IBRAAZ

Interview

Towers, Portals and Myths

Diana Al-Hadid in Conversation with Fawz Kabra

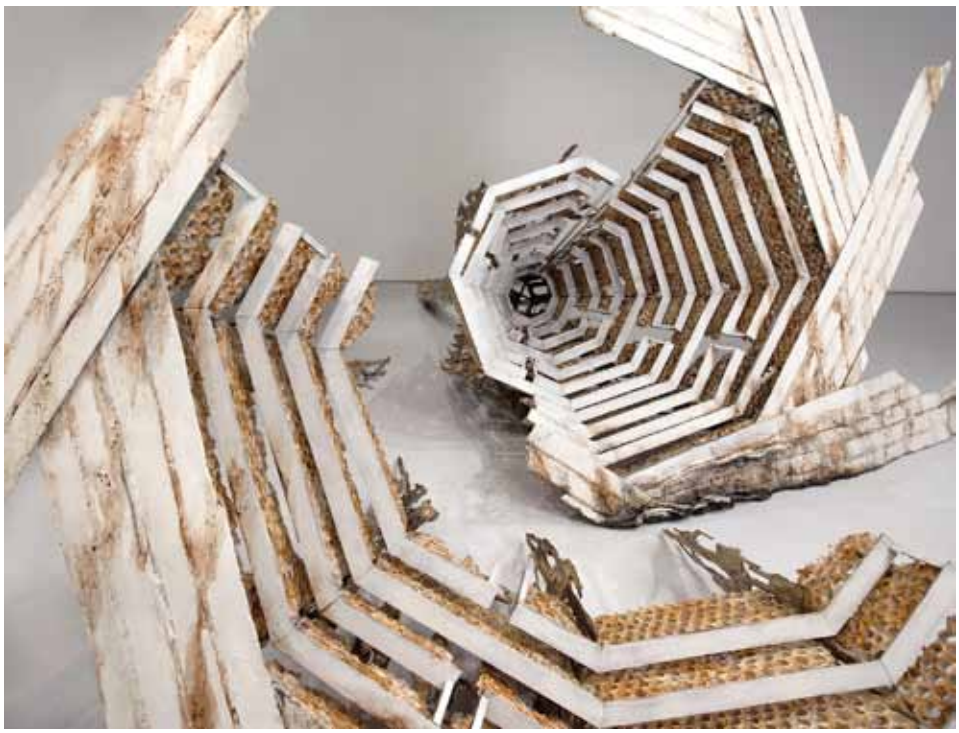
Diana Al-Hadid's sculptures seem as though they come from another time: a future past, or a parallel time space. Her visceral works can both draw you in by their intricate qualities or else repel you away, due to their imposing size. A scorched cathedral turned on its head so that it sprouts out of its spires, or a tower twisted in its own self destruction, for example, are works that impose their own narratives while conjuring legends from a distant past. Al-Hadid's sculptures are the result of her keen interest in ancient mythologies, histories of painting and sculpture, and the inventions and discoveries in physics and astronomy. These interests lead her on investigations into how these alternate mechanisms and narratives can materialise into physical mass in space. Al-Hadid's

Diana Al-Hadid, In Mortal Repose, 2011, bronze, cast concrete, 182.9 x 180.3 x 160.7 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery. Photograph by Jason Wyche.

figural sculptures are investigated in much the same way as her architectural structures. In this conversation with Fawz Kabra, she underlines her concern with mass, lines and planes, how they link both modes of building, and how her figures are not direct characters but rather look at the structure in which these characters are shaped. When studying the figure, Al-Hadid is looking at representations and imagining the physical structure of narratives. Whether architecture or figural, Al-Hadid's sculptures are a fusion of layers of materials that have been mounted in their basic components.

Fawz Kabra: Your work has architectural qualities. How does this affect the conceptual phase and building of your sculptures?

Dianal Al-Hadid: I am a builder more than I am an ‹architect›. I am lucky that I don›t have to worry about function. My sculptures are more of a proposition towards architecture. The most obvious connection between sculpture and architecture is the organisation of materials existing in space. I don›t know if I look at architecture as a starting point, but I do think about movement through space. This is why history is of interest to me, because I›m always looking at structures that have been built or proposed to be built. Histories of sculpture and painting are also at the periphery, but when I am building my sculptures, my first reality is what the materials can do and how I can best take advantage of them.



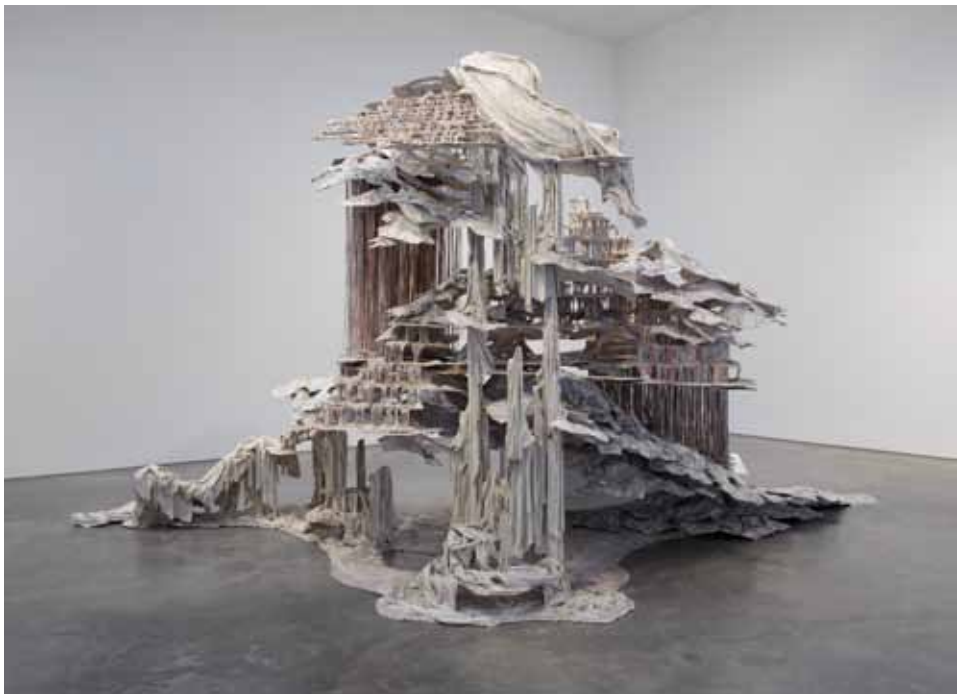
Diana Al-Hadid, The Tower of Infinite Problems, 2008, polymer gypsum, steel, plaster, fiberglass, wood, polystyrene, cardboard, wax, paint, large: 442 x 251.5 x 241.3 cm, small: 210.8 x 266.7 x 160 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery.

