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The Skin is a Screen

In place of a conventional artist's catalogue for her solo exhibition at the Vienna Secession two years ago, Diana Al-Hadid prepared a small artist's book.¹ The publication has the size and feel of a slim pocket journal. The sheets are squared, and filled with jottings in the artist's hand, interleaved by illustrations that are designed to look as though they have been taped down loosely. The first few pages show sketches of the Secession floor plan, layered with annotated doodles for potential configurations for her future exhibition. Towards the beginning one note reads "mountain growing from behind this side?", and a long arrow lunges into a near indecipherable thicket of handwriting and scribble. Over the page, she sketches up this idea. **(FIG 1)** Some pyramid-shaped heaps loom up, overlooking a valley cluttered with flowing lines. A quick swirling loop in the foreground bears the label "puddle on site". But the stream of ideas doesn't pool here. It trickles on, from page to page, accumulating additional layers of detail along its meandering course. Pictures of well-known sculptures and paintings intimate sources of inspiration, while snapshots of works in progress in her Williamsburg studio register the reach of her journey, as initial ideas gradually evolve into tactile shapes.

The passage Al-Hadid presents of her creative working process concludes with a picture printed on glossy photographic paper. **(FIG 2)** It shows the large hall of the Secession and was taken while her works were being installed in the summer of 2014. Nobody is present, although the ladder, bucket and protective sheeting indicate that the business of making is still ongoing. Scattered round about *Phantom Limb*, which was one of the main works in the exhibition, lie additional segments of sculpture, awaiting their placement in the larger assemblage. It is a picture of near readiness, or what we might call "the final stages". And by making this the concluding image she could not be clearer that the works exhibited are intended to be seen above all else as the outward manifestation of an imaginative and creative journey.

However, viewers of Al-Hadid's sculptures and drawings might wonder whether finality is a state that the works ever fully embrace. The actual process of making might well be over, but in our mind's eye we can imagine how they could evolve further. Even in their completed state they exude a powerful impression that they are in a permanent state of flux. Sometimes the sculptures have multiple elements, and provide viewers with markedly diverse impressions from different angles. Certain forms appear unresolved, as though the process of assembly might have been curtailed abruptly. In fact, some aspects of her sculptures still look as rough and amorphous as the hurried jottings that fill the Secession notebook, as though we are standing in front of the three-dimensional equivalent to a sketch. But the level of finish is far from consistent. Other parts might be worked up to a much higher degree, so that smooth, burnished surfaces sit cheek by jowl with textures that are raw and pockmarked. The generally uneven levels of handling across the works' multifaceted planes only adds to the feeling that the ensemble is subject to an incipient formlessness that threatens to overwhelm the entire composition. Al-Hadid frequently casts materials in ways that give the impression that they are melting away before our very eyes. They look as though they have congealed

¹ *Diana Al-Hadid. The Fates*, ed. Diana-Al Hadid, Tina Lipsky, Annette Südbeck, Secession, 2014.

rapidly, and might liquefy again at any moment. Nothing seems particularly stable at any level. This powerful image of mutability has led some commentators to regard her work as a reflection on more fundamental societal instabilities.² But more immediately, the fluidity and open-endedness of her work is perhaps better understood as a metaphor for the energies of creative artistic activity.

In this article, I want to discuss a number of themes and concerns that Al-Hadid has explored since graduating from art college ten years ago. My aim is to provide readers with a thematic context for the works included in this exhibition, and especially for *Phantom Limb*. This major large-scale sculpture, which was displayed for the first time at the Vienna Secession in 2014, consists of a complicated arrangement of molded surfaces and textures that are stacked up on one another to form a sizeable heap. **(FIG 3)** Perched atop this is the torso of a reclining female figure, which is a motif that has featured prominently in a number of Al-Hadid's recent works. The title of the sculpture alludes to the distressing psychological condition, occasionally experienced by amputees, who continue to feel sensations stemming from an absent body part. In this work, the "limb" in question is a truncated leg, presented on a low-lying white plinth off to one side, and clearly belonging to the female figure depicted in the sculpture. **(FIG 4)** Al-Hadid playfully invites us to imagine that this statue, headless though she is, still has thoughts of her own, and can still feel the twitch of her absent leg. Of course, most viewers who see the figure will not regard it as remotely life-like. The pose, after all, is a mainstay of Western art, and invokes Ancient Greek, Renaissance and Neo-Classical precedents. The truncated limbs and speckled patina are more likely to be read as an allusion to the intended age of the statue than to the actual bodily dismemberment of a person. Generally it looks much more like a representation of a sculpture than it does a depiction of a living, breathing person and it would take a considerable leap of faith to see this object as having agency. But this seems part of the point. After all, phantom limb syndrome is a condition in which the ability to distinguish between the real and the imaginary becomes horribly confused. And, as an art form, sculpture itself has also provided a cultural space in which infantile, regressive dreams about inanimate, unreal things coming to life can be entertained.³ Such topics recur in many different guises throughout Al-Hadid's art. She explores them through the images that she adopts, and also via the themes that she references. But she also pursues the uncertain borderlines between the real and the imaginary by probing the fantasies that are associated with handling materials; she dreams, we might say, through her sculptural processes.

