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## THE ART OF HOPE

SAFWAN DAHOUL  
AND HIS  
DREAM-LIKE  
CANVASES

STUDIO VISIT:

# DIANA AL-HA



Diana Al-Hadid on the roof of her studio in Brooklyn, New York. Photography by Sueraya Shaheen.

# DID



*Syrian-American artist*  
**Diana Al-Hadid** *invites*  
*Laura van Straaten*  
*on a whirlwind tour of*  
*her Brooklyn studio in*  
*anticipation of her first solo*  
*show in the Middle East*



Among the many beautiful things in the Brooklyn studio of Syrian-American artist Diana Al-Hadid, the most beautiful is the giggly baby boy who will surely grow up to equate the smell of paint with a mother's love. Born in October, baby August and his mother are dressed nearly identically in the blue-and-white stripes of French sailors, though his mother's worn overalls are speckled with paint, as are the walls of her studio and old wood-plank floors.

As dusk falls on a cold January evening, Diana's husband, Jonathan Lott, is carting the baby around post-nap as the artist and her assistants showcase the artworks being prepared for Diana's first solo show in the Arab World, opening 4 March at New York University Abu Dhabi's art gallery on Saadiyat Island.

In the last decade, Diana has had more than 20 solo exhibitions at museums and galleries around the world. But when asked if the Abu Dhabi exhibition feels like a milestone, she answers, "Yes, totally! I feel like I've touched base a little bit with the region," noting that she's shown work at the Sharjah Biennial in 2009, in group shows at Sharjah's Barjeel Art Foundation and at Art Dubai in the booth of her New York-based gallerist Marianne Boesky, "But nothing so comprehensive as this show."

Born in Syria in 1981, Diana emigrated from Aleppo at the age of five to grow up in the suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio, with her parents, an insurance agent and a florist. She stuck to the Midwest for college, receiving double bachelor's degrees in Art History and Fine Art at Ohio's Kent State University before pursuing a Master's in sculpture at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia, and then



A young Diana Al-Hadid at her easel. Photography courtesy of the artist. Left: An installation view of *Phantom Limb* at the NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery. Above: (Detail) *Phantom Limb*, 2014. Steel, polymer gypsum, fiberglass, polystyrene, wood, plaster, metal mesh, aluminum foil, pigment. Variable dimensions. Photography by Markus Wörgötter.



headed to the Big Apple. It was in Manhattan, while temping at a sculpture fabrication shop, that she met her husband, an architect who was sourcing materials for his first project. His proposal—gifting her a series of bells that eventually let her chime out *The Wedding March*—was so cute that it merited mention in the much-talked-about *Vows* feature of *The New York Times*.

Nowadays, Diana spends her days in 4,000 square feet of workspace in a somewhat desolate East Williamsburg neighborhood. The building, a former silk-flower factory, is wedged between a wholesaler of produce and an industrial glass facility. It is here, in her studio, that Diana transforms Renaissance and classical figures into contemporary sculptural shapes, often with an element of a cascade, similar to the manner in which dinner candles drip to create new forms. Her sources are architecture, science, ancient inventions, myth and Old Master works. Some of the pieces appear layered as if by time—even calamity. You can't quite tell if she's revealing form by removing material or working in an additive fashion.

Her workspace is lined with her characteristic wall-works whose base is a polymer gypsum which, she says, she discovered in graduate school and has used ever since. "This is as kind of as analog as it gets," she says, as she describes how she makes the painting-shaped wall-sculptures where one can still see the surface behind. "It was a way of articulating this liquid surface that's kind of frozen but suggesting forms that weren't there." The works read like fragile, drip paintings where a canvas may have been stripped away. The same gypsum is also used in her freestanding sculptures, which are



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Above: Diana Al-Hadid in her studio. 2012. Photography by Rebecca Robertson.

(Detail) *Phantom Limb*. 2014. Steel, polymer gypsum, fiberglass, polystyrene, wood, plaster, metal mesh, aluminum foil, pigment. Variable dimensions. Photography by Markus Wörgötter.

crowded together in various stages of production in the center of the studio.

After the tour, we sit in her office where a drawing in progress on Mylar is pinned to one wall. As we talk, an assistant pipes in now and then about possible shows and commissions in Japan, the UK, New Orleans and San Francisco.

I ask her if she feels that people—Americans and other art world personalities that she encounters around the globe—look to her as an artist of Syrian origin for guidance in how to think about and talk about what’s happening in Syria—the unspeakable violence against people, the destruction of cities, culture and monuments, the refugee crisis? And are they expecting her work to be “about” her or her family’s experience somehow? “I think that’s always been the case,” she says. “People like to know the biography of the artist and how it feeds into their work. It’s kind of natural.”

The title of her upcoming Abu Dhabi show is *Phantom Limb*—a phrase that might suggest how she is answering to that expectation. The phrase denotes an amputee’s feeling of a missing body part still being present—sometimes even causing pain or an itch. And amputations, of course, usually arise from trauma. It doesn’t take much analysis to see how the idea of a phantom limb might reference history and memory—or even missing memories and histories. She tells me how she still has elderly relatives in Syria and this is what connects her to the country of her birth at this point. The situation in Syria and of its refugees also tugs at her heartstrings.

New York University Abu Dhabi’s 7,000 square foot gallery will house sculptural wall-pieces, freestanding sculptures as well as several bronzes by Diana. Those who saw her solo show *The Fates* at the Vienna Secession in 2014 may recognise some works. In addition, a version of *Phantom Limb* will travel to the David

Winton Bell Gallery at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island from 3 September until 30 October.

Additionally, a catalogue by Skira Publishing, co-produced with the Bell Gallery, will accompany the Abu Dhabi exhibition. The book, with a launch planned during Art Dubai, offers essays in Arabic and English by Reindert Falkenburg, a historian of Renaissance Art (Diana’s most obvious influence); Sara Raza, the Guggenheim curator and scholar of Middle Eastern contemporary art; and Alistair Rider, a historian of modern sculpture, who connects the materiality of the artist’s practice to the ephemerality of memory and history.

As to that ephemerality: the press announcement for show at NYUAD describes Diana’s works as “inevitable ephemerality” of Diana’s works and how they “slowly drip, decay and melt away.” This might appear misleading to those who have witnessed art that is truly ephemeral. On the contrary, Diana’s work seems to have the quality of disintegration. In fact, her signature polymer gypsum dries hard. Very much so. Previously, I had only seen her work in museum exhibits and private collections, where touching her sculptures is a definite “no-no.” But here in her studio, she let me touch her works. And I was struck by their durability. It was heartening. ■

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