

# Ghosts of Things

A Conversation with

Diana  
Al-Hadid

BY MICHAËL AMY

ROBERT BOLAND © DIANA AL-HADID, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY

*Suspended After Image*, 2012. Wood, steel,  
polymer gypsum, fiberglass, high-density foam,  
plaster, and paint, 282 x 204 x 126 in.





Diana Al-Hadid was born in Aleppo, Syria, spent most of her childhood in Ohio, and lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. Her most recent work draws inspiration from sources as varied as Renaissance tapestries, with their unusual spatial tensions, Jacopo Pontormo's strange fresco of the *Visitation* in the atrium of SS. Annunziata in Florence, and Taddeo Gaddi's intricate preparatory drawing (collection of the Louvre) for his *Presentation of the Virgin* fresco in the Baroncelli Chapel (Santa Croce, Florence). Al-Hadid's complex and innovative works, which tackle Old Master painting and its offshoots in idiosyncratic ways, require a great many digital drawings, a huge amount of coordination, and lots of teamwork. The trick lies in making all of this research, time, and effort disappear in the finished works—sculptures captured in a moment of suspended disintegration as mass makes way for liquefying, then freezing, sheets and strands. In the six short years since Al-Hadid has been showing, she has had more than 10 solo exhibitions showcasing an impressively diverse body of work.\*

**Michaël Amy:** *You've said that you are moving away from narrative in your new work.*

**Diana Al-Hadid:** Before, when I began a work, I would have a little more of a "narrative sketch"—though it would occasionally fade away. However, even if I stuck to the scenario, it was unlikely that the viewer would be able to retrace my specific narrative arc, which was perfectly fine. Now, I start with more of a "blank canvas." I just start making and know a lot less. I let the sculpture show me what I am interested in. I don't come in knowing. I don't have as much of a clue at the beginning, which may be

why I come up with titles really late in the process. This was the case with *Suspended After Image* (2012), the work that I constructed in Austin. I wait to absorb as much as I can from the work before naming it. This is not to say that narrative cannot be found in my new work, but I certainly seem to know less about it these days.

**MA:** *There is far greater improvisation now.*

**DAH:** That's a good way of describing it. Before, there was more of a core, and I would expand on it, and the parameters were more defined, whereas in this recent work, the edges are a little

*Gradiva's Fourth Wall*, 2011. Steel, polymer gypsum, wood, fiberglass, steel, and paint, 183.5 x 190.75 x 132 in.

KEVIN TODORA, © DIANA AL-HADID, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY



Above: 2 details of *Gradiva's Fourth Wall*, 2011. Below: *Gradiva's Fourth Wall*, 2011. Steel, polymer gypsum, wood, fiberglass, steel, and paint, 183.5 x 190.75 x 132 in.



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more reckless. I don't necessarily know how much the work is going to sprawl out. *Trace of a Fictional Third* (2011) almost doubled in size within a week. I started with one end and kept building until it started to take shape. I made compositional decisions then and there. My earlier work had a clearly defined center, and everything rotated around it. Maybe that's why the earlier work looks more architectural; there is a clear interior and a more defined exterior. Now, the work is drifting. It organizes differently, probably because I have less of a lead. And maybe because I am trying to learn more from painting, which might be causing an interesting glitch in my system.

**MA:** *Your current approach seems related to Surrealist processes.*

**DAH:** Perhaps it is as far as the morphing of matter is concerned. I was in Barcelona to take pictures of the model that Gaudí built in preparation for La Sagrada Familia. He built the model upside down, so that strings pulled down by little sandbags could make perfect arcs. I had been drawing from that model for a long time, so I wanted to go and see it. I also visited the house that Dalí built and lived in with Gala. But, if anything, I have been looking mostly at Northern Renaissance painting, Mannerist works, and figures that float.