My most recent work is perhaps more architectural at heart. The structures are more complex. Rather than a pictorial approach, they are built with a careful study of mass, void, line and plane. I›ve been isolating those qualities and thinning out as much mass and material as possible, while still maintaining a massive scale.

FK: There is an awareness of one›s physicality when standing in the same space as your sculptures. The works appear otherworldly, once inhabited. The materials you work with – wire, cardboard or

foam – create a distance due to their delicacy. Can you talk a little about this?

DAH: What›s true is that there is an attraction and repulsion that may happen in my work. The works are generally large and they do not have a physical point of entry. So they do ultimately push you against their boundaries. At the same time, all of it is hand-built with a particularity towards the materials I use: I examine them and re-imagine how I can use them. Each piece has its own set of unique problems. The fact that they are hand-built is the attraction component, for me anyway, that›s the part that is the connective tissue that draws you in. The play with scale and lack of entrance is likely the part that pushes you away.



Diana Al-Hadid, Trace of a Fictional Third, 2011, polymer gypsum, wood, steel, fiberglass, aluminum foil, paint, 304.8 x 609.6 x 396.2 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery. Photograph by Jason Wyche.

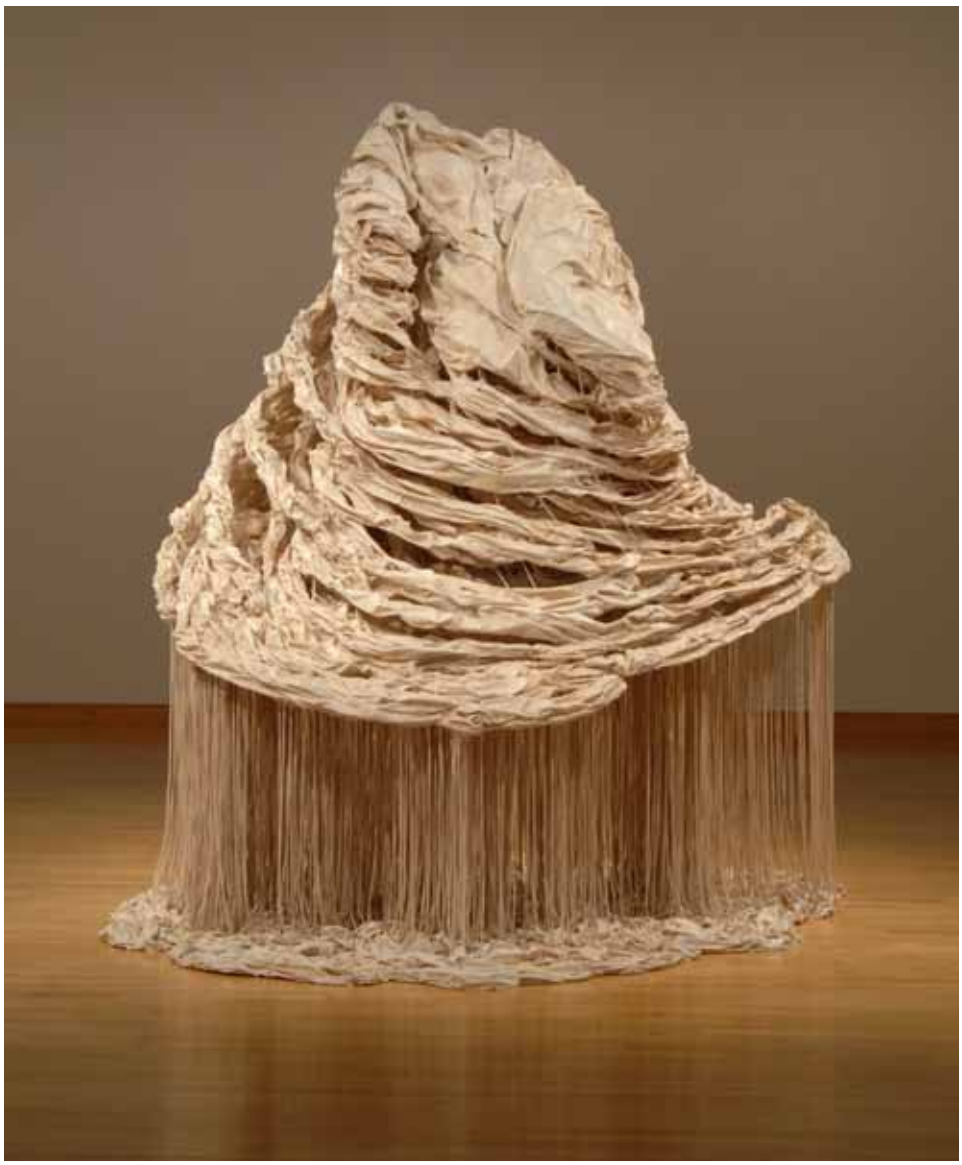
FK: Can you talk about the two sides of your work: one that speaks of architectural ruin and the other that speaks to the works› own narratives?

