

In 1967 I went to Paris to study fashion and art. In the morning I went to the fashion course but I would skip the afternoon as I was never that keen on learning the technique.

I wanted to enjoy Paris life as much as I could. I wanted to draw, paint and go to the cinema. What I liked about fashion was drawing, how to express an idea.

I seemed to understand what people wanted to wear. After a year of fashion school I started selling my sketches to fashion houses and magazines.

I could sell my sketches for 50 francs each. After a year of selling sketches I could rent a better room, eat in better restaurants. I wanted to be able to move on. I think my generation after the war had a burst of energy.

My teacher used to say to me, ‘Nicole, you are like a train stuck on train tracks and one day you’ll derail.’ I was too fast for her. But I didn’t listen and after two years I left as I had so much work already.

I met my first husband Stephen Marks [the owner of French Connection] in 1972. He was buying designs from the company I worked for and a lot of them were mine. He asked me to come and do a collection in London so I used to commute from Paris.

In the 1970s London was booming. The clubs were fantastic, the music was wonderful. King’s Road was an eye opener, especially for a clothes’ designer. People dressed very freely, the way they wanted to. In France fashion is much more conservative.

Stephen had a beautiful flat in Notting Hill. I was commuting with our baby daughter because I missed the food in Paris. At that time there was no café life in London where you could sit having coffee and chat with your friends.

When my daughter was four I finally moved to London.

MY FIRST LONDON HOME

NICOLE FARHI

The former fashion designer and queen of understated chic is now a full-time sculptor. She talks to **Kate Salter** about leaving fashion behind, her 18th-century home in Hampstead and why she’s a fan of bigger bodies



We bought the house I still live in now on Frognal in Hampstead.

The house was built in 1700. My studio, which is the old orangery, was built in about 1800. I came here 42 years ago, before I was sculpting, so I grew vegetables in the orangery.

Hampstead was still a village then. It was what I loved about it. I couldn’t believe that you could be in London and live where there is a butcher, fishmonger, grocer. It has changed a lot. The people who lived here were more artistic – now there are so many bankers and lawyers.

I think London has changed for the better. The cultural life of London is better now. Everyone goes to museums and galleries – they didn’t use to. Now people go

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and take their children and that’s fantastic because it opens their eyes to life.

I’ve been sculpting for the past 35 years or more. I sculpted all throughout my fashion career but I never wanted to show what I was doing because I thought you can’t mix fashion and sculpture and people would think, ‘Well, what is she? Is she just playing at being a sculptor?’ When I stopped fashion seven years ago the very next day I was in the studio and I haven’t left since.

Folds at Beaux Arts is my third solo show, then Heads and Hands, an exhibition at Gainsborough’s House. I like hands because they are so expressive, sometimes even more so than the face.

I never talk about fashion any more, only if I’m asked about it. I don’t look back and I’ve turned the page totally. I don’t go out shopping, I don’t know who the new designers are. I’ve stayed very good friends with my old team and they are the

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SHAPE SHIFTER Above: Nicole Farhi in her studio, a former orangery of her Hampstead home Right: Her bronze *Head of Gainsborough*

only ones who connect me to the world of fashion.

I met the Scottish sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi 35 years ago in a foundry when I was casting my first bronze – I called it *Orgasm*. When I was introduced to Eduardo he asked me what my sculpture was called and when I told him he said “Why don’t you come to my studio?”. He loved women. But actually we became very close friends.

He was my witness when I got married to David [Hare, the playwright]. My house is full of his work. He taught me to look at things you wouldn’t normally pay attention to, window shapes, things high up.

When I fell in love with David I didn’t sculpt – I was too excited to have met the man of my life. I used to sculpt things to pour out my angst. I was happy so I stopped and Eduardo was really upset. He told me “happiness

doesn’t suit your art at all”.

I was lucky enough to meet Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon through Eduardo. He knew everyone.

When I sculpt I’ve always been attracted to a figure if the body has flesh. Even when I was designing I would create loose stuff because I never liked skimpy, tight clothes. I don’t think you feel comfortable. I never liked to use very slim girls in my fashion shows either.

It was good that a few years ago there was the backlash against size zero models. Girls were becoming anorexic just to be able to get into a size zero.


Everybody focuses on being skinny but there is such beauty in the shape of a thigh, a breast or tummy. When I decided to do my *Folds*, sculptures of Sue Tilley [Freud’s subject in *Benefits Supervisor*

Sleeping] and Paola Barone, I decided to show it in fragments because your eye doesn’t wander over the whole shape of a woman, but concentrates exactly where I want it to look.

Anna Wintour, who is a friend of mine, came to see my work on Folds and said she would give me a feature in US Vogue. Two American women sent me an email after it came out. One said “I am

large and I didn’t know I could be beautiful.” I was so proud. The other one tore out the page from *Vogue* and said she looked at it every day. I hope people will see the beauty and sensuality that I see. ■

‘Nicole Farhi: Heads and Hands’ is at Gainsborough’s House, Sudbury, 26 February-16 June. gainsborough.org

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