

Sightings: Diana Al-Hadid

October 22, 2011 – January 15, 2012

In 2006, not even a year after completing graduate school, Diana Al-Hadid made *Spun of the Limits of my Lonely Waltz* (Figure 1), a six-foot-tall sculpture of a Gothic cathedral turned upside down, resting on the tips of its spires. This work, her first professional artistic statement, already contains many of the elements that Al-Hadid develops in subsequent efforts. Made of ephemeral, commonplace materials, its construction further undermines the sense of solidity and stability normally associated with grand architectural structures. From one side, the clerestory level is painted gold and gleams like delicate filigree between the white arcade and darkened roof. From the other, we are given view to the burned out shell of the interior. The spires look as much like stalactites in a cavern as cut-stone towers. Structural collapse gives way to organic growth; or, just as plausibly here, natural structure develops into architecture. Most importantly, the sculpture has a direct relationship to the body. It is six feet tall and just over five feet wide and deep, slightly too big for most people to see over or get their arms around. This physical stature is intentional. As the title indicates, the points where the spires meet the ground correspond to the spots where the artist's feet fell while dancing a waltz alone in her studio. It is this keen sense of our physical domain, its limitations, and poetic efforts to transcend it that characterize the work of Al-Hadid.

In the short time since earning her MFA, Al-Hadid has created an impressive body of work, including numerous drawings, but primarily medium- to large-scale sculptures and installations. These works range in scale from the human to the architectural and carry with them indications of a diverse set of interests and inspirations, including Arab and Greek mythology, Gothic and Middle Eastern architecture, cosmology and physics. Despite their personal and intellectual origins, it is their physical presence and ephemeral materiality that make the sculptures powerful, universally approachable evocations of the human experience.

For *Sightings*, Al-Hadid has created a new work for the Corner Gallery at the Nasher Sculpture Center. Conceived by its architect, Renzo Piano, as a kind of elegant, modern archeological site, the Nasher provides an ideal foil for Al-Hadid's sculptural musings on architectural ruins. Entitled *Gradiva's Fourth Wall*, the installation presents a tiered space spilling out of unfinished cubic pedestals, with columns rising above and descending, where they seem to soften into curtains. Fragments of architectural fenestration weave between, behind, and in front of the columns, complicating any sense of interior and exterior. A lone fragment of what appears to be an ancient recumbent figure occupies the center of the composition, separated by the tiers of the structure as if emerging from or receding into the now-aqueous, now-solid architecture. The work takes further many of the fascinations that have occupied the artist and packs them densely into a complex spatial and psychological terrain.

Architectural fragments and ruins have been a consistent source of both structure and meaning in Al-Hadid's work. Her sculptures often recall built structures—cathedrals, pipe organs, towers, labyrinths, cities—yet are made of simple, often delicate or fragile materials, such as polymer gypsum, thin-gauge steel rod, plaster, fiberglass, wood, polystyrene, cardboard, wax, and paint. The sculptures have the appearance of unfinished buildings or archeological remains, and, as in *Spun of the Limits of My Lonely Waltz*, it is often difficult to discern if they are in the process of

construction or collapse. *Tower of Infinite Problems* and *Built from our Tallest Tales* (Figures 2, 3) resemble ethereal structures crashed to ground, or ambitious building projects abandoned before completion. The titles here, as in many of Al-Hadid's works, point to a broader investigation of the structure of civilizations, underlining the role of language, narrative, and myth as essential building blocks of cultural and societal structures and also their inherent weakness. Other constructions, such as *Spun of the Limits of My Lonely Waltz*, *Self-Melt*, and *Edge of Critical Density* (Figures 4,5), turn the architecture on its head, precariously supporting larger, more massive structures on a series of narrow, sometimes almost impossibly fragile, points. Taking inspiration from diverse sources, such as dance diagrams, plans of ancient labyrinths, particle accelerators, the circumambulations of Muslim pilgrims, and images of galaxies, several compositions consider the constructive principal of the spiral and the function of movement. *Spun of the Limits of My Lonely Waltz* constructs a cathedral, standing on its spires, from the footprints of a waltz. *Tower of Infinite Problems* propagates from the labyrinthine shape at its core. *Tomorrow's Superstitions* (Figure 6) swirls upward recalling both images of spiral galaxies and Pieter Brueghel the Elder's vision of *The Tower of Babel* (Figure 7). Al-Hadid's process often reflects the metaphorical bases of her structures, building in layers out from a central core. As Hammer Museum Senior Curator Anne Ellgood has written, fundamental to this practice is the artist's "consideration of time—particularly a collapsing of geologic and what we might call architectural time."¹