DAH: I was reading a lot about nostalgia in relation to ruins a couple of years ago. A lot of what you call ‹ruinous› quality comes from my aggressive behaviour with the work. It›s an interesting paradox, because although I think some of the works might be read as a ruinous landscape, the process is more complicated, more ‹cut and paste›. It›s not something that starts as a whole integral unit that collapses and breaks over time. Sometimes a part may appear broken, when, in fact, it was built up through an additive process. It can be aggressive, but also obsessively fine-tuned. It›s hard to tell where it starts and stops, but I think that›s interesting too: how much of my own will I force on the thing. I work by way of layers and I mean that in the material sense, literal layers. Of course, ruins too are a result of layers of events and time, sediments of material. As I›m building, I think in terms of thin transparent layers, sheets and films of material that pile up one on top of the other to finally create a larger mass. That›s how I know how to organise space.

My work alludes to history, place and space. All of these things combined take the form of buildings. This is probably coupled with the fact that I›ve had this allergic reaction to figuration that I have been trying to reset in the last few years. I have studied classical treatments of the figure and I approach it as these canonical tropes that I can misuse and mis-apply. A lot of my work now is inspecting these forms and objects without a narrative structure. With the figure, I have had to look at the elements and learn how to register scale differently. The more the figure enters my work, the more I learn about mass, void and scale. I don›t think it is a coincidence that my structures, these imagined ‹places›, have become larger and more structurally complex with the introduction of the figure.

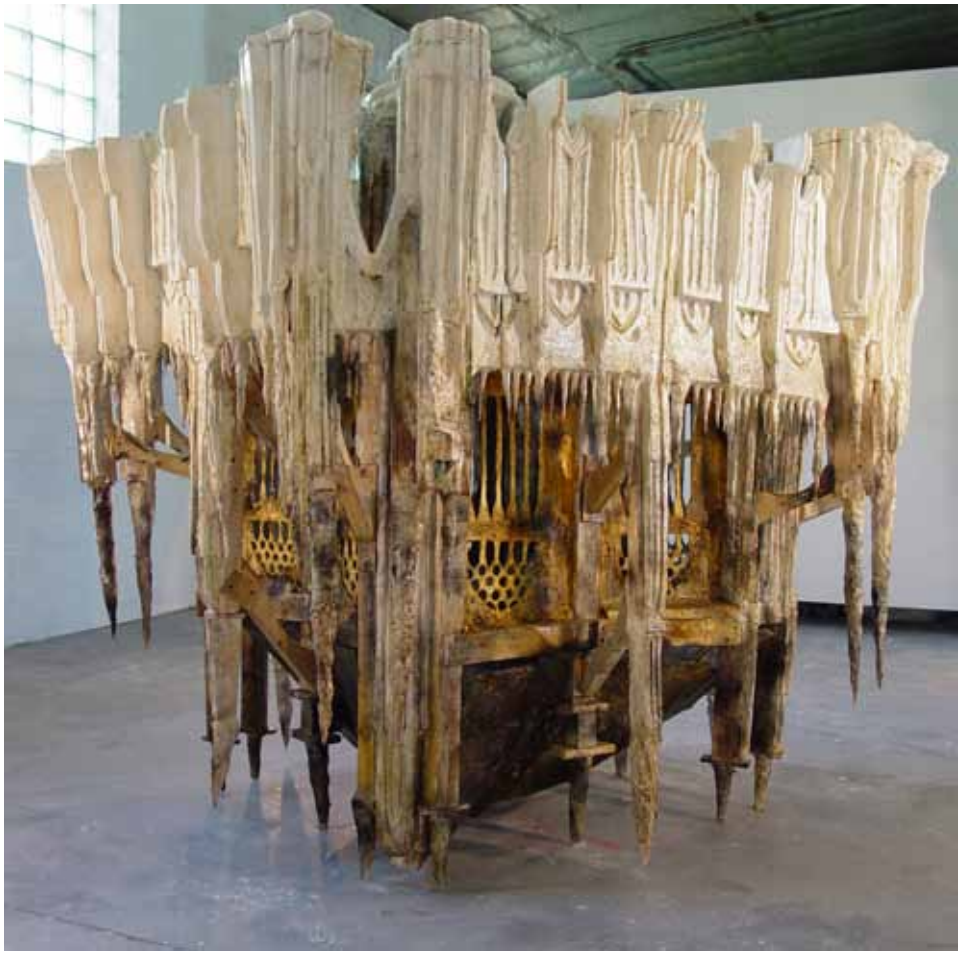
FK: You began talking about a kind of aggression that goes into making your work. There is the suggestion of an event: the aftermath of a burning, breaking or melting, which surprisingly leaves a lightness, elegance and austere quality to the structures. How do you view your final forms and their qualities?

DAH: I think it all depends on my temperament and a balance that feels right. In a more recent work, I had completed the whole piece and on my way out the door, I stopped and suddenly changed back into my work clothes and cut off the sculpture›s arm. I had invested



Diana Al-Hadid, Edge of Critical Density, 2009, fiberglass, polymer gypsum, steel, wood, paint, 228.6 x 200.6 x 230.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery.

all this time in making it, yet suddenly it felt right to cut a part off. In 2009, I made a piece called *Edge of Critical Density*, and the term 'critical density' was interesting to me. It's a cosmological term that I considered as a sculptural concept. 'Critical density' suggests the moment at which a sculpture may fall on one side or another, or has a perfect balance of mass, or where it's too heavy, or too light. These are factors that consume the majority of my day-to-day logistical thinking: How do these things get built? Again, it is a temperament thing. Sometimes I have a wider focus and want to break things apart in big motions, and sometimes I narrow my focus onto the very tedious and fine details. I have the capacity for both. I have both energies on both scales. My work can be very big, but it is also very detailed and fine-tuned.