Consider, for instance, one of the works that Al-Hadid made during her residency at the University of South Florida in 2010. **(FIG 5)** The studio at the Institute for Research in Art has the foundry facilities for creating sculptures in bronze, which enabled her to try out the time-tested tradition of lost wax casting. The procedure is notoriously laborious; it involves multiple stages and requires extensive technical skill. First, you take the object you want to cast and you encase it in a mold. Then you fill the mold with wax, which gives you a replica of the original form. Next, you construct another mold from heatproof clay around your wax model. After that, you heat up the clay to melt away the wax, leaving an empty core for the metal to fill. And only then are you ready to do the actual casting. Bronze liquefies at roughly

² See, for instance, Xandra Eden, "Vanishing Act: Perspective and Doubt in the Art of Diana Al-Hadid", in Nancy Doll (ed.), *Diana Al-Hadid*, Exhibition Catalogue, Weatherspoon Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2013, p. 13.

³ This is a theme explored by Kenneth Gross in *The Dream of the Moving Statue* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), and Victor I. Stoichita, in *The Pygmalion Effect: from Ovid to Hitchcock* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

2200 degrees Fahrenheit, which means that there is little scope for spontaneity or experimentation when it comes to the moment when the bright yellow metal pours from the crucible down specially prepared channels, and into the mold. Everything has to be prepared meticulously. Yet the look of the accidental and spontaneous is exactly what Al-Hadid wanted to achieve. For her sculpture, *In Mortal Repose* (2011), she developed a body cast of the torso of a reclining female figure. But when it came to pouring the molten bronze, she found a way of permitting the metal to spill out from the mold and drip uncontrollably down the stepped plinth that she had specially constructed. The upper section remains recognizable enough, but the lower half of the torso has collapsed into a swirling morass of bronze undulations. Two bare feet appear almost unscathed at the support's base, connected merely by a thin surface layer of metal. Analogies to actual bodily mutilation might be difficult to avoid. But this is also a sculpture that proclaims that it is about the technique of casting. It is a bronze that has been made to look like the melted wax that the procedure of casting in bronze requires. The unplanned, uncontrolled appearance of the work returns the focus to the site of the studio, and to the thrill in undertaking an established workshop technique only to discard the rules at the final moment. Al-Hadid has often spoken of her interest in testing out her chosen resources, putting pressure on them in order to find out how they will behave under duress. The sense of the volatility and roughness of her work is thus in large part testimony to her love of tactile experimentation with processes and materials.

Al-Hadid's openness about her hands-on engagement with the specialist skill-sets that are closely associated with the western sculptural tradition might initially seem unexpected. After all, it is no longer routine to walk into modern galleries and encounter works of art that look as labored over and hand crafted as hers do. It has come to be taken for granted that ambitious art need not involve or require any particular technical know-how. For a generation of artists who came of age in the late 1960s and 1970s, not having a studio was a mark of pride, not embarrassment, and the liberation of art from the shackles of craft competence was openly celebrated.⁴ By the 1980s and 1990s it was commonplace for artists who wished to display large-scale, object-based works to outsource the fabrication to specialist technicians.⁵ However, since the start of the new century there has been a growing trend among artists to re-engage with skills and processes that involve making things by hand, often in a workshop environment. This need not necessarily be regarded as a reactionary stance. In 2004 the critic Johanna Drucker pointed out that one of the major challenges for contemporary artists was to find a way of ensuring that their work looked as different as possible from 'other consumable objects in mainstream material culture'.⁶ She observed that one effective strategy for accomplishing this was to adopt a visually conspicuous attitude toward production. In this respect, it does not matter if an artist flaunts their artisanal incompetence by exhibiting crudely arranged assemblages of cast-offs, or whether they choose to labor for months transforming raw materials into a meticulously wrought artifact. The larger issue is that thanks to the automation of manufacture, the perfect levels and rounded-off edges that we associate with what she calls "showroom finish" have become so universal that, if artists

