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The Sculptor Bringing Back the Craft of Stone Carving

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By Christine Whitney

“Lilies are the most erotic flower,” says London-born, Los Angeles-based artist Nevine Mahmoud. She’s explaining the inspiration behind her carved-stone sculptures of the flower, which have turned many an art-world head as of late. Mahmoud’s been making a name for herself with her feminine-meets-rock-hard forms in alabaster, marble, and calcite (think: the aforementioned flowers, a pair of lips, a tongue, and a 50-pound peach), a unique oeuvre that taps into an ancient, traditionally male-dominated craft.



Photo: Julia Leonard

In 2012, Mahmoud moved from her native England to L.A. to attend the MFA program at the University of Southern California, where she became enamored with the medium. “It started with finding this supplier and outdoor artist studios in Ventura,” Mahmoud says. “Literally it’s a huge yard just covered [in stone], with carvers were working on giant sculptures — outsider artists and weird hobbyists who are obsessed with it.” Immediately obsessed herself, Mahmoud spent a year photographing and conversing with the artists, even asking one of her professors if she could take a course at the Ventura studios in lieu of working as a teaching assistant. “He was like, ‘Hell, no, you can’t stone-carve,’” the artist remembers. She put her aspirations on the back burner until after graduation. “After doing a lot of shows with the same work from grad school, I was just like, ‘I need to do something different,’” she says, which meant enrolling in carving lessons with a carver named JoAnne Duby, who “just taught me everything — she’s my guru.”

Mahmoud’s clearly an artist to watch; she recently joined the gallery M+B in West Hollywood and showed her carvings at New York’s Armory Show, to rave reviews. But she’s quick to assert that her work path is not set in stone (pun intended). “I’m a constantly shifting human,” she asserts. “Who knows what I’m going to be making next?”

Below, The Cut visited the artist in her Alhambra, California, studio to talk about British humor, vintage shopping, and the thrill of Craigslist.

You’re from London. Tell us a bit about your background.

I was born and raised in London and came here after undergrad. I wanted to move to L.A.; I’ve been obsessed with this city for a while. I’ll always love London and I miss British people, but

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day to day, there's no comparison.

What do you miss most about the British?

The sense of humor — it's very particular, very snappy and quick. The general recreational conversation there is not talking about yourself; it's more like jokes.

Your family is still there?

They are. My dad is Lebanese and my mom is Austrian. They met in Europe and moved around their whole lives before settling in London, so they're very supportive of me being out there and they love to visit. They met on a Greek island that we still all frequent. It's very romantic.

How do you manage your time?

[Figuring out] my routine and studio habits is probably something that's caused me the most anxiety of anything in my life. Getting into the routine I'm in now has taken me the past six years. Being in the studio is a really integral part of my process — it's really about going to this place every day and just being there. You don't need to make anything, you don't have to complete anything.

What's the first thing you do in the morning?

One of the first things I bought for my kitchen is one of those beautiful, stove-top Alessi coffee makers, so I have coffee, make breakfast, and listen to BBC Radio, but then I'm pretty quick to get out of the house. I don't like to stay at home in the morning. Either I get lunch ahead of time or do an errand. I used to go to Home Depot like every day, but now that the studio equipment is more built up, I don't do as much of that — I just buy stone.

What do you love about working with stone?

It's really absorbing and labor-intensive, which are things that really attract me. It's about tools and technique, and it's not easy to work with, but it's very pleasurable. It's intuitive and mathematical and I like that the material is old and has history embedded in it, literally. It's got all these contradictions. You never really know what you're getting, but there's all this room to interpret stone.

How do you pick the stones you work with?

I pick the stones depending on a shape or form that's been on my mind, but then that stone becomes synonymous with it. It feels really like it's about bringing out this ultimate thing I see in the color or the opaqueness. Now it's getting a little difficult if someone's like, "I love the peach!" [and wants me to make another one]. Sometimes that piece of calcite I have access to doesn't really want to be a peach right now. I just have to wait. It's this weird back-and-forth.

What helps when you're not feeling inspired?

Definitely being away from the studio for a little while. I used to struggle with that, or get really concerned if I felt like I had no ideas. Now I feel less pressure to be inspired in general. As long as I'm here and can see stuff, I know that there are things to do. Conversations with other artists also inspire me a lot.