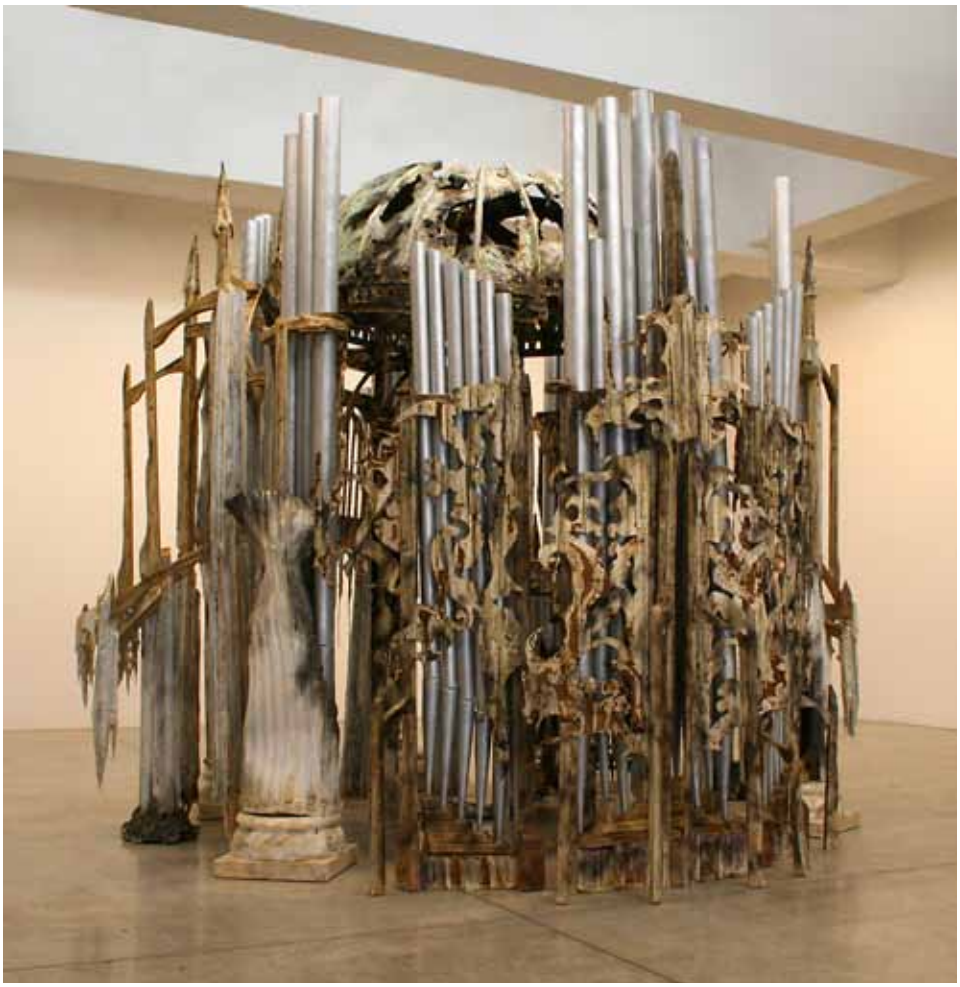


Diana Al-Hadid, Spun of the Limits of My Lonely Waltz, 2006, wood, polystyrene, plaster, fiberglass, paint, 182.9 x 162.6 x 162.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery.

FK: How do you consider the balancing act that your structures perform? How does this balance allude to a look of fragility? I am thinking of *Spun Of The Limits Of My Lonely Waltz* (2006) or *The Tower of Infinite Problems* (2008).

DAH: Because I didn›t study engineering, I had to piece together this knowledge of how to build from friends, other sculptors, art school, and making a lot of it up as I went. If a sculpture wasn›t going to work or hold up, I›d go with it. *The Tower of Infinite Problems* was initially conceived as one part, but it wasn't working and I realised it was more interesting as two elements. I came to understand I wasn't so married to my initial idea anyway and the different decisions along the way test your commitment.

A lot of ideas don›t make it in the work, and you can only predict so much. Sometimes I›ll be clinging to something, but when it starts taking form and becomes real in the world rather than as a concept, everything changes. Once it comes to form, that is what I have to respond to. It is not the picture in my head anymore that I have to answer, but a real thing that has materialised and that has different rules.



