



unbecoming



Diana Al-Hadid, *Blue Medusa*, 2023.
Photography by Charlie Rubin. Image courtesy
the artist and Kasmin Gallery, New York

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Syrian-American sculptor Diana Al-Hadid is keenly attentive to space: how you define it, occupy it, consider it, the viewer's relationship to it, and the list continues. Her sculptures quite literally take up space—filling galleries with large-scale installations, prompting viewers to move around or through a space to see a work and activate it. Her sculptural panels hang on the wall and occupy space while protruding from the wall, toeing the line between painting and sculpture.

By comparison, women are often told not to take up space, whether that's by physically getting out of the way, not sharing their opinions, or being told to limit their emotions or reactions; women should instead be quiet and small. Taking up space puts a woman at risk of being deemed "unbecoming." While becoming is defined by that which is "suitable, fitting," unbecoming indicates a woman who has strayed from what is appropriate or acceptable—a designation that is never fixed.

unbecoming is a survey of nearly two decades of work by Al-Hadid that considers how gender and femininity have been a throughline of the artist's practice. She draws on diverse sources ranging from art history to literature, mythology, and lived experiences, which in this exhibition all reference women and their experiences. These narratives, even when fictional, hold ideals about women and their conduct that remain relevant today. Al-Hadid never directly copies her source materials but reimagines them through abstraction, inviting us to rethink how expectations for women, or definitions of unbecoming, have taken shape over time.

The exhibition's title, *unbecoming*, emerged from a conversation with Al-Hadid about materials, making, and expectations. In art and art history, there are many expectations for women: what kinds of artists they should be, the subjects they should address, the materials they should use, the form of their work, how much space they should take up. As we talked about the idea of unbecoming, Al-Hadid contemplated how her work upsets those preconceived notions: Her materials do something unexpected because she experiments with them and pushes them, she does something different from what a female artist "should" do, she makes things that



Diana Al-Hadid, *Mad Medusa*, 2023. Photography by Charlie Rubin. Image courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery, New York



Diana Al-Hadid, *Night Medusa*, 2023.
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exceed what a female sculptor “should” do or the scale she “should” work at, she defies how painting and sculpture “should” look by making sculptures that appear like paintings—and this spirit of imagination and defiance continues. Al-Hadid’s work challenges the narrow parameters of what is deemed acceptable and takes up space without fear of being unbecoming; it is a model for us to similarly reject the norm and take up space.

Al-Hadid’s thinking also mirrors that of numerous authors who have pursued similar questions around expectations for what women “should” be. For example, Sheila Heti writes about the ways women are not seen as “complete” until they are mothers. Sarah Ahmed explains that women are encouraged to take up less space, implying that women should be quiet and not voice their concerns. Soraya Chemaly outlines how women’s anger is given a “bad rap,” adding that when women are told their anger is “undesirable, selfish, powerless, and ugly,” it suggests all women are the same. These authors are a few of many, but their arguments illustrate the limited space women are permitted to exist in intellectually, emotionally, or physically—what is becoming.

This exhibition and Al-Hadid’s work ask all of us to think about the idea of unbecoming. I purposefully leave this term undefined to invite space for self-reflection. Unbecoming is many things, and each of those definitions is an integral part of a larger conversation about how we set expectations for ourselves and others that prohibit us from being our authentic selves. But here, for one, *unbecoming* celebrates the possibility of a future where women can be free from the constraints of “becoming” by finding the power and joy in being unbecoming.

Rachel Winter, Ph.D.

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Diana Al-Hadid, *Spun of the Limits of my Lonely Waltz*, 2006. Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery, New York

Unbecoming as Existing

WHAT DOES UNBECOMING MEAN TO YOU?

The shore, stranded and still, lamented:

“Though I have lived long,

Alas! I still do not know what I am.”

A wave, surging forward, replied:

“I exist because I move;

If I cease to move, I cease to be.”

—*Payam-i-Mashriq*, 1923

This poem by Mohammad Iqbal (Iqbal Lahori) beautifully captures the existential paradox of unbecoming. In his words, the wave’s very existence depends on perpetual motion—a relentless dynamism. Within this existence every moment in time and space reflects both the longing for being and the inevitable shattering of any fixed state. The wave becomes a wave each time it crashes against the shore and dissolves into the sea. Unbecoming is a temporal journey between past and present. It pulls you into the hazy fragments of memory, where your becoming has been assembled piece by piece, only to return you to the present, where each fragment craves destruction and renewal. Your being is nothing but unbecoming.

