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BY  
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**B**orn in Syria, raised in Ohio and based in New York. Artist Diana Al-Hadid's multi-faceted installations explore architecture, astrophysics, topology and the constructs which keep us all bound together. Suggestive, cheeky and historically rich narratives draw the viewer into her detailed voids, immersing them in her own unique world of intricate fantasy and abysm.

**Brent Randall:** You're often described as an "Architectural Artist", though early on your works were more about avoiding the containment of spaces. You preferred to build boundaries and define perimeters rather than the creation of its centre or axis. I see you as sort of an anti-architect.

**Diana Al-Hadid:** I feel very different from architects but perhaps for contrary reasons than you mention. I am married to an architect, and we both share a love of problem-solving, but an architect is much more cooperative. If I'm an anti-architect, as you say, it's because I don't play well with others!

**Brent:** One of your earliest pieces, 'Paper plate cave' inspired by a cave in Tripoli, it was the first time you'd noticed a 'room' naturally evolve, not something mad-made. You've said it was an important discovery for your evolution as an artist. Why was that discovery is so edifying?

**Diana:** I think the thing that struck me the most about the cave was the enormity of an enclosed space that was not made by man. Being from the Midwest, large enclosed spaces are not special, but obviously this cave was a very different kind of enclosure. Its beauty was shocking, but it also felt old in a way I never experienced before. That was the surprise I was fully not prepared for. On the other hand, I noticed the construction of the tour—the pathway and the artificial lights—a very much a 'built' experience, controlling our movement through the cave.

**Brent:** Your works always have what you've described as "a nugget of an experiment in it from the previous piece, the catalyst for the next one". What was the nugget you pulled for 'Zipper Mountain'?

**Diana:** I suppose the notion of a land-

scape acting like a body was something that I took from the previous piece. The first one I made when I moved to NYC.

**Brent:** It crossed into a sensual, borderline sexual landscape which you hadn't really talked about before.

**Diana:** Yes, it's a little bit of a sexy piece. It was also a little playful problem about scale and inappropriate anthropomorphization. It's strange to think of the seduction of a mountain in another way.

**Brent:** You've said, "I'm going to outline the whole world. I'm going to outline Pangea." I love that you aren't scared to outline the organisation of our planet in



its entirety through your work. Where does one actually start the mapping our existence? It seems an inordinate task.

**Diana:** Yes, I suppose I aspire to inordinate tasks. Or at least look up to them like an older sibling...and I think it's healthy to approach inordinate tasks with a bribe or a soft-serve ice cream cone. Another direction would be to make the inordinate task small, try to digest it in more manageable bits. The "whole world" is more manageable when you realise there are 400 billion stars in our galaxy alone and 400 billion neurones in the brain.

**Brent:** It's a credit to you. You take on

such big, critical ideas, never fickle or cheap. Do you ever desire to simplify everything and say stuff like, "Ugh. Here's a flower. Its just a flower, shut up" - Or is it all over when that time comes?

**Diana:** Everything both is and isn't exactly what it is all the time. I do tell flowers to shut up quite often, though!

**Brent:** "I've consistently been working on my art career since I was eleven." Tell me about the eleven year-old Diana.

**Diana:** The eleven-year-old Diana was in 7th grade, moving from the suburbs of Cleveland to the even more suburb-y suburb of North Canton, Ohio. The social bubbles burst and got disorganised, and I felt totally alienated, but knew that I loved to draw. It was both a private and public thing. Private while I made it, public when the popular kid sitting in front of me in English Literature would sometimes wake-up to tell me that my drawing was the bomb.

**Brent:** How did you know so early on that this art was for you?

**Diana:** Lots of kids want to be artists when they grow up, it seems like a viable life choice at some point. At some point someone will likely talk some sense into them, and they abandon that path...for better or for worse. Anyway, it's a popular myth (or at least a rumour) that people have to do one thing for all their lives.

**Brent:** Your desire to disrupt classical order through the undoing of mathematic organisation, is quite rebellious. Is this the attraction and repulsion you've talked about within your work?

**Diana:** It's the oldest kind of rebellion in art, so I don't think it's really rebellious anymore, but I do find the conflict of attraction and repulsion endlessly interesting. It's fascinating how thin the line is between the two, and how quickly tastes can change. Most things are both attractive and repulsive at the same time. Your opinion on the matter just depends on where you are standing at the time.