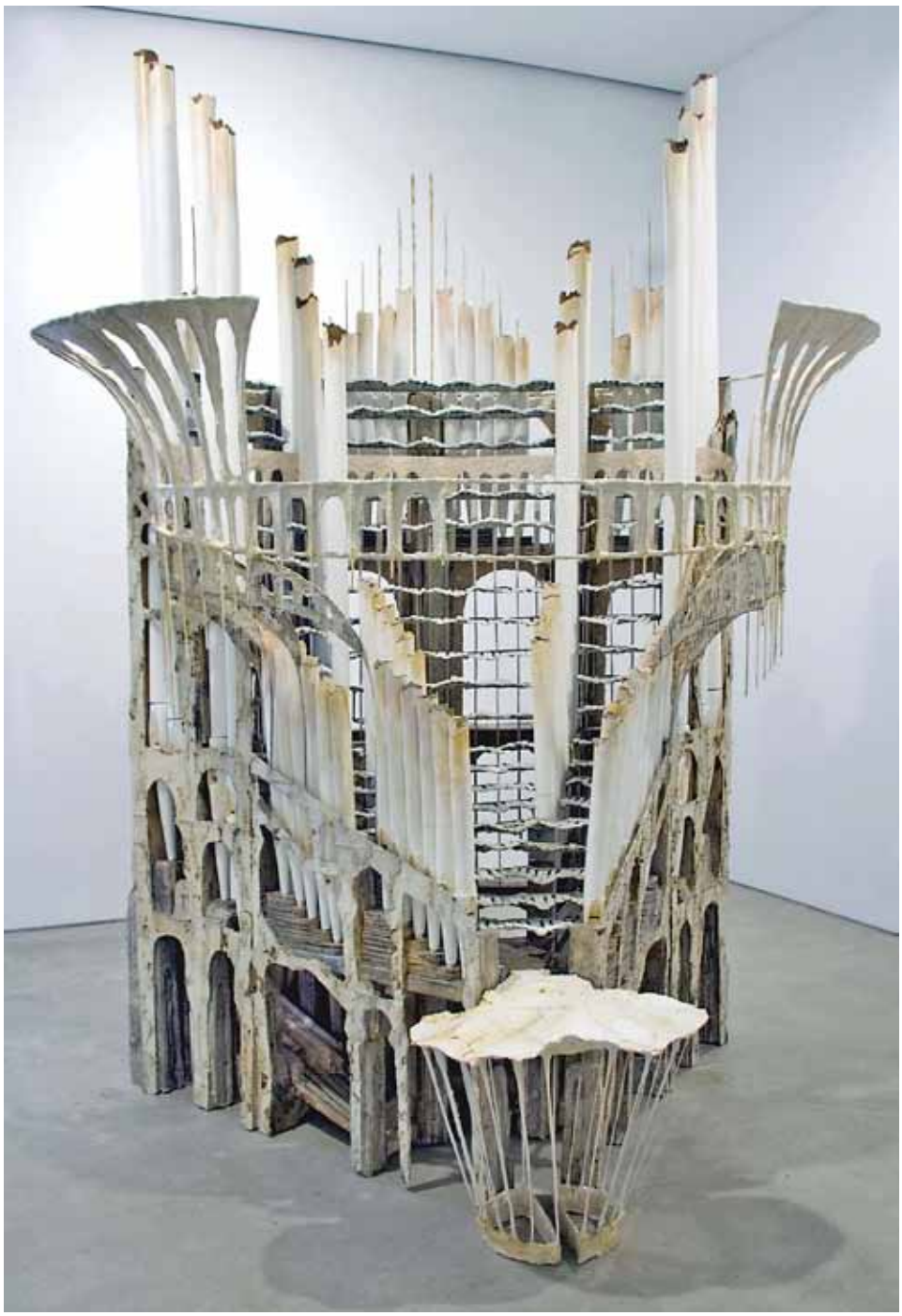
Diana Al-Hadid, Portal to a Black Hole, 2007, wood, plaster, fiberglass, polystyrene, plastic, cardboard, paint, 304.8 x 398.8 x 426.7 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery.

FK: I want to address this idea of a picture in your mind that you soon have to abandon: an organ appears in works such as *Portal To A Black Hole* (2007) and *All The Stops* (2007), and it has an element that I find quite dramatic. I'm curious to know what your interests were at the time and what sources you were referencing.

DAH: The first one I made was *A Measure of Ariadne's Love* (2007) and that came after the cathedral piece *Spun Of The Limits Of My Lonely Waltz*. I was trying to build this sculpture that was mindful of the architecture of all the cathedrals I was studying. I was using flying buttresses and numerous other architectural devices to make my version of what a Gothic cathedral might look like in my hands, to make it stand by my logic. Studying all of these cathedrals, because mine isn't any one cathedral, it's just its own thing, I started noticing the insides of cathedrals, realising that there's an instrument built into the structure, embedded into the walls. That idea was really interesting: there was music literally implanted within the architecture. So, making *Spun Of The Limits Of My Lonely Waltz* was made by my dancing the waltz, which I taught myself for the

piece. I applied paint to the soles of my feet and wherever the paint marked the floor was where I planted a spire. That piece is made by my own body dancing.

I am interested in how things are built, the mechanics of the musical instruments. The sounds come apart in hundreds of different components and small objects. *Water Thief* (2010) came from that