⁴ John Roberts explores this subject in detail in *The Intangibilities for Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade* (London: Verso, 2008).

⁵ Brandon Taylor addresses this tendency in his discussion of the London fabricators, Mike Smith Studios. See his article "Virtuosity and Contrivance in the New Sculpture", in Jonathan Harris (ed.), *Value Art Politics: Criticism, Meaning and Interpretation after Postmodernism* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), pp. 397-423.

⁶ Johanna Drucker, "Affectivity and Entropy: Production Aesthetics in Contemporary Sculpture", in M. Anna Fariello and Paula Owen (ed.), *Objects and Meaning: New Perspectives on Art and Craft* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), p. 136.

aspire to these standards, their work runs the danger of looking like any other commodity.⁷ Drucker's suggestion is that the popularity among younger contemporary artists for adopting alternative techniques and standards for making things is a way of distinguishing their work *as art*. Al-Hadid's commitment to a studio-based practice, on the one hand, and, on the other, to an unresolved and imperfect 'look', deserves to be understood within this wider context. The visceral impact that is made by sculptures like *Traces of a Fictional Third* (2011) or *Phantom Limb* derives in large part from their extraordinary varied textures. **(FIG 6)** In fact, it is hard to conceive of surfaces that are more different in look and feel from the flawless machined finishes that we handle on a daily basis. The fissured walls of drips, the drapery encrustations and the congealed puddles that feature in her sculptures do little to hide their origins in unconventional, messy studio processes. The resulting surfaces appear very 'low-tech'; nor do they look that pleasant to touch. In fact they often invoke discarded, abject things -- objects that have gone brittle with age, or clammy with mould.

Despite the traditional casting and modeling techniques that Al-Hadid uses, many of the materials that she uses have not been around for that long. The main ingredients of her sculptures are synthetic. For instance, one of the substances that she employs regularly is a material called polymer gypsum, a generic term that refers to a substantial range of widely available products. Essentially, she uses it as a modern alternative to sculptor's plaster. It can be applied in combination with other materials, including fiberglass, and, once hardened, it can be worked further with abrasives or other tools. It is also lighter, quick drying and more resilient than traditional water-based gypsums, which is why it is now commonly used to mold anything from architectural details to giftware figurines. Indeed, versatility is its basic attribute: it is a surrogate substance, designed to be able to conceal its own features by looking as though it could be something else. In its raw, unworked form, it just looks amorphous, and, were it to be encountered in this state, it is unlikely that many people would be able to name it, or know even what it was for. Unlike more familiar art resources that have strong distinguishing attributes (like marble or bronze, for example), polymer gypsum operates incognito. We might say that it is a medium less intended to be worked in, than through.⁸ And this also seems true of the way Al-Hadid uses it. She employs synthetic sculpting resources because they are available, and because they enable her to achieve the intricate, evocative, tactile effects that she is after. But she gives no impression that she has an enduring loyalty to these substances for their own sake. This is worth underlining, because the overall impression that we get as viewers from her sculptures is of a palpable sense of materiality. Yet this haptic perception cannot be said to have much to do with the constitutive materials in themselves. It is triggered instead by the fact that we recognize a range of recurring shapes and textures within her sculptures. These we read as the traces of physical processes with which we are likely to be rather more familiar, such as crumpling, tearing, or dripping.

Of these procedures, it is perhaps the telltale outline of the congealed vertical drip that is the most important. Stalactitic shapes recur in some form or another in almost all of her recent work. They cascade downwards in a shower, or they trickle over mysteriously absent steps to form puddles that hang implausibly in the air. In sculptures such as *Phantom Limb* some of the perpendicular surfaces of the stacked plinths are made entirely from bands of gypsum

⁷ Drucker, "Affectivity and Entropy", p. 136.

