

Diana Al-Hadid SUBLIMATIONS



Visually extravagant and conceptually provocative, Diana Al-Hadid's sculptures, wall panels, and drawings are inspired by a range of sources, from art and architectural history to mythology and literature from around the world. Transforming the vestiges of such inheritances into improvised assemblages, intricate fields of dripping gypsum, and partially articulated human figures, Al-Hadid meditates on cycles of dissipation and renewal within and among cultures. Just as the word *sublimation* denotes a chemical transformation from one state of being into another, her work suggests changes wrought by time, as substance mutates into sensation and thought.

Although she starts her process by responding to existing images and models, Al-Hadid ultimately camouflages these sources within an elaborate framework, prompting a reading that is intriguing and inexplicit. Hints of narrative and symbolism within these baroque configurations make each work a tantalizing projection of an imagined archaeology, where the salvaged detritus of society and the body holds its secrets close.

The inseparability of material, process, and content is most evident in works made with polymer gypsum, a strengthened, weather-resistant form of the sulfate mineral used in plaster and wallboard. In works like *Gradiva*, for example, sinewy gypsum lacework evokes the profuse swirls of Abstract Expressionism, in which a subject is often buried within raw paint. Al-Hadid's source of inspiration is likewise hidden within these tangled surfaces, where elongated drips seem to

simultaneously swirl downward like roots after water and grow upward like vines seeking the sun (fig. 1).

Like other works in this exhibition, *Gradiva* (Latin for “she who walks”) revisits archetypal narratives that depict the female body in socially prescriptive terms, which Al-Hadid challenges, transforms, or dissolves. These legacies are often shaped by male desire and fantasy, inviting an alternate reading of *sublimation* as envisioned by Sigmund Freud, who used the word to define the transfer of energy from negative behavior—frequently involving unacceptable sexual impulses—to more wholesome outlets.

A wall-like sculpture, *Gradiva* was inspired by a 1902 novella by Wilhelm Jensen, who wrote about an ancient bas-relief



fig. 1



fig. 2



fig. 3

carving on a Roman wall, of a beautiful woman walking gracefully (fig. 2; see also fig. 3, Al-Hadid's drawing of *Gradiva*). This figure drove a modern archaeologist to such yearning that he saw her—in his dreams or perhaps in reality—manifested as a living woman for whom he developed a pathological desire. Wilhelm's story intrigued Freud, whose essay "Delusion and Dream in Jensen's *Gradiva*" discussed the inexplicable obsession of the archaeologist in psychoanalytical terms as compensation for a lost childhood love: sublimation as an exchange of irrational wildness for productive normativity. The story was also compelling to Surrealists like Salvador Dalí and André Masson, reinforcing their belief in essential truths obtained through erotic fixation. For Al-Hadid, a different shift seems to occur as she moves from the literalness of such readings. The woman as object of desire has disappeared into a field of open interpretation and fluidity—the explosive dissolution of longing into abstraction.



fig. 4

Gradiva was in an outdoor installation of sculptures on view at Madison Square Park Conservancy in 2018 titled *Diana Al-Hadid: Delirious Matter*. Other works in the exhibition include *Citadel*, currently on view at Cheekwood Estate & Gardens, the co-presenter of this exhibition. *Citadel's* form was derived from Hans Memling's painting *Allegory of Chastity* (1480), in which a young woman is contained within a mountain guarded by fierce lions (fig. 4). The painting reflects the patriarchal ideal of protecting feminine virtue from both external threats and internal desires: the lions ensure that men cannot get to the woman and she cannot get to them. In *Lionless*, Al-Hadid proposes a playful corrective (fig. 5). She has removed the bestial gatekeepers and dissolved the restraining mountain into a porous cascade of gypsum, freeing the young woman, almost six centuries too late, from the restrictive bonds that held her.

Memling's girl is not just imprisoned—she is half-swallowed, as likely to sink deeper into the mountain's grasp as she is



fig. 5

to climb out toward life. This concept of return or release from the earth, of death and resurrection, is played out in more ghastly terms in Al-Hadid's monumental sculpture *Head in the Clouds*. This ramshackle construction suggests a decaying body whose skeletal frame and tattered remains seem ready to collapse in ruin, to rattle back off into the underworld from where it emerged (fig. 6). But the deathly apparition is also a spiritual creature, with its head in the clouds and its



fig. 6

feet on a plateau hovering over the ground. The extended hand holds a simple house—a variant on traditional iconography, where statues of saints or church patrons offer models of religious structures for Christ's blessing. In Al-Hadid's reinvention, the house refers to her childhood home in Ohio, where her family had relocated after they left their native city of Aleppo, Syria, when she was only five years old. Held out like a talisman, the simple home is remembered in the mind's eye as a sign of childlike wholeness that is haunted by the deteriorating effects of time. This mournful consecration of the past represents home as a powerful symbol of memory,



fig. 7

identity, and loss—a symbol that is arguably more acute for the immigrant than the native born.