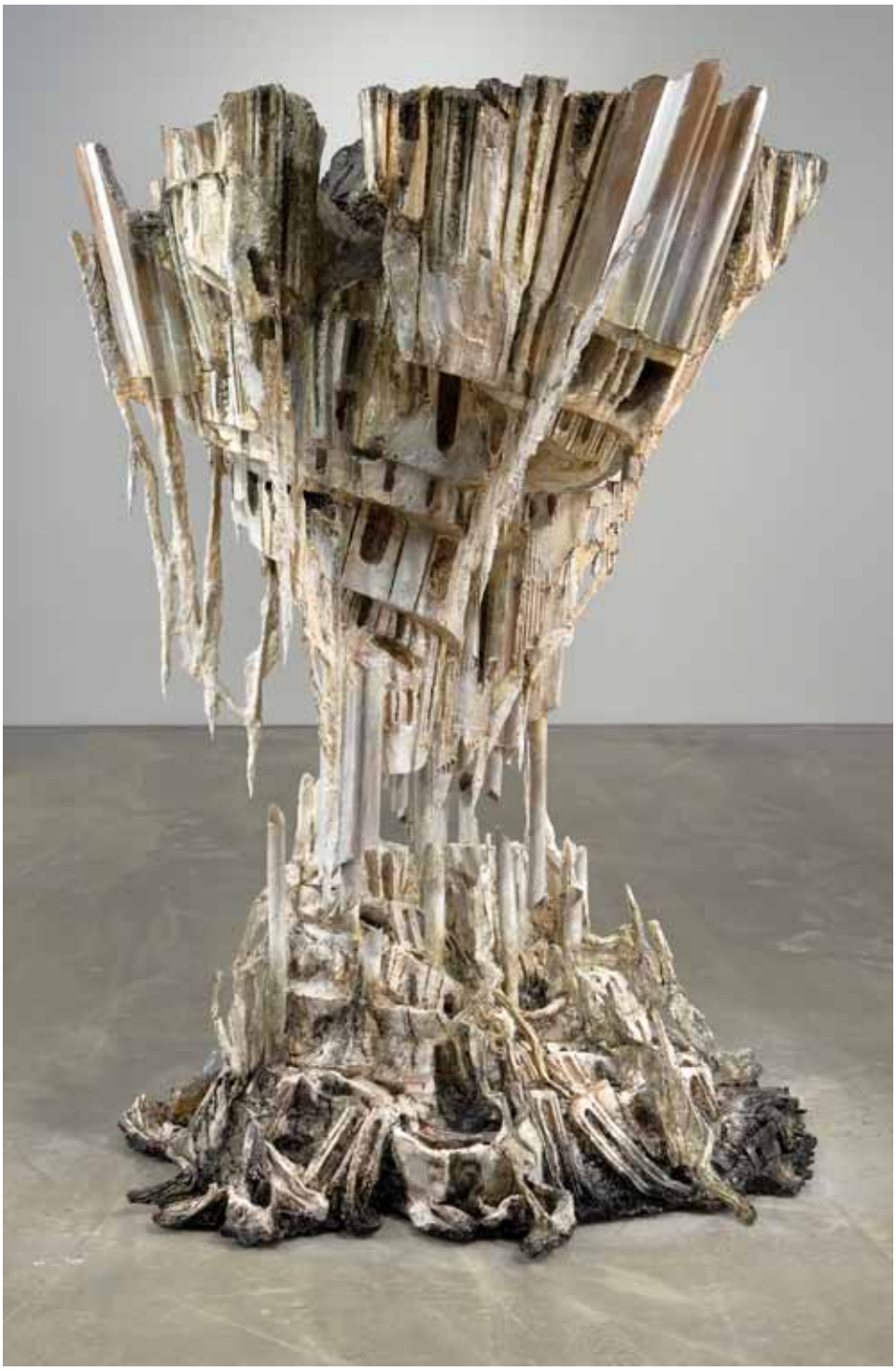


Diana Al-Hadid, All the Stops, 2007, wood, fiberglass, metal, plaster, cardboard, paint, 172.7 x 142.2 x 264.2 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery.

similar interest in learning about the mechanics of these devices that do something as esoteric as tell time, or make music, or measure the weight of the earth. These incalculable things are, incredibly, somehow calculable. So, I spent about a year really getting into pipe organs, and embedding them into a couple of different works. *All The Stops* is a pipe organ fitted into a slice of the Roman Colosseum, and *Portal To A Black Hole* came after having learned that black holes emit the sound of b-flat. I'm not claiming that I am able to

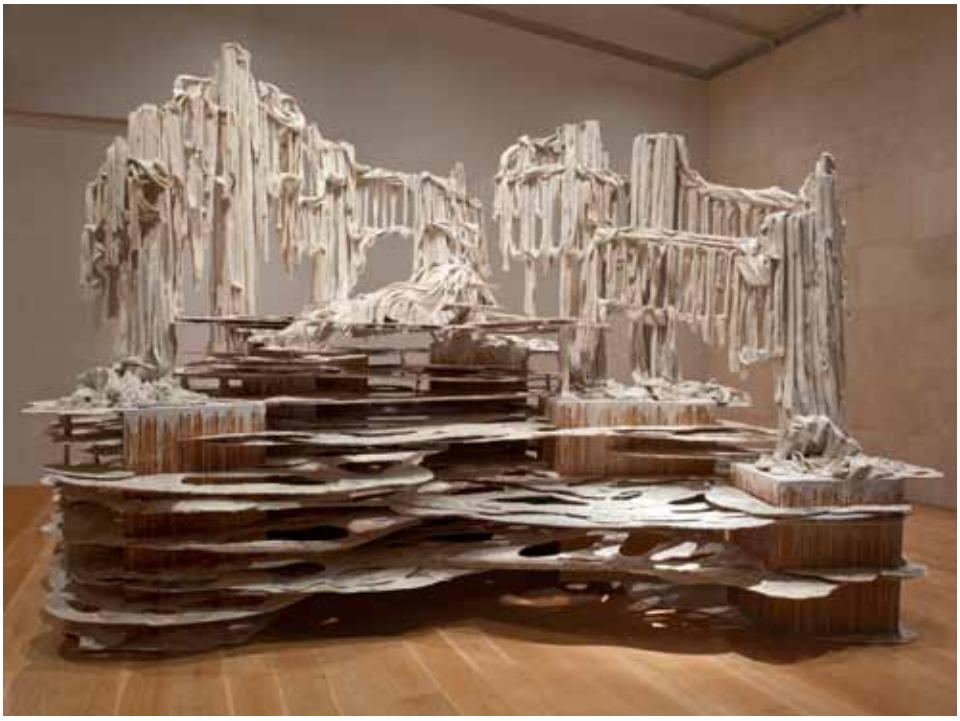
build anything functional, I am just so curious about finding a way to understand how something is built. When all the parts are put together, they make this incredible music. They create something that is more than the sum of its parts, and that is what I'm really interested in.

FK: From going to outer space, architecture weighted with myth and ruins of histories, to organs built into intricate cathedrals, you then bring it down to the human form. The insertion of a figure here is at times less obvious and more ephemeral, such as in *Trace of a Fictional Third* (2011), where the figure is a suggestion underneath the draping of a cloth. You also have the concrete figures that are in mid-melt such as *In Mortal Repose* (2011). Can you explain the turn to figuration?



Diana Al-Hadid, Self-Melt, 2008, polymer gypsum, steel, polystyrene, fiberglass, cardboard, wax, paint, 147.3 x 142.2 x 190.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery.

