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NEVINE MAHMOUD

Interview and photography by AMANDA CHARCHIAN
Artwork by NEVINE MAHMOUD

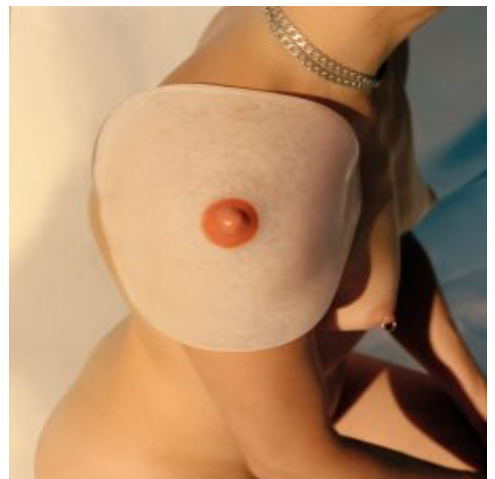
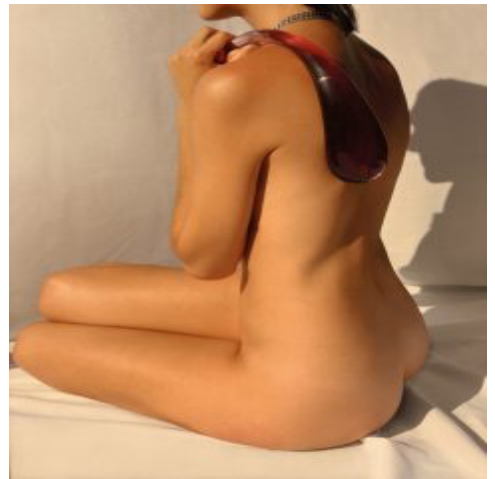
stone carvings and glass pieces as a Labor of Love: the Los Angeles-based British artist Nevine Mahmoud sculpts highly tactile, sensual, and erotic works out of rock in the form of breasts, lilies, split peaches, and disembodied members.

AMANDA CHARCHIAN – *What's beautiful about your work is that it's just so tactile. What inspired you to do those disembodied parts?*

NEVINE MAHMOUD – The disembodied body is the most accurate representation of the history of feminism, in my experience – of being a woman and what it feels like in that body. I identify strongly with that dismembered physical presence: parts being interchangeable and alien even to themselves. The split peaches and lilies in stone are so suggestive of female genitalia that it was a natural progression to start making legs, torsos, breasts – cover all ground. And this is still evolving.

AMANDA CHARCHIAN – *How would you describe your personal experience of love?*

NEVINE MAHMOUD – Like nature or what we call the natural environment, love has similar qualities to art:



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unpredictable, beautiful, formal, but also mysterious, and circular by design, not linear. I'm very much in that headspace. I've recently fallen in love – what feels like the real deal. So, I'm quite obsessed with love at the moment, which has been both powerful and distracting for making work. [Laughs]

AMANDA CHARCHIAN – *How does being in love affect your work or your practice?*

NEVINE MAHMOUD – My work's been my number-one love priority for the past six years!

My number-one girl, guy. Of course, I have a loving community of friends and family, but a new partner is a big shift. Also, with Covid-19 and the Black Lives Matter uprising, these things have felt more important to spend energy on than being in the studio. I worried for a while if I'd have to choose between life and love, and making art. Of course, this is not the case. In terms of my sexuality and eroticism, being in love only helps...

AMANDA CHARCHIAN – *I'm Middle Eastern, and when I make pictures of women in a specific way, I feel it has so much to do with my upbringing and how, if I were in Iran now, I wouldn't be able to make this type of work. I have this obsession with natural female beauty and bodies, and am constantly representing it. Do you think, being a bit Middle Eastern, that your similar interest comes from that at all?*

NEVINE MAHMOUD – I wonder, because my father is Lebanese, but we actually didn't go to Beirut very much as children. A lot of my family emigrated to France after the civil war in Lebanon, and my mother's side is in Austria. I went to an international

school and grew up aware of my difference, but in no way discriminated against. If anything, the duress was experienced as a woman, even in the context of an all-girls' school. My teenage years made me extremely self-reflective about the power of the female body and the anxiety or distress that can come with it.

AMANDA CHARCHIAN – *Your sculptures are about subtracting because you're removing from a block or piece of stone all day, right?*

NEVINE MAHMOUD – A surface suggests the outside, the skin, the shell. But with the stone and glass pieces I've been making, the hollowness also speaks to volume. The two are inverted, but they're



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in intimate dialogue with each other. In the carving process, one is removing material to find a new form, so space or void is just as important as the thing itself.

AMANDA CHARCHIAN – *Right, because you have to plan in advance to carve the shape.*
NEVINE MAHMOUD – I do if I'm trying to make a specific shape. But a lot of those ideas first came to me in response to a specific stone. The first breast I made was because a piece of alabaster I was working with broke in half accidentally. Once I got over my fit of rage, I saw the shape and thought, "Oh, that's like a half breast."

