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DIANA AL-HADID *BECAUSE IT WAS HERE NOT THERE THAT I FELL INTO YOUR FOUNTAIN, AND HERE NOT THERE THAT I STUCK AROUND FOR A BATH.*



DIANA AL-HADID, "DIVIDE AND CONQUER," (2015), POLYMER GYPSUM, FIBERGLASS, STEEL, PLASTER, GOLD LEAF, AND PIGMENT, 84 X 59.5 X 6 INCHES, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND OHWOW GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.



DIANA AL-HADID, "UPON REFLECTION, SOME CHANGES," (2015), POLYMER GYPSUM, FIBERGLASS, STEEL, PLASTER, GOLD LEAF, AND PIGMENT, 59.5 X 47.5 X 2.5 INCHES, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND OHWOW GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.

Written by
Matthew Bedard

Picture Narcissus kneeling over his chiseled pond reflection. He's in awe. He's so damned handsome. He's beautiful. So much so that he'll drown himself in that very reflection, chasing his timeless beauty into a rather conclusive end. Now picture artist Diana Al-Hadid, who turns 33 this year, in her studio, considering Narcissus, and his mission, working backward from the now, from 2015, with fiberglass, and steel, and plaster, and gold leaf, and other materials. Consider how, as a sculptor, she might position Narcissus by the pond, self-indulged but near teeter, as if she caught him the moment before his inadvertent plunge to death. Then consider the fallible linearity of time, and how colossally twisted our sense of self, of history, of architecture lies within this. Imperfect right? A little off. Thus, Al-Hadid's re-creation, Narcissus might not be looking into his reflection, but rather the splintered, warped, asymmetrical representation that, after some wear and tear and years gone by, might not align with the beauty ideal, might be a bit more personal, more close.

Al-Hadid, who was first featured in *Flaunt* in 2009 and opens her first solo show this month with Los Angeles' OHWOW Gallery, boasts a complex body of work that draws from science, myth, art's Renaissance and Mannerism periods, and ancient invention. The results see decadent, eerie suspension of time, almost crystalized or frozen. It's in this suspension that humankind's faults and anomalies, and beauty as Al-Hadid might attest, come into relief. Not so ideal, not so perfect, but complicated beyond imagination, and imbued with a kind of everlasting grace. Here, Al-Hadid, whose work has shown at Secession, Vienna (2014); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2010); La Conserved, Centro de Arte Contemporáneo, Murcia Spain (2011); and Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas (2011), among others, shares on her arrhythmic excavation of the past (not Narcissus but rather the paintings of Hans Memling, for instance), and why the fountain of youth is better piloted with forward momentum, in reverse.

You're about to open a show here in Los Angeles, and we've elected you the cover art creator for this pursuit of the eternal Elixir Issue. How do you relate to the idea of Forever Young?

As much as there's this draw to the fountain of youth, and it's fashion-y and sexy, I don't know. I don't fall for it. I don't trust it. I like the messy, less perfect side of life. I can understand why people are drawn to religion, because it's easy to answer the complex mysteries of life with simple, idealistic answers. There's something clean and orderly about it, the allure of perfection. It's also the allure of youth/eternal beauty. But that's a fiction, people grow old, life becomes more complex, and I find those wrinkles beautiful. Maybe I'm a weird fit for the cover. I mean, I'm getting older, and less seduced by these youthful ideals.

Oh, please, in addition to being a youngster, what you're saying is perfectly on theme—especially in the spirit of religious pursuit or life's mysteries. You mentioned at the start of our conversation about architecture as intervention. There's a sort of divinity to this idea, but intervention is also tied into this idea of defying time, or age. Thoughts? Maybe I'm old school, but I have never used the ceiling to hold up my work. I've never yet thought to use the ceiling instead of the floor. I have a real battle with gravity that can only be fought on the ground. But my battle with gravity is formal, not ideological, like your youth issue proposes... It isn't so much the anti-gravity or "fountain of youth" fight, like "Oh, I don't want my skin to sag." I'm interested in how to use gravity, how to challenge it.