⁸ My phrasing is borrowed here from Michael Fried's remarks on Anthony Caro's use of painted metal. See his 'Introduction', *Anthony Caro: Sculpture, 1960-1963*, exhibition catalogue, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London; reprinted in Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 273.

stretched taut by gravitational flow. **(FIG 7)** In the *Blind Bust* series from 2012, she uses a similar technique to equivalent effect, although here the drips are fashioned from bronze. In fact, it does not really matter what material she uses: the impression of a relentless, downward force remains dominant regardless. **(FIG 8)** Nor is it that important ultimately whether the shapes of running droplets were actually formed by pouring a liquefied material, or if they were just made to look like this through some other technique. As viewers, we come to read all vertical striations in her art as ‘drip-like’.

Take, for instance, her recent drawings in charcoal and pastel. In these, dense vertical lines commonly cloak the entire surface of the paper, and, when these are exhibited alongside her work in three dimensions, they only serve to amplify the shimmering, trickling verticals of the sculptures. And the sight of the many hardened dribbles in bronze or gypsum makes the drawn hatching in the works on paper look even more like the gravitational pull of liquefied matter. In turn, these atmospheric, fuliginous representations in two dimensions can also help draw attention to other aspects of the sculptures. They point to the very painterly effects generated by the streams of congealed drips in the works. In certain sculptures, some are even flecked with pigment, which we might read as a subtle allusion to the surface textures of paintings, and a reminder that pictorial conventions are part of her sculptural concerns. For Al-Hadid, drips are used to trace the presence of surfaces and volumes that otherwise hardly exist. In place of the solid, tactile object, she regularly presents a web-like carapace, one that frequently looks fragile, and tends almost always to be incomplete. This gives the works a certain spidery lightness, enabling the sculptures to appear more evanescent and gravity denying than they are in reality. In short, we might say that the drips enable her to achieve the impression that she is painting in air.

Another way of phrasing this might be to suggest that Al-Hadid is a sculptor who exploits the conventions of picture making in order to create physical objects that often aspire to the status of images. The titles of two works from 2012, *At the Vanishing Point*, and *Suspended After Image*, ought to be enough to alert us to the fact that she is an artist who does not distinguish between sculpture on the one hand, and, on the other, optical and perceptual effects. **(FIGS 9 and 10)** For her, both are inextricably related. For *At the Vanishing Point*, she created a box-like niche that gives the impression that it recedes much further than it does in actuality, while, in *Suspended After Image*, she created three-dimensional forms that are meant to resemble the residue of retinal impressions. More recently, in 2015, she titled an exhibition at a gallery in Los Angeles, “Ground and Figure”, and for this show she exhibited a number of vertical latticed panels, formed from thin strands of polymer gypsum and fiberglass and layered with paint and gold leaf. These works hang from the walls, like shallow reliefs, although since they lack a continuous ground plane, they act more like screens, enabling viewers who stand close to see through them, to the surface of the wall behind. The largest work of this kind formed a diaphanous partition across the gallery itself, and a gate-sized aperture in the center permitted viewers to step across the virtual ground plane. **(FIG 12)** Here, Al-Hadid’s painterly interests could not be more explicit. Her materials and technique enable her to weave together the outlines of figures, buildings and landscapes, like a sorcerer, conjuring apparitions from thin air. Complementing these works was a free-standing sculpture, which was perhaps her most ambitious attempt to date to magic up a specter from her chosen hoard of ingredients – polymer gypsum, fiberglass, steel, wood, concrete and polystyrene. The work’s title, however, acts as a reminder that viewers are not supposed to be *completely* fooled by the show-stopping special effects: this one is named *Smoke and Mirrors*. **(FIG 13)**

The wider issue is that, for Al-Hadid, optical illusions cannot be separated from tangible, palpable objects. The things she makes are made to look like things that deceive. Figures resemble ghosts, while solid objects are shaped to look vaporous. The reclining body in *Actor* (2009) seems rounded and full from the front, yet it turns out to be as rigid as a plank when you look at it from the side. From a distance, her creations can appear mysteriously ethereal and hallucinatory, as in *Smoke and Mirrors*, but from close up they are disconcertingly physical and present. The sculptures and panels entice viewers with teasing deceptions, but they only go so far. This means that when we look at her works, we also find ourselves thinking about our own experiences of seeing. And ultimately it is this that makes the art compelling. The blurring of the pictorial and the sculptural that fascinates Al-Hadid can result in visual ambiguities and clever spectacular effects, but in themselves these are less significant the fact that they provoke more measured reflection on the nature of fantasy itself, not to mention the interdependency of sight and imagination.

