory, not relying on the original mold.

I asked Al-Hadid what she thought about as she did this meticulous work, and she said, "I am not trying to discover who I am through my work. I am exploring those things that make less sense to me, where there is something new to discover."



The second casting, made with paint poured more vertically than in the first version (top left). Al-Hadid and an assistant weld another metal armature that fits over the new fiberglass shell like an exoskeleton (center). The shell is removed in parts and fitted to the armature (bottom right) and the strengthened pieces are fitted back together (top right). Once layers of plaster have been added to cover the steel spokes, the figure is snugly placed in its pedestal (bottom left).



Al-Hadid smooths and sculpts the plaster base to emphasize the softness of the pillowy-looking depression where the figure sits (above). The piece installed at Marianne Boesky, where it receives a few more coats of paint (below). **Opposite** Al-Hadid and the finished *Antonym* on her show's opening night.



The final piece, now stationed in the gallery on West 24th Street, still looks raw. The skin is patchy, a combination of white paint and plaster, coarsely applied in various layers. The interior is muted, with its pale pastel lines. The figure has no head, but it doesn't seem to be missing, as is often the case with ancient statues. Yet enough of the body remains so that you can still see the twist of the woman's waist and the way she shifts her weight onto one side.

"I've been working with these materials for over ten years. Each time, they are reconsidered or misused. The drips just

happened earlier this year for my installation *Suspended After Image*," Al-Hadid says, referring to an installation she built on-site in the Visual Arts Center at the University of Texas at Austin and included in the Marianne Boesky show.

"I saw the potential and thought, 'Wouldn't this be a great way to build an image and really insert it into the architecture?' After that, I wanted to fit them into a contoured space, such as the interior of a woman's body.

"So it really is seeing a process all the way through to the end in many iterations."