**Brent:** With your works being so large scaled and automatically immersive, how important is this pushing and pulling of your viewer?

**Diana:** To be honest, I pay most attention to how it pushes and pulls me as I work

on it. Usually when a work is finished, I don't think much more about it, unless someone or something brings it up.

**Brent:** Your interest in topology and mapping seems like you're trying to make things tangible that shouldn't be. Tell me about your interest in the hidden math within religion which you've said "Helps contain god".

**Diana:** I think I just meant to say that rules and boundaries help us to cognitively cope with the notion of the intangible, or "god", or whatever else is impossible to conceive. Numbers and words are tools in that sense. It's a paradox, we can never really understand what infinity is. It's not possible to really 'see' infinity, so we have to draw constraints around it, or just make a shorthand symbol: (insert infinity symbol).

We can't visualise a million, let alone a billion, let alone infinity. But to help put things in perspective we can think of these numbers in terms of time: a million in seconds equals about 12 days, but a billion is 31 years.

Sometimes it's much easier to understand simple math in terms of shapes and space, but then, bigger, more complicated math is only understood in terms of digits on a page. When Benoit Mandelbrot came up with fractal geometry it was after asking how long the coastline of Britain was. The answer was impossible because one needs a fixed point of reference from the coastline, otherwise it would expand and contract infinity.

That length is impossible to visualise, but if we drew it as general shape, it would be identifiable as the coastline of Britain.

**Brent:** On religion and ritual, you see it as "an effort for subjectivity to be contained and organised." What specifically is it about these constructs us humans have built around religion which interests you?

**Diana:** It's interesting that our mind relies on the organising, sequencing, categorising, compartmentalising left side of the brain to understand the instantaneous, free-wheeling, associative right side of the brain. It's interesting to notice how often these religious rituals so closely mirror others from across the world, but we don't identify them as our own.

**Brent:** You've said that it "gets absurd" when you try to articulate things that shouldn't be tangible. The belief that these things exist without any proof, only living and existing in the land of hypothesis. How do you avoid getting completely buried and lost in the weight of these subjects and when do you know it's time to stop?

**Diana:** It's never time to stop! I'm kidding. I honestly don't really think about these things as heavy pressures. I focus on the practical details of a project, like, how will I get that thing not to fall, or what else can I do with this new material, or how can I finally use this piece of junk I have saved for six years now?



**Brent:** 'Tower of infinite problems' deals directly with the birth and death of art and cultures, and the dispersion of religion after the destruction. How did that come about?

**Diana:** That piece got its start from my love of the obsessive Bruegel Tower of Babel paintings, so he's responsible for the big interpretations, I'd say. I just liked his painting...

**Brent:** Why are you so interested in religion?

**Diana:** I'm as interested in religion as probably anything else I'm interested in, and also just about as interested as most of the world. I'm sure it's because

I was raised in a non-majority religion, so I had more questions to ask about my and others' religions than your average person. I can say I'm 'interested' in it as a historical subject and a sociological study, but that's probably a way for me to psychologically cope with my strong dislike of religion in general—sort of a way to politely repackage my feelings into an objective scientific study. Perhaps it's another attraction and repulsion thing.

**Brent:** Around the time of the 'Tower of infinite problems', you were starting to tire of architecture. You "felt stuck" as an Arab artist in New York creating fallen structures and buildings.

**Diana:** I couldn't ignore the way I was being "soundbited" for press and it made me realise I needed some distance from it to understand what that meant, and how much responsibility I should take for it. It felt like I was being publicly psychoanalysed. But then maybe that's part of the process of being an artist?

**Brent:** Do you think that was a direct response to the mood surrounding middle eastern tensions and America's stigma and fear around that time?

**Diana:** Yes, probably. It's just strange to see yourself as a statistic, when you forgot that in fact, you are just a statistic. And in fact, statistics have meaning. But sometimes that meaning is skewed, because isn't all science a little subjective when the information is new? It's true that I am in fact, statistically speaking, an Arab woman living in New York who made work about fallen towers, but I am also a woman from the suburbs of Ohio who is deeply interested in Flemish Painting and illustrations of built structures and myths. You see how all these things are true, but they feel a little different depending on the order you put them in and what you leave out.