DAH: *Self Melt* (2008) was inspired by the 1563 painting *The Tower of Babel* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder and the impossible feat he set for himself in making these paintings. After making so much work that was very architectural and led to a lot of conversations about architecture, I wanted to do something that was unfamiliar, something I had been tiptoeing around. When I started working with figuration I looked at it structurally, perhaps a bit like a building. The first work, *Actor* (2009), was a figure of a woman somewhat reclining, and I really wanted to capture her position, so I crystallised her form. I wanted to pick apart that position, so there's no flesh and bones and no real body that you see, only the architecture of that underlying position underneath all the folds of fabric. When you get to the other side of the work, you see that she's not fully formed, she's not dimensional. When I made *Trace Of A Fictional Third*, I cloaked the figure to imply a kind of place-holder position for the character. At best you see a male or female, but not a specific person or race. It was a way to also play with scale.



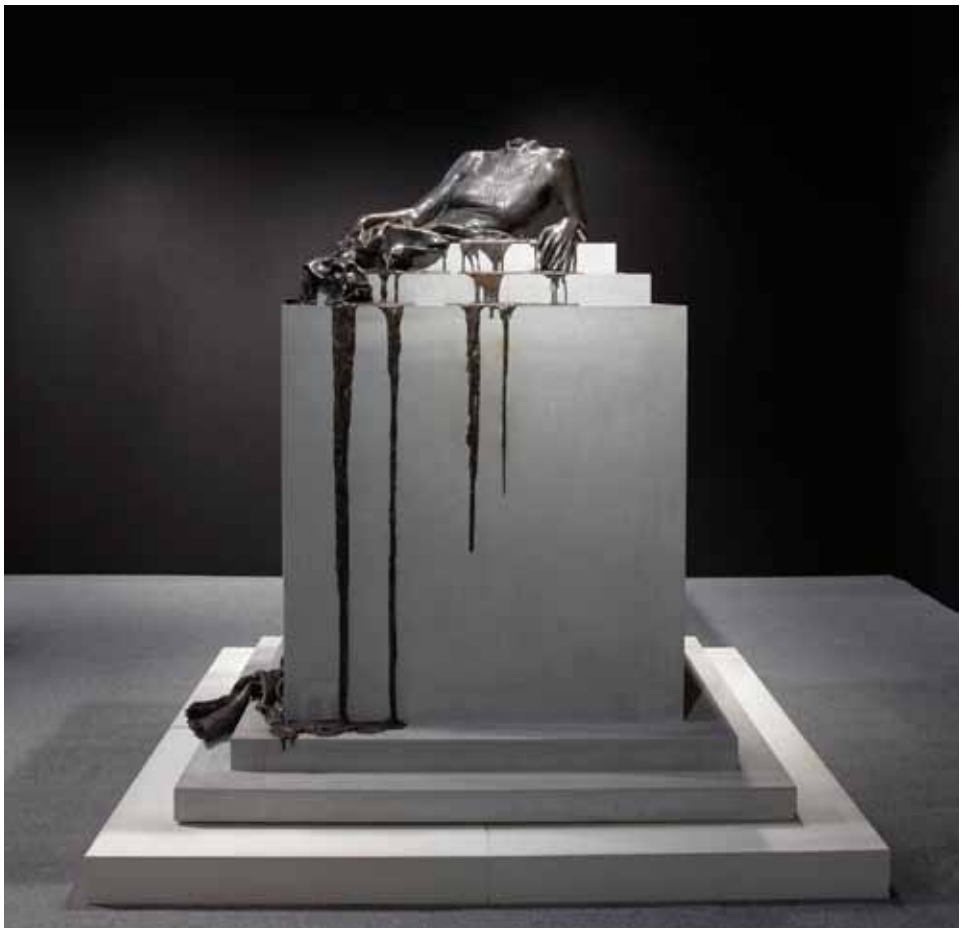
Diana Al-Hadid, Gradiva's Fourth Wall, 2011, steel, polymer gypsum, wood, fiberglass, steel, paint, 466.1 x 484.5 x 335.3 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery. Photograph by Kevin Todora.

I love stories and the structure of their narration. I made a piece called *Record Of A Mortal Universe* (2007) that was an obscure way of translating a Greek tragedy through architectural terms. I am not thinking about a specific person, but I do find specific characters really interesting. I was thinking about the figure, not so much as a character in a story, although in *Gradiva's Fourth Wall* (2011) I thought of Gradiva as a character that was also a part of the architecture and also a part of Pompeii and part of your psyche as Freud discussed. So she's a strange character that's barely really a character.

When considering the figure, I›m really interested in the weight and position of the form. I look at the way they are depicted in paintings, their dramatic poses and the compositional characteristics of these characters. So in looking at Renaissance and Mannerist paintings, I am considering the way the figures are presented: whether from

the front, twisted, or lazily lounging or dying. Sometimes a reclining position turns them into a landscape among their folds of fabric.

It has been interesting working with figures, because I started measuring everything against myself. All of a sudden, something my size felt very confrontational somehow. Working with that scale means I have to be very physical, always using my body to build the work. The body is automatically implicated in the work anyway, so I thought I should address this blind spot. The first bronze I made was the first overtly figural work. It reorganised my thinking and the kinds of work that I could make. It was also an entry point to working with a pedestal, which I had never done before. Ever since that work (*In Mortal Repose*, 2011), I have been able to use pedestals, which is a big achievement.



