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Nº17

UPSTATE DIARY



NATURE IS OUR SPARK

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This page: *The Outside In*, 2023.
Ph: Diego Flores. Opposite page:
Looking toward new horizons,
Diana Al-Hadid in her field.



GREETING THE UNFAMILIAR

Artist Diana Al-Hadid takes your brain to another dimension. Pay close attention.

Words Sophia Herring

Photography Martin Crook

This page, clockwise: Caption



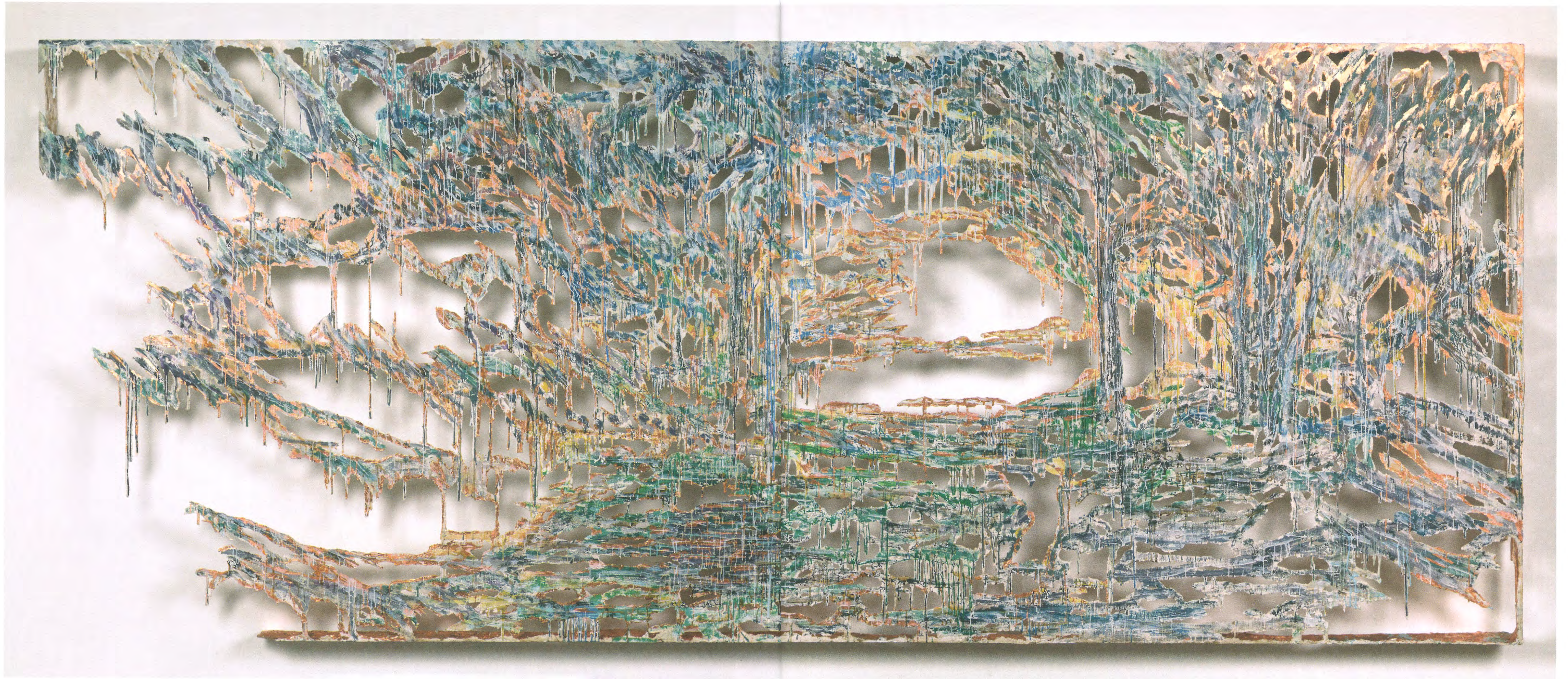
Seeing Brooklyn-based Syrian American artist Diana Al-Hadid's sculptures for the first time in the flesh is a visceral experience. The pieces are usually taller than eye level, and even her works on the walls often span more than two dimensions. It's the emphasis on materiality that captures the eye, an unfamiliarity that only comes through deep experimentation.

"I get really fascinated in how you can put two things together and see what new forms can grow," Al-Hadid explains of her practice. "It just lights up my brain." Although she notes that it doesn't always work this way. Like cooking, for example, which sparks "little curiosity or interest."

So, what is it about polymer gypsum, fiberglass, wood, foam, and plaster that incite the artist's creativity? "I use these materials to tell particular, unfamiliar stories," she explains.

This page: *Light in Mai*, 2022
Opposite page: Diana Al-Hadid
on her upstate property.





This page, above: *Solstitium*, 2022.
 Left: *The Long Defeat*, 2017-2023.
 All works by Diana Al-Hadid.
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Most recently, it was a commission for Penn Station to enliven the 33rd street entrance, which materialized as a floor to ceiling mosaic on the upper stairway landing. It's inspired by a black and white image from photojournalist Alfred Eisenstadt, titled "A Farewell to Servicemen." Through glass tiles and a method of abstraction, Al-Hadid creates an uncanny, gripping re-imagination of on Eisenstadt's photograph.