These are key themes for Al-Hadid, and arguably no more so than for the most ambitious and large-scaled sculptures that she has created to date. Works such as *Gradiva's Fourth Wall* (2011), *Nolli's Orders* and *At the Vanishing Point* (both from 2012) or *Phantom Limb* (2014) might seem to belong to a hybrid class of sculpture that has few precedents in recent art. Yet these works could also be understood as an imaginative re-engagement with the forms and conventions of the tableau. This is a genre that traditionally has occupied the interstitial zone between the arts of painting and sculpture. We can think of it in relation to its better-known sibling, sculptural relief, which is a type of three-dimensional art that adopts many of the formal conditions of the framed picture. A relief is a sculpture that is not intended to be seen in the round. The forms and figures are drawn out from a ground, and viewers encounter the presentation from the front, as they would a two-dimensional painting.⁹ The tableau, on the other hand, can be described as a picture that has been liberated from its frame. The figures, the background scenery, and other elements of the composition are actualized in the real space of the gallery. Viewers are free to move around the resulting staged assembly, although certain points of view are likely to provide privileged perspectives.¹⁰

We see this in particular in *At the Vanishing Point*, which is a work that was loosely inspired by a sixteenth-century fresco in Florence by Jacopo Pontormo.¹¹ (FIGS 14 and 15) The fresco depicts a scene from the Gospel of Luke in the Christian Bible, when the Virgin Mary is greeted by Elizabeth, both of whom are soon to become mothers. But Al-Hadid focuses less on the story than on the highly stylized setting in which the encounter takes place, for Pontormo sets his figures on a staircase, surrounded by classical architecture that is consistent in style with the church in which the fresco is located. In this way, the religious scene is made to appear as though it is spatially coterminous with the viewers, as though nothing separates these divine presences from the worshippers, apart from a flight of ascending steps. Al-Hadid's *At the Vanishing Point* presents an actual interior space, constructed from walls of polymer gypsum and fiberglass, that taper on one side to accentuate an impression of perspectival recession when viewed frontally. This structure is then raised to eye level on a

⁹ The German sculptor Adolf von Hildebrand (1847-1921) provided the classic analysis of the formal properties of the relief in his essay, *The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture*, trans. Max Meyer and Robert Morris Ogden (New York: G.E. Stechert, 1907), pp. 80-99.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the tableau form, see Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line: Re-making Art after Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 85-99 and Roland Barthes, "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein", in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 69-78.

¹¹ The work in question by Pontormo is *Visitation* (1514-16), in the SS. Annunziata. Gregory Volk discusses the relation between the fresco and Al-Hadid's sculpture in "Protean Adventures: On the Art of Diana Al-Hadid", in Nancy Doll (ed.), *Diana Al-Hadid*, pp. 16-17.

series of stepped plinths. As a three-dimensional model, it barely resembles the virtual proportions depicted by Pontormo, nor does it incorporate any forms that can be read easily as figures. Only some drapery, carpeting the stairs of the plinths, alludes loosely to their presence. Yet their absence is perhaps appropriate, since the subtle illusion of nearness that the fresco produces is lost once the depiction is translated (however freely) into a three-dimensional tableau. The critic Brian O'Doherty once observed that one of the consequences of the tableau form is that it can leave viewers feeling like intruders, or even "trespassers". It positions the spectator apart from the setting in the nowhere space of the gallery, looking in at a scene that might be close by physically, but can also feel very remote.¹² This also seems to ring true for *At the Vanishing Point*. To stand directly in front of the sculpture, gazing into the interior space with its uncertain sense of scale, is an absorbing experience. We can immerse ourselves in studying the many crevices and facets of the cave-like interior, but physically and psychologically we can never enter its ambit. Its world is not ours. We remain resolutely outside.