Who would be your ideal studio visit?

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Because she was just so badass, Louise Bourgeois. Or Bruce Nauman or Isamu Noguchi — he's been my go-to stone carver for a really long time.

You're very inspired by other women artists. Who are some of the most influential for you?

Louise Bourgeois and Alina Szapocznikow — I look at her stuff every day.

There's this show I'm in, in London at the end of June at the White Cube. It's this big group show of female artists under the umbrella of surrealism and modernism: Claude Cahun and [Bourgeois] and Kiki Smith and Mona Hatoum. Of my contemporaries who are kind of emerging, Kelly Akashi and a couple of others are also in the show.

What do you like to have around you when you work?

Recently, music. I try not to listen to headphones too much, just because with carving I want to have my senses all equal. I listen to this radio station that broadcasts from London a lot and gives me a lot of ideas, called NTS. They actually broadcast from a store right next to where I live, and in London it was the same thing; they broadcast from the square next to the apartment. It's just very comforting and really great music — obscure stuff and old-school stuff.

What are you listening to on repeat?

A dance playlist. These friends of mine keep coming over for dinner and everyone will bring two bottles of wine each. We'll have some great meal and then start playing music and drinking and dancing. It's gone until like 4 or 5 a.m. a couple nights. No drugs, just energy. I'm just compiling the music we've been playing — a lot of R&B and hip-hop stuff, like that Miguel song, "Adorn."

What's your studio uniform?

I have a cupboard of old T-shirts, [like this Backstreet Boys one], and leggings. Shoes are like this [white Reeboks], or sometimes I'll need something steel-toed. Leggings and shorts in the summer — although I have some pretty gnarly burns on my hands and legs just from the grinders, so I should be wearing long pants all the time.

What's the story behind the Backstreet Boys shirt?

I got this when I was like 16 from Camden Market. It was from this store that sold all the '90s band T-shirts in vacuum-sealed plastic bags, and these high-waisted jeans I still think about all the time. They were called Fizzy Jeans, and they were skin-tight, and stretchy — we bought those by the boatload.

What's your style like outside the studio?

It's pretty different. I like to wear colors, block colors, silks, translucent fabrics, and nice jeans. I haven't really been into dresses, but more tailored stuff. I just got this classic Gaultier '90s, net, sheer, tight top with crazy patterns. I found it at a place called called Replica Vintage ... It's really good, it's a lot of Gaultier and Westwood, that kind of darker '90s stuff. And I have this Calvin Klein velvet pantsuit — blue velvet dots on sheer, sort-of silk. It's like a smoker's jacket kind of thing with loose pants.

When did you realize you wanted to be an artist?

When I was like 16. I played the flute, I was in theater a lot, and I was doing art. Acting was like

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this adrenaline rush, but I was just obsessed with drawing and photography. And I remember being like, “Oh, what will I choose?” And I was like, “[Art] is gonna be more realistic — this is gonna sustain me and keep me interested for longer.”

What were some of your most memorable theater roles?

Males always, always men. Except once I was an old woman, a billionaire, who went back to her hometown to murder this guy that raped her. It's this play from the '30s and it's crazy. That was a pretty great role.

Did you see the movie *Elle* with Isabelle Huppert?

I just saw that — it's excellent, she's amazing. That film and *Mustang* [from 2015] are two of my new favorites.

You have a child's slide and a big metal spring here in your gallery. What are you doing with them?

Those are just forms that — scale-wise, shape-wise, color-wise — I'm just keeping here constantly, because I know they're both going to be emerging in my work.

Where did you find them?

Craigslist. Everything is Craigslist. I look for slides and car parts, always. Now people know the work so I'll get text messages [if they find good ones].

How do you unwind?

I'm trying to garden more. And there are always home projects to do. But I'm pretty social, so if I'm in the mood to unwind, I'll just have someone over, and we'll have a glass of wine and cook some food.

What's your signature dish?

Through winter, I was doing a really rich, red-winy stew with game, and pasta. I also got really into savory pies, like onion tarts. Tonight I'm doing a roast chicken.