AMANDA CHARCHIAN – *Do you ever feel attracted, just in terms of energy, to some of these pieces? I'm curious how you relate on a more intuitive or psychic level to the material.*

NEVINE MAHMOUD – At the beginning, when I was new to working with stone, all were magical, and I didn't really know one from the other. I responded intuitively to what I was attracted to, and that often came with color. I realized that I was more interested in working with translucent and strongly colored stones, as opposed to marble or limestone that have more subdued colors. I wanted to learn how to work with the ones that were bright red or bright orange, and this came with its own set of rules. I learned this way, case by case, rock by rock. I could only really deal with something around six inches for about two years. Then, shape and size evolves – you move on to bigger blocks, and next thing you know, you've got rooms and cars full of giant boulders.

AMANDA CHARCHIAN – *It's alchemical because you're turning one thing into another, and infusing it with all this symbolic power. You're turning such delicate, sensual things like peaches or lilies into stone, and it's somehow subversive in just the fact that you're a woman handling these pieces of stone and changing them. Does it ever feel like you're working out a process that seems more like a metaphor?*

NEVINE MAHMOUD – Definitely. The impulse toward working with stone was partly metaphorical. I thought about how I wanted to project myself as a female artist. At the same time, I had a compulsion to make erotic objects, and making them in stone is both physically difficult and historically bound. It's sort of a contradiction in a contemporary setting. I thought there was a lot of richness there, and just making an attempt would produce something interesting. That can happen with all kinds of media in art, when time and energy are invested. I tend to be drawn to material processes that are technically very rigorous as a way to find my voice. I'm never really sure what I want to make until I start working with the material.

AMANDA CHARCHIAN – *When I see your work, I really want to touch all of it. It makes me think about my own body. It was as if I wasn't allowed to. It had this playful, teasing quality to it: the tongue coming out of the wall – there's an erotic appeal to that.*

Is that something you intend?

NEVINE MAHMOUD – Definitely. Before my stone works, I was thinking about shapes that referred to the body and erotic symbols, but I was reducing them to more abstract forms. The stone helped me want to become explicit. The cut-open peach was the first example. Then the next pieces became indicative of orifices of any kind – mouths, vulvas, anuses. Still quite abstracted, but definitely more figurative. That's been a pleasurable journey for me, to exhibit this kind of explicitness in the gallery setting. I want the experience of my work to bring up questions about touch and the material.

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Sense is just as critical as language or comprehension in viewing contemporary art, especially with regard to sculpture.

AMANDA CHARCHIAN – *I keep thinking about the meditative aspect of laboriously cutting through stone, and how you probably can't be any more present in life than in those moments where you're just working through it. I'm wondering how that's essentially a spiritual practice at some point.*

NEVINE MAHMOUD – It is definitely a process that requires a lot of focus and love. Because of the repetitive nature of the work, it can be calming and take you out of yourself. At least, this was my experience. For me to start learning, I had to go out of town and drive to Ventura, where I met my mentor, JoAnne Duby. I had a very intimate relationship with her and the stone yard, Art City, where we would buy stone. Then I would drive back to LA – two or three hours – and resume daily life. Stone carving was a whole other world from the art circuit of the city, and that still stays with me now. It nurtured another mental space to make work in. And whatever respite it served, it's not a soft space. It's fucking hard! Learning different methods, through teachers and peers, and now working with my own apprentices – it's a beautiful network of inheritance.

AMANDA CHARCHIAN – *That sense of tradition is rarer and rarer these days, especially in art making. There are very few mediums that have such a long history. You could have it 3D-printed, or why not just put it in a computer because you could essentially do that, right?*

NEVINE MAHMOUD – There are also machines that can fully automate stone carving. Alma Allen, a sculptor now based in Mexico, developed a giant robot to carve his large-scale pieces. Sort of like a massive-armed, computerized chisel with accompanying software: 3D printing-meets-Marvel arm. And the work still feels connected to what came before. I'm not opposed to using newer technologies at all. And plenty of artists have pieces fabricated without encountering the raw material.

AMANDA CHARCHIAN – *Do you think that your work will have a different energy if you do that – that your handmade feeling is a devotional part of it?*

NEVINE MAHMOUD – Yes. The work lies in what happens along the way of making and then how it's resolved. This process cannot be designed.

AMANDA CHARCHIAN – *There's that beautiful quote from David Hockney when he was making all of these quarantine digital paintings. He said that the source of all art is love. I'm wondering if you agree with him.*

NEVINE MAHMOUD – I wonder, too, if the same could be said of a lack of love – how you feel and what you need to express when you have been denied love, in the absence of care. Some of my favorite sculptures are born from a place of trauma, and are beautiful and devotional because of this. The objects are expressing distress, but the act of making them is love.

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