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Nicole Farhi: beautiful, nonchalant and ageless

Nicole Farhi talks to Celia Walden about her subtle styles which have been delighting the British intelligentsia for 25 years



Nicole Farhi: "I don't think I'll ever give up designing" Photo: MARTIN POPE

Last week Nicole Farhi was elected French Entrepreneur of the Year by the UK's French Community in a vote run by Grandes Ecoles City Circle

If Virginia Woolf were alive today, one fashion critic observed, she would wear Nicole Farhi. The French designer – who moved to the UK in 1970 and launched her eponymous label 12 years later – creates clothing that women who don't want to think about fashion don't have to think about. Farhi raises an eyebrow. "Virginia Woolf? That's a compliment. She was very beautiful and intelligent. Why would I mind being thought of as a designer who makes clothes for intelligent people?" When you consider that Nicole Farhi CBE is one of Britain's most successful designers, with a multimillion-pound global empire and a clutch of awards to her name, you can see why the 62-year-old might not see this as a failing. It was no accident that Farhi cornered this very British market. In France fashion is a source of intellectual pleasure like books, theatre or art, but the old-fashioned English intelligentsia, still shackled by Bloomsbury-style neuroses, have always felt uncomfortable about the frivolous pursuit of an attractive appearance. Flashy designers who commit the grave sin of making it obvious that you've tried to look good are anathema to Farhi's muted colour palettes and subtle styles. She is the Armani to our Versaces.

Softly spoken and strongly accented, she sits opposite me in her bright, white studio above Carnaby Street, one hand threaded through her untameable hair, aquamarine eyes resting coolly on mine. Dressed in a pair of dark grey harem pants (her own), a white silk shirt beneath a black wool cardigan and brown ankle boots, Farhi is a perfect spokesman for her brand: beautiful, nonchalant, ageless.

"In France, we're brought up thinking fashion is very important," she shrugs. "When you look back at our history, it's what is left." Because the French "can be a bit too chic", she has always found greater stimulus on the streets of London.

"French women love to be perfect," she explains with a wry smile, "but there is a wackiness here that is much more inspiring." As a woman who was torn between becoming a painter or joining the fashion world, and the wife of Left-wing playwright Sir David Hare, it's not surprising that Farhi's references have remained predominantly cultural. A recent exhibition of paintings by Vilhelm Hammershøi prompted the designer to base her entire autumn/winter 2009/10 collection on the Danish artist's limited greys. "Then I got bored and decided to add in bright fuchsias and turquoises," she laughs. "Everything is a reaction to everything else."

The daughter of Turkish immigrants, Farhi was born and brought up in Nice, where she studied art and sculpture before moving to Paris to enrol in fashion school. "It was the late Sixties and *prêt-à-porter* was starting to boom, so it seemed easier, I suppose."

In 1972, she and her partner and lover at the time, Stephen Marks, founded the high-street label French Connection. Three years later, Farhi fell pregnant with Candice, now 32, and decided to settle here permanently. When the relationship dissolved, the two remained friends. It wasn't until a decade or so later, at the first-night party of Hare's 1991 play *Murmuring Judges*, that Farhi met the man she still describes as "the most romantic in the world".

"We have been together 17 years," she says, unable to repress a smile, "and it's exactly like the first day. Just as I admire his work, his beliefs and his morality, he is also completely behind me and everything I do." When I ask if Hare ever offers any stylistic input, she bursts out laughing. "No, but he does wear my clothes faithfully. I give him the things that we don't sell because they are in a colour nobody wants to buy, so he walks around in baby-blue coats and orange sweaters, saying how proud he is to wear them."

Farhi still sculpts at the home in Hampstead she shares with Hare, as well as in their house in the south of France, where the couple take very civilised holidays with her husband's children from a previous marriage, her ex-husband, his new partner and Candice. "We are all the best friends," she says proudly.

She has kept her old apartment in Paris where she spends at least four days a month. "It's important to preserve my French roots," she says. "They still know me at the little Chinese restaurant around the corner. But not because of who I am," she adds hastily, worried this should sound self-important. Celebrity is not something Farhi ever aspired to or feels comfortable with. She is at pains to think of any high-profile person she would actively like to wear her clothes, eventually conceding that it would, perhaps, be nice if Barack Obama would agree to be "Farhied". "The greatest compliment is for someone to say 'I've had a coat of yours for 10 years and it's still my favourite.'" In Britain, she says, "the cult of the famous" has reached farcical levels. Never having used celebrities in her campaigns or catwalk shows, she took exception to a recent request by a magazine editor to find 10 famous friends to model her clothes. "It would be very easy for me to get together actors, artists and writers I know, but I find it completely stupid. Why would those people want to be models? It should be models on the covers of magazines, not celebrities." It wouldn't happen in France, she insists, still rigid with outrage, where women don't bitch about other women, either in the press or in life. "And why [British] women are so concerned with the clothes public figures wear is beyond me. Is it so important?" And yet, I suggest, France's own dress-up doll, Carla Bruni Sarkozy, is certainly having fun with her new persona. "Well, yes," she tosses back her mane with impatience. "It's easy for her: she has a great figure, although they do say that she is pushing the whole 'demure' thing a bit too far. Carla will be there as long as she wants; when she's bored with playing that part, she will go somewhere else."

What about Farhi? Can she imagine getting bored with a world she occasionally seems to perceive as unimportant or, at least, secondary? "Oh, I don't think I'll ever give up designing," she says. "Resigning isn't in my vocabulary." .

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