For Al-Hadid, architecture and architectural ruins are evocative reminders of our physical relationship to our environment, as well as our sense of place and self. Born in Aleppo, Syria, where she lived until the age of five, when she immigrated to the United States with her family, Al-Hadid has been living in both worlds and attempting to bridge the two cultures most of her life. "As an immigrant to America at a young age," she has said, "I think I tacitly understand how a person could feel closely identified with yet remotely nostalgic for a single place, of being simultaneously attached and disconnected. Ancient ruins are culturally nostalgic objects that carry with them a distinct psychological effect."² The interest in the mystery and psychological impact of these fragments recalls the fascination with ruins in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Artists like Caspar David Friedrich in works like *Cloister Cemetery in the Snow* (Figure 8) cultivated a sense of awe and foreboding in the encounter with remnants of architectural structures. For them, an encounter with ruins initiated a heightened experience of the sublime, a breath-catching, shudder-inducing sense of one's existence, connection to the past, and mortality. It is this sense of connection in the present with things long past that suffuses the work of Al-Hadid and permeates *Gradiva's Fourth Wall*.

The "Gradiva" of the title refers to an elusive muse who beguiled the thoughts of several significant twentieth century thinkers, including Sigmund Freud and the Surrealists. The myth of Gradiva derives from a Roman copy of a neo-Attic Greek relief in the Vatican Museums (Figure 9). This relief serves as the point of departure for German author Wilhelm Jensen's 1903 novella, *Gradiva*, in which the protagonist, an archaeologist named Norbert Hanold, becomes obsessed with the image after seeing it in a museum in Rome. His obsession leads to a vision, a dream, a quest to find his vision in Pompeii, and ultimately, a delusion in which he encounters a woman he knows from childhood and mistakes her for Gradiva. Freud later psychoanalyzed Norbert in his essay "Dream and Delusion in W. Jensen's 'Gradiva.'" The myth of Gradiva later became an obsession of the Surrealists, including Breton, Masson, and Dalí, who featured her in

numerous writings and works of art, Breton even going so far as to name the art gallery he opened in Paris in 1937 after her. It is this myth of the elusive muse, of desire unfulfilled, of an object devoutly wished but not attained, that is the point of departure for Al-Hadid's installation.

The fragmentary draped figure in the midst of Al-Hadid's installation at the Nasher recalls several passages of Norbert's visions of Gradiva from Jensen's novella. In Norbert's delusion, the woman he thinks is Gradiva repeatedly appears and disappears, to his eyes as evanescent as a spirit:

A golden butterfly, faintly tinged with red on the inner edge of its upper wing, fluttered from the poppies toward the pillars, flitted a few times about Gravidia's head and then rested on the brown wavy hair above her brow. At the same time, however, she rose, slender and tall, for she stood up with deliberate haste, curtly and silently directed at Norbert another glance, in which something suggested that she considered him demented; then, thrusting her foot forward, she walked out in her characteristic way along the pillars of the old portico. Only fleetingly visible for a while, she finally seemed to have sunk into the earth.³

This passage evokes the columns of Al-Hadid's construction and the spectral figure at the center that seems to be sinking in to the ground.

As in *Gradiva's Fourth Wall*, several of Al-Hadid's recent works have incorporated shells of draped figures. Like the Nasher installation, *Cenotaph for Two* and *Trace of a Fictional Third* (Figures 10, 11) feature hollow fragments of figures within an imagined architectural setting that seems to be melting or disintegrating. All of these figures recall the fragments of reclining figures from the Acropolis, now on view in The British Museum, London (Figure 12). In Al-Hadid's hands, however, these massive marble sculptures become weightless, hollow shells, mere suggestions of a human presence, perhaps there, perhaps lost to time. This investigation of presence and absence is particularly heightened in *Trace of a Fictional Third*, where the viewer becomes the third figure in the composition.

It is not surprising that Jensen's story and the myth of Gradiva resonate with Al-Hadid. It is, in one view, about the simultaneous nearness and distance that we feel in the midst of archeological objects. Standing at the Acropolis, we are present at a historic site, but are separated from that living history not by space, but by time. The sensation of that history being there, living now, can be very strong. In Jensen's novella, Norbert's encounters with Gradiva in Pompeii dramatize this experience of being in the midst of ancient history:

Now, at length, he drew a deep breath, for his breast too had remained almost motionless. / Simultaneously the sixth sense, suppressing the others completely, held him absolutely in its sway. Had what had just stood before him been a product of his imagination or a reality? / He did not know that, nor whether he was awake or dreaming, and tried in vain to collect his thoughts. Then, however, a strange shudder passed down his spine. He saw and heard nothing, yet he felt from the secret inner vibrations that Pompeii had begun to live about him in the noonday hour of spirits and so Gradiva lived again, too....⁴

This passage in particular impresses the sense of a thin veneer between past and present, presence and absence, fantasy and reality.