Closely entwining history, sensuality, and death, *In Mortal Repose* is a bronze depiction of a headless woman in a revealing tank top. She is melting over the edge of the pedestal in bloodlike drips (fig. 7). This seems at once to be a timeless expression

of bodily and emotional vulnerability and a comment on the sexually objectifying legacy of Western art. Throughout this history, the motif of a woman lying on a bed has been repeated innumerable times, generally with a limited number of narratives. Women may be dead or dying, as in Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *Death of the Blessed Ludovica Albertoni* (1674), a funerary altarpiece in which the figure's dramatic posture signifies such traits as piety, purity, and a passion for Christ that borders on ecstasy (fig. 8). Representations like Antonio Canova's *Reclining Naiad* (1819–24), on the other hand, display female beauty and sexuality for the admiration of the male



fig. 8



fig. 9

observer (fig. 9). An intersection of both motifs, *In Mortal Repose* also relates to other sculptural traditions that arose in critique of classical representations of women. These range from the partial or unformed figures of Medardo Rosso and Auguste Rodin to fragmented bodies by the contemporary artist Kiki Smith, which denote existential crisis in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the form of female trauma.

Throughout this exhibition, such a collapsing of time and iconographic associations is more impressionistic than illustrative. The pleasure for the viewer is to read Al-Hadid's sense of touch and the unpolished immediacy of her technical process as tracings of the way she works out ideas, from the point of departure to the realization of an ultimate sensation. An impressionist of the performative kind as well, she crafts an effervescent take on the dreams and foibles of a past full of richness, irony, turbulence, and beauty.

Mark Scala
Chief curator

About the artist

Born in 1981 in Aleppo, Syria, Al-Hadid moved with her family to Cleveland, Ohio, at the age of five. She grew up in Canton, Ohio, and earned her BFA in sculpture and BA in art history at Kent State University (2003) and her MFA in sculpture at Virginia Commonwealth University (2005). Her works have been exhibited internationally and are in numerous museum and private collections. Al-Hadid currently lives in New York City, where she is represented by Marianne Boesky Gallery.

COVER: Diana Al-Hadid. *Synonym*, 2016. Polymer gypsum, fiberglass, powder-coated aluminum, and pigment, 83 x 60 x 60 in. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © Diana Al-Hadid. Photo: Jason Wyche

Fig. 1: Diana Al-Hadid. *Gradiva* (installation view, Madison Square Park, New York), 2017–18. Polymer gypsum, fiberglass, powder-coated steel, plaster, and pigment, 162 x 180 in. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © Diana Al-Hadid. Photo: Object Studies

Fig. 2: “Gradiva” relief, perhaps representing Aglauros, daughter of Cecrops, the mythical first king of Attica. Museo Chiaramonti. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY

Fig. 3: Diana Al-Hadid. *Untitled*, 2013. Conté crayon, charcoal, pastel, and acrylic on Mylar, 24 x 18 in. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © Diana Al-Hadid

Fig. 4: Hans Memling. *Allegory of Chastity*, 1480. Oil on wood, 15 1/8 x 21 1/2 in. The Jacquemart-André Museum, Paris

Fig. 5: Diana Al-Hadid. *Lionless*, 2013. Polymer gypsum, fiberglass, steel, plaster, and pigment, 64 x 58 x 3 1/4 in. Private collection. © Diana Al-Hadid. Photo: Press Rodriguez

Fig. 6: Diana Al-Hadid. *Head in the Clouds*, 2014. Polymer gypsum, fiberglass, steel, foam, wood, plaster, clay, gold leaf, and pigment, 130 x 56 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © Diana Al-Hadid. Photo: Peter Kaiser

Fig. 7: Diana Al-Hadid. *In Mortal Repose*, 2013. Bronze and cast concrete, 75 x 76 3/8 x 70 3/8 in. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © Diana Al-Hadid. Photo: Jason Wyche

Fig. 8: Gian Lorenzo Bernini. *Death of the Blessed Ludovica Albertoni*, from the Altieri Chapel, 1674. Marble. San Francesco a Ripa, Rome, Italy. Photo: Bridgeman Images

Fig. 9: Antonio Canova. *Reclining Naiad*, 1819–24. Marble, 35 x 75 x 32 1/2 in. overall. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Mrs. Joseph A. Neff Gift, In memory of Joseph A. Neff, 1970 (1970.1). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY

Diana Al-Hadid SUBLIMATIONS

Gordon Contemporary Artists Project Gallery

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