What's defying space at OHWOW this time around?

Well, I guess the most prominent piece would be this 30-foot wall that you can pass through. There's a gaping hole in the middle. It's the first one that I made that you can walk through. I think it's interesting because I don't know how people will react to it. Generally, it's really important for me to get a viewer to walk around my work and to feel the material and structure. My first site visit to OHWOW, I loved their arched ceiling, and noticed the bottom of the trusses was only about 11 ft from the floor. So in some ways it's a beautiful and interesting space, but it's difficult. So I thought it would be interesting to make a really wide tapestry-like division and create an opening in the center of the image, so the main event is erased. But it would become the area that people would fill and populate again by walking through it. And in some ways, that gaping central cavity is what conceptually drove many of the other works in the show.

People hear 'fountain of youth' and they assume ideas of preservation. It could be said there's a preservational sensibility in your work. Would you agree?

I feel like my work often looks like there was some kind of event, or it's been said there's a kind of pause, or a moment that's frozen. I play with classical tropes, and I reach back to classical or old masterworks. With a certain sense of nostalgia, perhaps, or reverence, but almost with a desire to corrupt, or undermine, or to make it more personal, to bring it closer to my experience, rather than slot it into some kind of broader ideal. To pull it out of its historic archive and make it something more mine. When I look to these classical forms, I'm always curious to find the idiosyncratic moments, the errors, the mistakes, the dysfunctional, the scales or shifting that don't make sense—an illogical state.

Is there a trope at the moment or a trope in history or trend in history that you are particularly fascinated with right now?

For a lot of these panels, I look at the Northern Renaissance. There's a painter that I've referenced—Hans Memling—and there's something really awkward about his compositions. And I'm interested in awkwardness and distortion. And right now I'm really into this piece featuring this woman, who looks like a cork, or some kind of plug, sitting on top of this mountain, and she's just sitting there politely, and it looks like the mountain is growing like a skirt below her. There's a few titles—it's disputed—but I take "Allegory of Chastity" as the title. I've used it in my panels a few times, and it was present more than ever with me for this show.

The idea of chastity is somewhat of a deterrent to perpetual youth or the creation of offspring or the proliferation of your seed or your spirit. And chastity could be considered containment, or restraint. Is there a thematic bridge into the show's work here?

How about I try to tell you a little about the strange wayward process of the main sculpture, which is the piece in the show that has had the longest and most complex life in my studio. I've had this piece in my studio for about two years and it's a very challenging piece because my work has developed so much in that time, the piece has had to keep up with everything happening around it. I was having old problems that I proposed and make them interesting to me again. One of the thoughts I had early on was that the final blind bust should be looking into a "mirror"—not a functional mirror—but a plaster mirror like one I saw carved from stone in a sculpture on the facade of the Paris Opera. So I set up my own plaster cast "mirror" so that it "reflected" perhaps a kind of simple frozen mirror. The carved reflection is a way to make something tangible that really isn't tangible. Anyway, I started this piece with the last of the original heads of my blind bust and then halfway through I decided I didn't like the main structure, the body of the piece. I didn't like the way it sat on the ground so I started moving things around again, rotating and lifting the head, and then I eventually gutted the pedestal so it looks like this rectangular "core" sample from the earth, but with a gaping vacancy. And then the visual line that connected the head to the mirror was broken, which actually seemed much more interesting to me. As if the mirror and its frozen reflection are now independent of its source, amputated from its body. So as you can see, it's a very non-linear process. Sometimes the structure or the form changes and rewrites the narrative, sometimes the narrative helps structure the form. Like I said, it's not like I think of it and then make it; it's actually backwards. I make something in the middle of the process or at the end actually.



DIANA AL-HADID, "SINKING AND SCAFFOLDING," (2015). POLYMER GYPSUM, FIBERGLASS, STEEL, PLASTER, GOLD LEAF, AND PIGMENT. 84 X 120 X 6 INCHES. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND OHWOW GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.