Al-Hadid's sculptures offer numerous instances of this nature. Evocative glimpses into interior spaces abound throughout her work, permitting rich opportunities for viewers to embark on flights of fancy. A tiny chink can offer up a keyhole glimpse into an otherworldly palace of strange textures. In these moments, we are allowed to lose our bearings. But there are plenty of other occasions when we are reminded of our here-and-now presence, when the objects refuse to mold themselves to our fantasies. Her sculptures oblige us constantly to shuttle between a sense of the exteriority of things and fleeting, momentary impressions of complete immersion. This is particularly evident in her early works, which often allude to the inside and outside experiences that are offered by built forms. Several of these sculptures recall fantastical edifices, reminiscent of Pieter Bruegel's famous painting of *The Tower of Babel* with its pinnacles reaching through the clouds, or Giovanni Piranesi's densely detailed prints of colossal edifices. **(FIG 16 and 17)** We might say that her inspiration during this period derived from imaginary buildings that exude a sense of monumentality, which artists like Brughel or Piranesi generated by amassing layer upon layer of dense visual information. The tiny figures often visible in the foreground of these pictures -- clambering up staircases, or surveying blocks of masonry -- only accentuate the sublime proportions of these immense buildings. Their allure stems largely from the fact that they permit viewers to imagine what it might be like to pass through their cavernous passageways or look down into vertiginous voids. In her early pieces, Al-Hadid invokes similar impressions, as in, for instance, *Tomorrow's Superstitions* from 2008, where the level of detailing is reminiscent of an architect's scale model. **(FIG 18)** This work consists of a ziggurat tower, spiraling upwards, replete with rows of arched windows. She then adds further complexity to the structure by partially cloaking the central tower with additional layers of archways and walling that bulge outwards implausibly. A tangled exoskeleton of little stick scaffolding adds yet another stratum of intricacy.

Tomorrow's Superstitions stands seven and a half feet from the floor of the gallery. It is considerably taller than an average person, although in shape and stature it does recall the proportions of a standing figure. Al-Hadid seems interested in thinking of buildings as human-like, and in exploring the ways they can be imagined as shells, which can be inhabited and worn, like cloaks. In this sculpture, the multiple swirling layers that make up the work are in some ways reminiscent of the shrouds that blanket an embalmed corpse. Similar

¹² Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 49.

analogies appear in one of the very earliest sculptures that she created after graduating from art college. *Spun of the Limits of my Lonely Waltz* from 2006 takes the shape of an upside-down gothic cathedral, which, as its title implies, acquired its proportions by her measuring out the steps of a dance that she performed in her studio. **(FIG 19)** The parameters of the building and its rhythmic proportions have been drawn in, and reduced in scale, so that they reflect the immediate outer reaches of a circling body. But although the resulting structure is constricted to just five feet wide, it is also upturned, pivoting precariously on its spires, as though still caught in a spin. In volume it might be slight and human-sized, but in its architectural form it implies an immense scale. The idea of a dancing cathedral is thus as much a construct of a daydream as it is an actual built thing.

Tomorrow's Superstitions and *Spun of the Limits of my Lonely Waltz* establish an analogy between the human body and built form based on a loose correspondence in size. Yet other sculptures from this period also present buildings as metaphors for embodiment without invoking the scale and proportion of the human form. For instance, one sculpture from 2008 is called *Self Melt*. **(FIG 20)** It depicts an upturned tower that looks as though it is being sucked through the neck of an invisible hour glass and is congealing below in an untidy heap. The liquidization of a building becomes a symbol for the decomposition of a body image, or the undoing of the architecture of the self. Built forms provide Al-Hadid with such a productive range of analogies for depicting personhood and individuality because they too have insides and outsides, public facades and secretive inner sanctums. The images and impressions of interiors and exteriors, playing off one another, which we find in her art, are aligned with the ways in which we commonly think about our inner and outer selves. Al-Hadid has what we might call an “architectural imagination”, because she makes insides and outsides a matter of surfaces. After all, like buildings, her sculptures consist almost entirely of skins, screens, layers and coatings. The physical structure as well as the meanings of the works are lodged in their exterior surfaces.