There are precious few precedents for Al-Hadid's work in 20th century sculpture. Many artists have engaged existing architecture in site-specific installations, or created works that reference architectural structures or are constructed on an architectural scale, but few that deal with this experience of the architectural ruin. The architectural interventions of Gordon Matta-Clark comes to mind. He cut entire sections out of condemned buildings, modern architectural ruins, creating enormous voids and displaying the excised parts as works of art. But his work stemmed from post-minimalism and evinced the spare, rectilinear construction of its predecessor, with nothing of the baroque sensibility present in Al-Hadid's work. The same could be said of Rachel Whiteread's casts of architectural elements—doors, windows, even entire houses. These works speak of the past and memory, as Al-Hadid's works do, but are unornamented casts of actual objects, not fantastic creations. This tension between modernist rigor—a reduction to essentials—and baroque or Arabic effusion—a tendency toward ornamentation—is something that Al-Hadid recognizes in her work. Speaking of Adolf Loos' attack on the decorative, *Ornament and Crime*, Al-Hadid notes that the essay “invigorated my defense of my culture's love of ornament, filigree, and pattern (as seen in Islamic calligraphy)... I can identify areas of my work where reductive organizing principles have contained opulent effusions, and other areas where decorative impulses have overtaken an essentialist design.”⁵ There are numerous figures in the last fifty years who have embraced the decorative, but whose work does not engage architecture in any meaningful way. One exception is Frank Stella. Following his breakthrough minimalist canvases, Stella began making reliefs and free-standing sculptures that took on a maximalist approach. Incorporating a variety of decorative motifs like French curves and protractor forms, Stella has pursued a formal program of fullness in his work since the 1980s. Works like *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg, Ein Schauspiel, 3X* (Figure 13) recall the precarious constructions and emphasis on layers of forms of Al-Hadid's *Spun of the Limits of My Lonely Waltz*, *Self-Melt*, and *Edge of Critical Density*. Stella's work, however, shares none of the interest in ephemeral states and the construction of memory that preoccupies the work of Al-Hadid. Perhaps it is not surprising that the modern artist who most interests Al-Hadid is Medardo Rosso. Known best for sculptures in wax and plaster like *The Golden Age* (Figure 14), Rosso's work immortalizes the fleeting and ephemeral moments of life, as if glimpsed through a golden haze. His figures, like Al-Hadid's appear to be emerging from and receding into the material from which they are made. Rosso's sculptures, like Al-Hadid's, evince a powerful, poetic longing for a moment now passed.

The example of Medardo Rosso is instructive for another reason, too. Despite their seductive materiality, most of Rosso's sculptures were conceived from a single, frontal point of view. In this way, the sculptures are pictorial. Although they reveal a great deal about the construction of the object, the backs of Rosso's sculptures were never meant to be seen. This tension between pictorial and sculptural space informs *Gradiva's Fourth Wall*, as well. For it, Al-Hadid has considered the particular circumstances of the gallery's presentation to the street as a point of departure. The title refers to the imaginary “fourth wall” that separates the stage and the audience in the theatre, and here, the glass wall of the corner gallery performs that function. Seen from the street, the composition coheres: the figure, which is separated into segments both vertically and horizontally over numerous tiers, resolves into a cohesive image from the front. This is the view that draws in the visitor. When they arrive in the gallery, they encounter first the back side of the installation, which appears unfinished.

This kind of spatial shift reflects Al-Hadid's interest in Northern Renaissance and Mannerist painting. Works by Jacopo Pontorno, like *The Entombment* and *Joseph with Jacob in Egypt* (Figures 15, 16), present complex spatial environments in which the frontality of the composition and proportions of the figures distort our reading of the space. *The Entombment* depicts a highly compressed congregation of figures. The strong vertical orientation of the composition relies on overlapping of figures to designate depth of space. There is no architecture or landscape to designate scale, and the elongation of the figures seems even more unnatural compressed into the foreground of the composition. Conversely, the space in *Joseph with Jacob in Egypt* is complicated by the shifting scale of the architecture and figures. Due to shifts in scale figures in the foreground seem to recede into the distance, and objects in the distance appear to be closer. The entire space is contrived and off-kilter: the multitude in the middle ground seems puny in comparison to the house looming on the hill in the distance. The staircase on the right curves around the exterior of an open structure, unsupported, and two of the figures on columns seem to be stone sculptures, while the one in the foreground on the right appears to be a flesh and blood child.

The Merode Altarpiece (Figure 17) also provides an interesting analogy. Although naturalistically plausible, this Northern Renaissance masterpiece depicts wild shifts in perspective. The primary figures of the composition are pressed tightly up to the picture plane, where even the table of the central panel is tipped up to better display the objects on it. Even the central figure of Mary, reclining in voluminous red robes that give no sense of corporeal structure, recalls the hollow central figure in Al-Hadid's installation. Open windows and doors in each of the panels give views into the far distance. This combination of compressed foreground and deep recession into the far distance, presents a complex spatial environment that Al-Hadid explores in the tiered construction of *Gradiva's Fourth Wall*.