Born in Syria and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, Al-Hadid's own tale is one that has largely influenced her career. "It was the immigrant experience, learning to navigate two seemingly opposite worlds," she tells of venturing to middle-America at age five, being raised Muslim. At 13, the artist returned to Syria for the summer, recalling it a "very informative and important experience" for her rooting, and sense of self. She remained in her hometown to study art history at Kent, where an integral part of the program

was getting a good understanding of contemporary art through museum trips to Pittsburgh, New York, and visiting as many shows as possible. Adding, "I felt like it was the best way for me to come to understand the world."

For graduate school, the artist ventured to Virginia Commonwealth University, in Richmond, drawn to their MFA for its emphasis on tactility, and making. "I like the building, and the physicality of working with my hands, which allows me to think through materials." She reveals.

When asked about the research phase of her process, the artist paused for a moment. Not because she doesn't have one, but simply because it is so integrated into her day to day, it's hard to decipher as its own thing. "I do it in a grazing manner throughout my life," she elaborates, discussing the books, podcasts, and post it notes accumulated on her desk, noting that she's never not reading or listening to something;



“I GET REALLY FASCINATED IN HOW YOU CAN PUT TWO THINGS TOGETHER AND SEE WHAT NEW FORMS CAN GROW, IT JUST LIGHTS UP MY BRAIN.”

and draws from sources ranging from social and political to art and architectural.

Today, it’s not hard to see the way her surroundings have become research: she draws on the natural world, Islamic architecture, architectural ruins, historical materials, and art historical references; ranging from frescoes to tapestries. Even when it comes to her choice of material, breathing new life into even the most mundane, to reconstitute them in an entirely new fashion. “I love seeing plaster harden — concrete, steel, bronze — all very much ancient material,” the artist tells, noting that they have been with us since the Babylonian times. “But they are very contemporary, in the way I work.” Although not obvious at first glance, Al-Hadid notes that her work is “very technological,” and would not be possible without innovations such as photoshop.

When asked what influences her the most? “My husband Jon Lott, he inspires me, every day,” she shares of the architect, and Harvard professor. “I am always reminded how much we have in common with our thinking process.”

The two met while Al-Hadid was working in the office of a sculptural fabrication studio. He came in search of samples for his first project. As her career grew, the architect remained on her mailing list, but

the two only connected many years later when he thought of her for a collaboration on a project. “I think he recognized the architectural [influences] in my early work, which was about the built environments in an amateur, made-up way,” Al-Hadid explains, referring to a series of sculptures in 2010 in the form of upside-down cathedrals. Today, although the two haven’t collaborated in pen and paper, they continue to share their learning and ideas with one another. Adding, “he is much more academic than I am, and thinks through drawing and building and researching and knowing...”

In 2019, the couple purchased a home in Amenia, New York. It offered respite from the city, and particularly for Al-Hadid, some much needed extra studio space (which Lott is currently in the process of building for her). During the pandemic, the escape shifted to become their primary residence.


The move has come to reveal itself as more than just a geographic convenience — perhaps, one may even say it was spiritual. When the couple first visited the property, she described a surreal, psychedelic experience “while sober,” of seeing three suns in the sky, and a rainbow. She realized, in that moment, the transformative power of nature, and how long it had been since she had even seen a tree.

The property has also allowed her to connect with Jon in an entirely new way. The two spend half their weeks at their separate places of work (him, at Harvard, and Diana, in the city, “that’s important”, Diana notes). “That’s a big thing about living upstate,” she continues. “Con-

necting with him, walking around the property and imagining possible futures and how they can extend into the rest of the world.”

In terms of her own work, being in the greenery has prompted a shift as well. “My work moved upstate, and my mind moved upstate,” the artist notes of her

experience during COVID-19, which was the first time the family was in Amenia full time. “I was taking information from everything around me, and my work became more colorful, which was one of the most noticeable things.” She adds that the full influences of operating from the new location have yet to fully hit. “Once I’m really working in there, the studio, for a year, that’s when I’m really going to notice what happened in 2020.”

Perhaps we will get the first glimpses of it in her two upcoming projects: in November, she is releasing her first solo-show in two years at Kasmin Gallery. Although she can’t say too much, the artist does note that the show has a theme of volcanic activities. “It starts in bursts, and pieces,” she explains. Adding that there will be headless figures, a lot of bronze, “and probably some feet.” Another element she will be drawing on is MOXA, which is the name for the 3-sun effect she saw when first coming onto the property. Yes, it’s very challenging to visualize these separate components, but it seems emblematic of Al-Hadid’s process — piecing together fragments of inspiration, and the everyday, and turning it into something entirely otherworldly. 

Diana Al-Hadid’s solo exhibition opens November 2nd, 2023, at Kasmin Gallery, 509 West 27th St., NYC.

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