Two recent figurative sculptures, *Synonym* and *Antonym*, both from 2014, make this particularly apparent. **(FIGS 21 and 22)** These are works that are disconcertingly hollow. They were created through an intricate process of casting, and both represent different versions of the same model. In each the pose of the reclining female is identical, although in coloration they differ. Furthermore, since the figure is only represented in these two works by thin shells that fashion the surfaces of the body to different degrees, the torso of *Antonym* seems significantly more present than is the case for *Synonym*. This impression is compounded by a similar treatment of the plinths on which the figures repose. With *Synonym*, the pedestal is reduced to a few blobby straws of polymer gypsum, terminating in formless puddles. For *Antonym*, the base seems more solid, although telltale striations around the lower sections imply that that this state is only temporary and that the work of deforming is already underway. When treated as a pair, it is hard not to feel that these two sculptures represent stages of a process of deletion rather than composition. It is as if some external force is eroding these figures, along with their plinths.¹³ The process seems oddly analogous to the ways in which pixels can be erased on the screens of our computers with the stroke of a mouse. Confronted by these two sculptures, viewers might desire to fill in the absent sections

¹³ My reading here draws on Rosalind E. Krauss' discussion of art nouveau furniture in her book *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), pp. 33-34. The chapter in which her remarks feature also include a number of observations about the role that surfaces play in Auguste Rodin's sculptures. These too have informed my argument. For a more recent and wide-ranging discussion of the role of surfaces in art and architecture, see Giuliana Bruno's *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality and Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

and imagine the physical presence that is only insinuated. But attempts to restore a genuine impression of volume and depth in this way are not likely to be particularly satisfying. These are works that allow viewpoints through the ragged gaps of the skins of the figures and into the interior volumes that bodies conventionally occupy. The familiar smoothness of bare shoulders is made strange by seeing it on the inside surface, so that it is now back to front, so to speak. In fact we see front and back, inside and outside all at once, which obscures any clear, consoling impression of warm, tactile presence. Our eyes busily flicker from surface to surface, following the undulations and contours over the striations and around the streaks of colored pigment.

Think again of that fragment of a leg, which lies abandoned on its plinth, separate but also a part of *Phantom Limb*. Like *Synonym* and *Antonym*, it is an object that looks as if it has been subject to multiple processes of molding and shaping. These actions have resulted in its dry, mottled textures of green umber and beige, but they can also be read as mapping out all the intricate and complex workings of the psyche. In this, and in all of Al-Hadid's work, interiority is splayed out over the screen of the skin.

c.5650 words inc. notes

IMAGE LIST (all works are by Diana with the exception of figs 13, 14, 15)

- 1, pages 6 and 7 from *The Fates* (2014)
- 2, installation photograph from *The Fates*, which appears 8 pages from the back
- 3, *In Mortal Repose* (2011)
- 4, *Phantom Limb* (2014)
- 5, *Phantom Limb* (2014), detail
- 6, *Traces of a Fictional Third* (2011)
- 7, *Phantom Limb* (2014), detail
- 8, *Blind Bust* (2012)
- 9, *At the Vanishing Point* (2012)
- 10, *Suspended After Image* (2012)
- 11, installation photograph, "Ground and Figure", OHWOW Gallery, LA, 2015
- 12, *Smoke Screen*, (2015)
- 13, *Smoke and Mirrors*, (2015)
- 14, *At the Vanishing Point* (2012), detail
- 15, Jacopo Pontormo, *The Visitation* (1516), SS. Annunziata, Florence
- 16, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Tower of Babel* (1563), Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum
- 17, Giovanni Piranesi, print from the series *Carceri (Prisons)*, i.e. Plate VI (1750/61)
- 18, *Tomorrow's Superstitions* (2008)
- 19, *Spun of the Limits of my Lonely Waltz* (2006)
- 20, *Self Melt* (2008)
- 21, *Synonym* (2014)
- 22, *Antonym* (2015)

Bio Note

Alistair Rider teaches art history at the University of St Andrews. He has a long-standing interest in all forms of modern sculpture, although to date he has mainly centered his studies on European and North American artists who came of age during the 1960s and 1970s. He is the author of a monograph on Carl Andre (*Things in their Elements*, 2011), which developed from his doctoral dissertation, completed at the University of Leeds. Currently, he is writing a book on artists who have devoted their careers to single, life-long projects.