Perhaps this is where the narrative element delaminates from the work. I look at paintings and am interested in them, but I don't follow the narratives closely. Instead, I look at the unusual perspectives depicted in these pictures. The laws of gravity function completely differently within an image, and I'm jealous of painting's ability to make anything float. The sharp-focus detail also interests me—things in the background are in equal focus to objects that lie in the foreground. Pontormo can have what is supposed to be a statue stand on a pillar in the background, and, because of its huge size, it looks like it should be in the foreground; then you have a figure in the front that is very stiff, and it should be of marble, but it is not. He paints stairs that seem to go up to nowhere. These are things that I jealously want to pull from. I never looked directly at Dalí's work, but perhaps he was in my periphery.



The character of Gradiva caught my attention when I was making my previous work, *Gradiva's Fourth Wall* (2011), and I learned about her from the Surrealists. She was a muse for Dalí, who called Gala “Gradiva.” But Wilhelm Jensen’s novel (1903) was, in fact, made famous by Freud, and not by Dalí.

**MA:** *Your use of improvisation, chance techniques, and accident made me think of Surrealism. Dreams also come to the fore in your work. The reclining white male figure in your new sculpture has lost his head. He is lost in dreams. The upright cloak at his side seems dream-like.*

**DAH:** Yes, I can see that, although, unlike the Surrealists, I don’t use my own dreams as a source. The title, *Suspended After Image*, refers to the solid form that persists in one’s memory, as well as to the effort to make something that is immaterial materialize—which is a constant pursuit for a lot of artists—to make a form rise from nothing. And I suppose that when you finally do have something material, you want it to return in the opposite direction—namely to shift from real space and time to the propositional or “dream” space where it originated. That is related to *Gradiva's Fourth Wall*. A thin veil separates the real from the imagined—that is what Gradiva really was about. In Jensen’s story, Gradiva would show up and, at times, be real and concrete; at other times, she would be a figment of the character’s imagination. Freud’s interpretation of the story is called *Delusion and Dream in Jensen's 'Gradiva'* (1907). There is something dream-like, I would agree, in negotiating what is real and what is fiction, where the story stops and where something else takes over.

**MA:** *You have introduced the notion of a story, but your work is moving away from narrative.*

**DAH:** I meant that I am moving away from having a “narrative sketch” at the outset, something that directs the piece in its early stages. That’s not the same as being less interested in stories. I’m just more willing to see what might develop without my knowing so much so soon. But, as a result of relaxing the “script,” there is greater friction between narration and abstraction. I’m curious about this threshold of how much narrative you can withhold and how much you can suggest. We instinctually want to organize form, to find patterns—it’s elemental to our survival. I like to see how much I can withhold, and with my materials, I like to see how little structure I can integrate into the work. How much air can I allow to pass through a sculpture, how much mass can I remove? Even though my sculptures are constructed, there is still so much that is transparent. How many holes can I cut out of them? How much “dream space” can I cut out of them? There is a conflict between the labored, handmade



*Trace of a Fictional Third* (detail), 2011. Polymer gypsum, wood, steel, fiberglass, aluminum foil, and paint, 120 x 240 x 156 in.

materiality of my work and my desire for disappearance and weightlessness. It is a necessary conflict—the more I add and build, the more I want to remove and break. On the increasingly frequent occasions when I don’t know what I’m making or exactly how I will produce a sculpture, I trust that I will learn from the materials and the process, and I proceed with whatever little information I am sure of. Raul Ruiz wrote of the relationship between a film’s structure and its construction—the structure referring to the thing that exists before construction takes place—and describes the process of architects building a Gothic cathedral. At some point, they get to a place where a new tool needs to be invented to solve a problem, thereby setting into motion a cycle in which future problems are first hypothesized and then created so that the new tool can fix them, which will affect the original structure, which is modified accordingly. I deeply believe in this cycle.

**MA:** *What contemporary artists are you looking at?*

**DAH:** I love Judy Pfaff’s work. She strikes me as very improvisational. She is fearless in her use of color, and her work is muscular and energetic. She is the mother of installation art, and my personal hero.