Investigating pictorial space in a three-dimensional sculpture is a bold proposition, but one of many that seem natural for Al-Hadid. *Gradiva's Fourth Wall* questions what is present and what is not, what we experience and what we see. In this densely layered construction, physically and metaphorically, Al-Hadid calls into question the nature of time and space.

¹ Anne Ellgood,

² Sasha Mann, "Q&A with Artist Diana Al-Hadid," URL September 10, 2010.

³ Wilhelm Jensen, *Gradiva*, 1903, republished in a companion volume with Sigmund Freud, "Delusion and Dream in Wilhelm Jensen's *Gradiva*," Kobenhavn & Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2003, p. 69.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁵ Robin Reisenfeld, "The Labyrinth in the Tower: A Conversation with Diana Al-Hadid," *Sculpture* 28, no. 2 (March 2009): 28.

Al-Hadid Essay Illustrations

1

Diana Al-Hadid

Spun of the Limits of My Lonely Waltz, 2006

Wood, polystyrene, plaster, fiberglass, and paint

72 x 64 x 64 in.



2

Diana Al-Hadid

Built from Our Tallest Tales, 2008

Wood, metal, polystyrene, polymer gypsum, fiberglass, plastic, concrete, paint

144 x 100 x 80 in.

Photo: Mariano C. Peuser



3

Diana Al-Hadid

The Tower of Infinite Problems, 2008

Polymer gypsum, steel, plaster, fiberglass, wood, polystyrene, cardboard, wax, paint

83 x 105 x 63 in.

Photo: Tom Powell



4

Diana Al-Hadid

Self-Melt, 2008

Polymer gypsum, steel, polystyrene, cardboard, wax, paint

75 x 58 x 56 in.

Photo: Tom Powell



5

Diana Al-Hadid

Edge of Critical Density, 2009

Fiberglass, polymer gypsum, steel, wood, paint

90 x 79 x 90 ¾ in.

Photo: Peter Foe



6

Diana Al-Hadid

Tomorrow's Superstitions, 2008

Polystyrene, polymer gypsum, steel, silverleaf, paint
60 x 48 x 90 in.



7

Pieter Breughel

The Tower of Babel, 1563

Oil on oak panel

44 ¾ x 61 in.

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna



8

Caspar David Friedrich

German, 1774-1840

Cloister Cemetery in the Snow, 1819 (destroyed 1945)

Oil on canvas

Formerly in the Nationalgalerie Berlin



9

Gradiva bas-relief

Roman copy in the manner of Greek, 4th century BCE

Vatican Museum Chiaramonti, Rome

Photo: Rama (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Gradiva-p1030638.jpg>)



10

Diana Al-Hadid

Cenotaph for Two, 2011

Polymer gypsum, fiberglass, steel, polystyrene, wood, paint
90 x 90 x 132 in.



11

Diana Al-Hadid

Trace of a Fictional Third, 2011

Steel, polymer gypsum, wood, fiberglass, paint

120 x 240 x 156 in.

Photo: Jason Wyche, courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery



12

Hestia, Dione, and Aphrodite

Three goddesses from the east pediment of the Parthenon

The Acropolis, Athens, Greece, about 438–432 BC

Marble, Length 91 ¾ in.

The British Museum, London; Elgin Collection

© Trustees of the British Museum



13

Frank Stella

American, born 1936

Prinz Friedrich von Homburg, Ein Schauspiel, 3X, 1998-2001

Stainless steel, aluminum, painted fiberglass, and carbon fiber

31 x 39 x 34 ft.

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

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14

Medardo Rosso

Italian, 1858–1928

The Golden Age (L'Eta d'oro, also called Aetas aurea), 1886

Wax over plaster, 19 x 18 ¼ x 14 in.

Raymond and Patsy Nasher Collection, Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas

Photo: David Heald



15

Jacopo Pontormo

Florentine, 1494–1557

The Entombment (Deposition from the Cross), 1525–28

Oil on panel, 123 x 76 in.

Capponi Chapel, Santa Felicità, Florence



16

Jacopo Pontormo

Florentine, 1494–1557

Joseph with Jacob in Egypt, probably 1518

Oil on wood, 38 x 43 1/8 in.

National Gallery, London



17

Workshop of Robert Campin

South Netherlandish, active by 1406, died 1444

Annunciation Triptych (Mérode Altarpiece), ca. 1427–1432

Oil paint on oak

Central panel: 25 1/4 x 24 7/8 in.; each wing 25 3/8 x 10 3/4 in.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The Cloisters Collection, 1956 (56.70)