**Brent:** You started to look internally. To our bodies as vessels, as containers, as constructs for these ideas to reside in— as opposed to man-made structures. Tell me about some of the earliest rumblings of inspiration and what were some of the bigger personal issues you were dealing with around this time which brought these to the surface?

**Diana:** I've been thinking of my work



as containers for a long time. But perhaps my first figural work, was "Actor." I approached this sculpture a bit architecturally and a bit like a drawing, extruding a form from a printed image. I used small rods to weld the figure, interpreting the curves of the fabric as facets, drawing them up like small marks.

**Brent:** You were shifting the idea of containment and vessels with 'Pedestal'. Contextualising and destabilising the figure. Introversion for me, generally happens when the outside world becomes quite shit and unbearable. Do you find that you're more productive in the darker periods of your life or is it the opposite?

**Diana:** I suppose that depends on the shade of black. Being productive means not totally being overrun by the darker periods.

**Brent:** This led to the first piece where you used your own body. You wanted to make a building made of your body instead of for your body. I imagine placing yourself into one of your works, was quite challenging coming from a place where your identity had only ever emerged through less blatant, broader terms. Was it a difficult transition?

**Diana:** I didn't really think of my own body as a marker of identity, it was just a tool that was a means to an end. It was the first time I had made a work like

this, so it was a little intimidating, but mostly it was exciting. I knew it was a necessary thing to do, which made it less difficult.

**Brent:** You said that you don't really live in your work, it's not really you. You're very practical and not into so much ornamentation, though your work couldn't be more ornate and detailed. Tell me about that disconnect?

**Diana:** I meant that my work is more irrational and perhaps more chaotic than my personal life is day to day. I prefer not to waste space, materials, meaning in either my work or in my life.

**Brent:** "I'm not trying to please people by making beautiful objects...I don't need the public to relate to it, I don't need to explain to anybody." You might have to explain that one for me!

**Diana:** Of course, I want and need there to be an audience, or else there would be no work. I was referring to the process of making something, while it is being made. When the work is being made in the studio, which is the part of its life that most concerns me, it's important that I feel free to experiment and to pursue my curiosities without fear of what the public may or may not interpret them to be. Initially, making art can seem very selfish, because it's important to turn off the "audience" and try to worry only about whether or not it's sustaining my own interest.

**Brent:** What do you need the public to do with your art? What is our role on entering your installations?

**Diana:** When the work leaves my studio, I don't really need much more from it personally. But perhaps it can be of use to someone else. I would really only hope that someone looks carefully at the work, and perhaps that they slow down and spend time with it and move their bodies around the entire thing if possible.

Like anything, art requires attention and some understanding of history and context. Like anything, a person has to become interested and motivated to look at art. My work is for everybody that is interested and motivated, so in that sense art is a very generous thing. But I don't need to 'convince' people to be interested or motivated. It's there if they want it, no pressure.

**Brent:** You once asked fellow artist Paul Chan what his most important failure was. I'd like to know what yours is, or what you fear it may end up being?

**Diana:** I worked for a year on a project in grad school that taught me about the difference between broad and narrow focused problem solving. I was looking so closely at the problem, and being so over-focused that I couldn't see how to approach the work from any other perspective. I became so attached to the tedious monotonous efforts I had invested, I wasn't willing to destroy to re-create. I learned from that project how to undermine myself for the sake of the work, how to gut it from its core and turn it on its head. I also learned how to let it go when it wasn't becoming more than the sum of its parts. It was a very important failure at a very formative time.

**Brent:** On your schooling, you were trained by modernist teachers, which is very stripped back, paired-down and singular, though your work is an almost opposite negative inversion of those ideals. You've said yourself, "I have the modernist in me, I just sort of resent it." Could you elaborate on that please?

**Diana:** I am balanced between two worlds in this sense. I am interested in the relationship between skin and structure, and often try to join the two as much as possible, to use only with what is essential. But then I have a more disorderly, chaotic side, which compels me with equal strength. It's easier to resent the part of you that is essentializing and orderly, because the left side of the brain can tend to feel louder than the right side of the brain, which we are less likely to value.

**Brent:** During your training at VCU, you learnt 'how to interrogate yourself'. There's always debate on whether technical training is necessary for an artist. Is it necessary?

**Diana:** Technical training is not important to all artists, but for some it can be a great way to creatively misinterpret a problem.