**MA:** *I was thinking of David Altmejd, in light of the delicacy of your work.*

**DAH:** I love Altmejd’s work. In his last exhibition at Andrea Rosen, he used floating body parts and cut into the pedestal, and I was doing the same

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*Trace of a Fictional Third*, 2011. Polymer gypsum, wood, steel, fiberglass, aluminum foil, and paint, 120 x 240 x 156 in.

things around the same time, though in a different way. He was eating away into the walls and into the right angles of the gallery. I think we share something there. I would be very honored if he agreed.

**MA:** *Your work brings American painting to mind. I am thinking of Pat Steir's torrents of pigment running down the height of the canvas and of Helen Frankenthaler pouring puddles of pigment onto raw canvas laid flat on the ground.*

**DAH:** I think that the pour constitutes the origin of painting. That is what these artists are zeroing in on—just the paint. Something at the heart of what they are doing appeals to me. That’s how I build up my layers—it’s just paint, poured and dripped over a horizontal surface. It’s a very quick gesture. There is a lot that happens afterwards, behind the scenes. It’s about isolating those pigments. It’s not just about color. You want to see how the pigments run and how they behave in space, how gravity pulls them down, and how the colors of layered puddles will affect each other and the surface of the canvas itself. I start playing with the colors and the paint, and after that, when the medium is dry, I lift it and build shapes out of it. I’m really not a painter—I’m kind

JASON WYCHE © DIANA AL-HADID, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY

of faking it. I am forcing these drips of color against an invisible grid, and then over the whole three-dimensional structure.

Agnes Martin’s work has been very important for me, which may seem funny, as there is nothing like an exact match between our bodies of work. But what she has to say about the artist’s process is very inspirational. She has a wonderful spirit about staying close to your process. She forces you to see the grain of the pencil mark, the texture of the canvas, and to realize that they are inseparable. That single, perfectly drawn line, which looks both machine-made and handmade, is so seductive—at a distance, it disappears, and up close, it becomes very tactile. It’s remarkable that someone pursues that line over and over again. When you break down my earlier work, it is just a matter of lines and planes assembled to create a dimensional object.

I am also a huge fan of Cy Twombly. The people I love, and whose work I have really looked at, have often been painters, and there is a tactile quality to their work. I learn from what I do not know. I like the improvisational thing in Twombly. His sculptures are revealing as well. They are gritty—everything is handmade, and there is an immediacy that is really attractive. The marks that he musters have an emotive quality that ranges from childish and funny to very aggressive and dirty. There is a kind of narrative there, but it’s very sketchy. He seems to start with something





Above and detail: *Cenotaph for Two*, 2011. Polymer gypsum, fiberglass, steel, polystyrene, wood, and paint, 90 x 90 x 132 in.

random and then finds order in it, and that’s how I approach my drawings. Maybe that’s a Surrealist or Dadaist thing. I start with something really reckless and then I form it into something more cohesive and coherent, and I see what emerges from it.

**MA:** *There are many historical and literary allusions in Twombly’s work. Can such allusions be found in your recent work?*

**DAH:** From working on *Gradiva*, I learned how Derrida analyzed Freud—because Freud had read Jensen’s novel as a metaphor. Jensen tells the story of a man who goes to Pompeii to try to find *Gradiva*. Freud believed that *Gradiva* was the therapist. The psychoanalytic process is a matter of unearthing layers of history. Derrida interpreted that interpretation.

Historians want to both witness and archive the event when it happens. It’s impossible, but it’s a fantasy shared by historians and artists: they want to memorialize the event. *Gradiva*’s footprint is proof of her existence—the ghostly imprint on the earth marks the historical event. But Derrida criticizes Freud’s attraction to the archaeology metaphor. Archaeology does not relive the past, but archives it. It “buries as much as it digs up.”