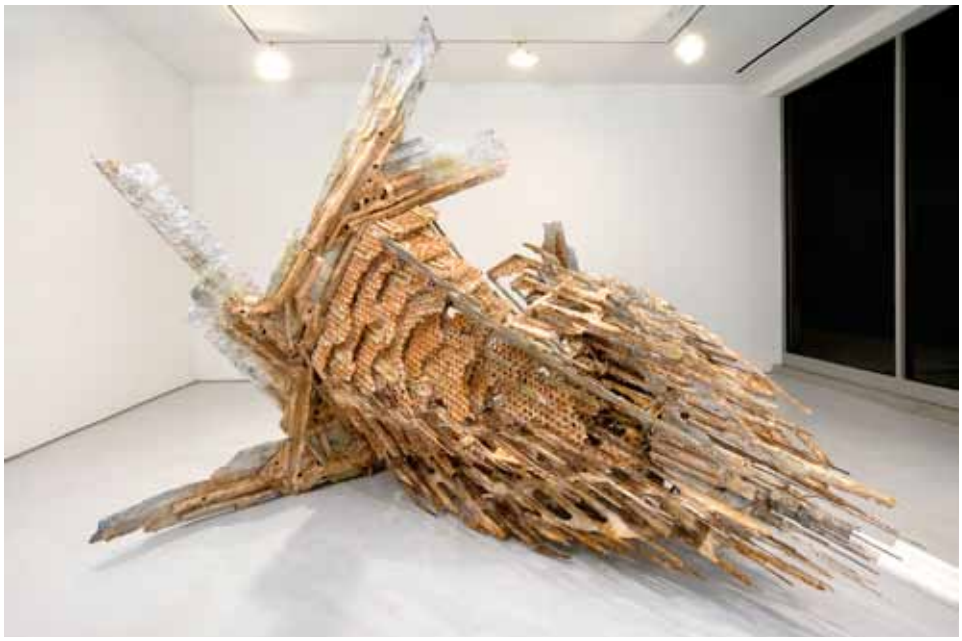
Diana Al-Hadid, In Mortal Repose, 2011, bronze, cast concrete, 182.9 x 180.3 x 160.7 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery. Photograph by Jason Wyche.

FK: I am interested in the notion of time: in your work there is a stillness, where drip, or gravity, has frozen. The structures, organs and figures are muted, yet they resonate with life. Can you tell me about this notion of time that is both still and moving?

DAH: You know, it›s a strange thing but for whatever reason, all the things that catch my curiosity have tended to be historical, whether the history of art, sciences or the world. I›m living in this time and I don›t feel like I can process with such proximity. There is something about looking at a subject that is far away and making that connection that I find exciting. It›s not that I won›t look at the present because I›m already in it, but it sometimes feels redundant. But I shouldn›t speak so soon, because I also once thought using

the figure was redundant, so perhaps now I›ll rethink that as well. That›s kind of a superficial response to your question, because I›m talking about points of reference. It›s not what I›m always thinking about when I›m making the work. It›s one fragment of the work, but it›s the thing that›s somehow easiest for people to talk about.

The parts that are not easy to talk about – almost impossible to talk about – are things like time and experiential relationships. I think the way I treat the materials is potentially what you›re talking about, like freezing those drips. Perhaps there›s something about the rough handling of some of the materials and then pausing it at a certain point to where it becomes a solid that speaks to that sense of time. For me, sculpture is in motion at all times. It is time-based by nature.



Diana Al-Hadid, The Tower of Infinite Problems, 2008, polymer gypsum, steel, plaster, fiberglass, wood, polystyrene, cardboard, wax, paint, large: 442 x 251.5 x 241.3 cm, small: 210.8 x 266.7 x 160 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery.

FK: Your work is certainly an experience: time, freezing, and slow motion are all phenomena that are manifested. Can you explain your thoughts about, and process for, making this experience unfold? I would like to hear about the thinking behind these intentional phenomena.

DAH: I guess it›s hard for me to lay claim to that because that›s my highest hope, that someone will be energised enough to walk around the sculpture and experience it in the present time. I ultimately think about material: getting rid of as much mass as possible and in a way that boils down to a single drip. You can just drip the material to the thinnest possible form of itself, and then it›s just barely there, it›s barely holding together. That drip constitutes for me a drawn line, it›s the basic building block of any image or any structure. There›s a line, a mark and a plane and those things naturally look like they›re in motion. If you strip everything down, it›s a line and a plane that is the genesis of any image. I reduce all the elements of the sculpture so that its materials are in their bare cellular components. Then I sync it together so that it›s an object that maintains mass. Maybe that effort to push as much out and reduce as much of the material is what you›re responding to.

FK: You have just had a very successful solo exhibition at Marianne Boesky gallery in New York City. What can we next expect?

DAH: I›m doing a show with the sculptures of Medardo Rosso, whose work I am a huge fan of, in Venice for the upcoming Biennial. There will also be a show of some of my works between 2009 and 2012 at Weatherspoon Art Museum in North Carolina. I also just finished some bronzes that will be on view in December at Art Basel Miami Beach. I›m cleaning my studio now, so I don›t know what will come out of that until the moment I start again.

Diana Al-Hadid was born in Aleppo, Syria, in 1981 and currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. She received her BFA in sculpture and BA in Art History from Kent State University in 2003, an MFA in sculpture from Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, in 2005, and attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2007. She has been the recipient of a USA Rockefeller Fellowship, a Joan Mitchell Grant, a Louis Comfort Tiffany Grant, a New York Foundation for the Arts Grant, and a Pollock-Krasner Grant. Her work is included in the collections of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; The Weatherspoon Art Museum, Greensboro; The Judith Rothschild Foundation, New York; and The Saatchi Collection, London. Al-Hadid has had solo exhibitions at Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond; Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas; Centro de Arte Contemporánea, La Conservera, Murcia, Spain; Nevada Museum of Art, Reno, and the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. She recently held a solo show at Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, and showed work at Mass MoCA, North Adams, MA, in the exhibition Invisible Cities. She has an upcoming two-person exhibition with the work of Medardo Rosso in Venice during the 2013 Venice Biennale, in addition to an upcoming exhibition in France.