I realize sometimes how small my focus can be, and how persistent my obsessions. I like to salvage something from the wreckage and unearth some strange thing. You never know what insignificant object will eventually become an extremely important thing, which someone will pay attention to—a thing imprinted

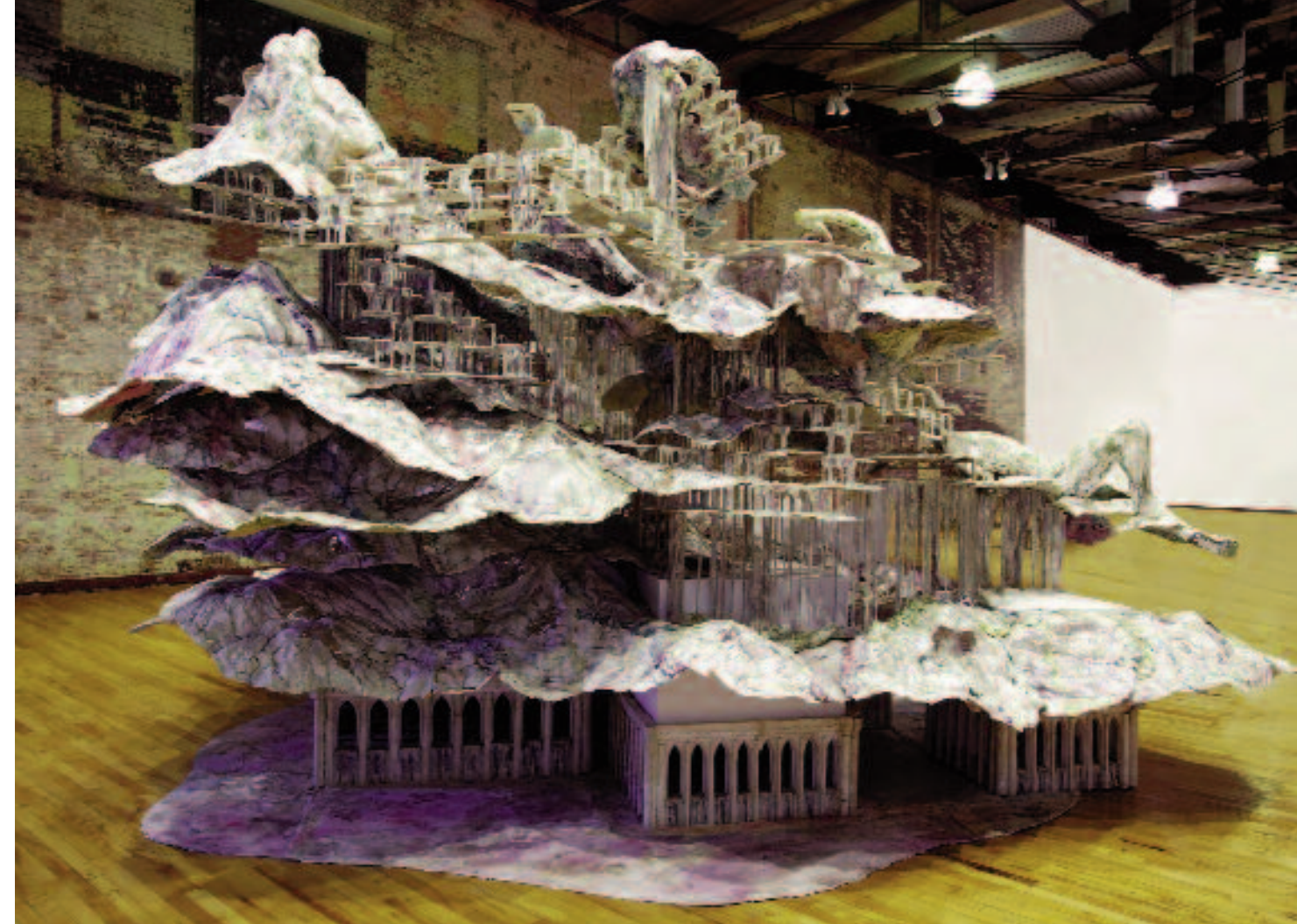
with history. For me, it is now becoming more interesting, not to find a particular event or artifact, but to invent it or let it find me.

*Gradiva*’s story fit so neatly with the direction in which I was going, using the figure as a shell, an imprint, because that’s what she is—*Gradiva* is just a cloak, a cloth over the form, she is not a material body, and that’s what most of my figures up until now have really been: the shell, the casing of something, but not the thing itself.

**MA:** *What is the metaphorical meaning of a shell of a body?*

**DAH:** All of my work is a matter of layers. It is composed of one thin layer floating over another or defining a space. My first interest in sculpture was a matter of parameters—looking at the edges of a room and filling the room, having a physical boundary when you are making an installation. After graduate school, I would start with a core and expand it to a specific parameter. That’s how I learned to make objects without the walls. I kind of pushed that. In school, I was assigned *Metaphors We Live By*, by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. It’s an amazing book. All of our language points to metaphorical concepts of how we perceive the world. We understand everything in terms of metaphor. This is very clearly evidenced through language. Take “the mind is a machine”—our language clearly shows that this is how we conceptualize the mind. The authors also describe how we perceive the world as a thing with parameters. We imagine ourselves in a shell; we are

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*Nolli’s Orders*, 2012. Steel, polymer gypsum, fiberglass, wood, foam, and paint, 264 x 228 x 122 in.

encased in this physical form, which is our body. When we find a clearing in the woods, we find no real boundary there, but we define a boundary, psychologically. We do that to organize our sense of space, and we do the same thing with our bodies. We *are* our bodies, but we are also *inside* our bodies, so everything is related in that sense, in the same way that we understand our size, our proportions, and our sense of scale and space in relation to buildings and sculpture. Our bodies are implicit in all of this built work and in everything that we do. We think of things in terms of interior and exterior.

Feet, which feature constantly in my work, are the most distant things when one looks at oneself. We have less of a relationship with our feet—though they keep us grounded. Our feet help us organize space and understand how we navigate through space. *Metaphors We Live By* shows us that our language constitutes proof positive of how we organize space, how we have survived, and how we have evolved into these perceiving beings. That’s the metaphorical end for me. I just want to get the ghost of something. For me, it’s not a matter of identity or specificity. I am not out to create a single character or a single body. For me, it isn’t about the flesh, and it isn’t about body politics. Instead, it’s about posture, composition, architecture, and the structure of the body, the skin that surrounds us, and the skin of the architectural object as well—maybe that’s a way for me to relate the body to architecture. *Gradiva* is literally made of the same material as the curtain around her. I try to think about the material as matter. In *Suspended After Image*, the issues get further confused. The

paint leaks over the structure, but then it is the structure: it is the skin, it is the shell. There is an invisible box underneath. I want to imply it and leave the residual imprint or footprint, and leave out the identity. Perhaps that is why all these pieces have been headless.

**MA:** *Are there other texts that have influenced you?*

**DAH:** I read a great deal of fiction as a kid. I really loved *Madame Bovary*. Now, I make things more than I read. But almost everything I read influences my thinking—how can it not? I start reading “for fun,” but it seems like I read just enough to generate an idea. Put another way, the work picks up where the reading leaves off. As I said, my sculpture helps me learn what I am interested in. Something will happen that will lead me to something else I did not know about. There is a common link in my interests, but it’s a very long chain of events—in isolation, they may seem random.

#### Notes

\* This interview was conducted on the occasion of Al-Hadid’s site-specific installation at the Visual Arts Center of the University of Texas at Austin (2012). I would like to thank You You Xia, Jade Walker, and the Visual Arts Center for facilitating our conversation.

*Michaël Amy is a professor of the history of art at the Rochester Institute of Technology.*

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