Unbecoming demands the dismantling of molds and frames. It resists the passing of time and defies the limits of space and thought. Diana Al-Hadid’s dripping sculptures and paintings embody this urge—to break down the known, to unravel form, to dissolve the very essence of the figural. Her dripping process materializes the reality of becoming, conditioned by time, space, and movement. The artwork takes shape only when the dripping ceases. Yet the result of this becoming defies familiarity; it is something wholly other. Her resistance to form accentuates the becoming of a primordial state, cast within the artist’s own unbecoming. In this process, form dissolves into fragments, suspended between coherence and dissolution.

Unbecoming assumes agency. It revives forgotten and lost voices. It encourages questioning and resisting any imposed form of becoming. Al-Hadid’s triptych *Hindsight* (2020) alludes to this act of unbecoming. The emerging woman in her work, resembling a mountain, stands poised between a dormant peak and an erupting volcano. Suspended between stillness and rupture, her presence embodies the woman’s desire for and contemplation of unbecoming. To be seen, to be heard, to exist—she must reverse her own becoming.

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Diana Al-Hadid, *Hindsight*, 2020. Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery, New York

Unbecoming Uncanny

WHAT DOES UNBECOMING MEAN TO YOU?

The word unbecoming is often used normatively, as a critique of behavior that is considered inappropriate or to describe an object that is unflattering. A scold might describe a way of behaving as unbecoming to reinforce a hegemonic style, the disruption of which is considered rude. In progress narratives, strategies of being unbecoming have offered meaningful challenges to the norms that constrain or degrade everyday life and have been deployed by civil rights activists, feminists, punks, LGBTQ people, and climate activists as polite forms of violence designed to liberate, interrogate, and enrich.

There's a temporal strain in the word unbecoming that pulls in opposite directions against the present moment. On the one hand there is the process of "becoming," which pushes being into the future, and on the other the "un-," which reverses its progress. Unbecoming is part of the process of becoming that describes the impossibility of perfection.

Democracy is designed to harness processes of unbecoming, or dissent, through periodic renewals that are decided on by the people. The representatives and propositions that we vote for change from one term to the next in response to our social priorities and mores, while bureaucratic mechanisms offer stability and therefore the possibility of future renewals. Through regulated unbecoming, democracies are in a constant state of becoming what they already are. This is only the rational version, though, which depends on a public sphere in which the will of the people can be openly debated, thanks to guarantees of free speech. It assumes that such debate is informed by equal access to education, enabling the citizenry to make informed decisions. Authoritarian incursions on academic freedom, inequitable access to education, the defunding of research institutions, constraints on self-expression, and other modes of restricting participation in democratic processes reveal the fragility of the peace and safety on which pluralistic society depends.

Diana Al-Hadid's art envisions the uncanny entropy of unbecoming that is always ready to erode the world we've built the moment our ability to make it make sense ceases. Her architectural forms and landscapes drip away like corroded infrastructure and ecological ruin. There's a quiet horror in how easy it is to recognize her abstractions from images in the news and down the street. While imperfection creates movement under normal circumstances, Al-Hadid's images invite us to consider the point at which failure becomes finitude, and to ask ourselves, Who are we unbecoming?

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Diana Al-Hadid, *Deluge in the Allegory*, 2020.
Photography by Timothy Doyon. Courtesy the
artist and Kasmin Gallery, New York

Diana Al-Hadid, *Lionless*, 2013. Collection of the
Green Family Art Foundation. Photography by
Pres Rodriguez. Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin
Gallery, New York



Unbecoming

WHAT DOES UNBECOMING MEAN TO YOU?

As a scholar of religion, I often tell students that religious rituals offer technologies of being and becoming. Think about it. Christian baptism marks a state of theological becoming—a signifier of salvation. Buddhist rituals of meditation and recitation offer technologies for awakening the mind and cultivating awareness. And my own Jewish tradition has a plethora of ritual technologies to mark being and becoming. Bar/Bat/B Mitzvah offers a ritual becoming into adulthood. The chuppah (wedding canopy) symbolizes a new home for a couple who become a family by undergoing the various rituals of kiddushin (marriage). And the mikveh (ritual bath) functions as a technology of ritual cleansing—required by Jewish law of women after menstruation. Dunk under the water, 1, 2, 3, say the blessing, and the impure female body becomes pure again.

Theorists of ritual have long taught us that rituals transfer us from one state of being to another. They work when they are believed to have this technological ability, when they are recognized by a community as having the power to make something become new. New is exciting: a new couple, a new baby, a new adult, a newly clean female body, full of potential.

There are comparably few rituals to mark unbecoming. Religious ritual technology seems to look for transformation toward rather than transformation away. And yet unbecoming is often involved in some of life's most important transition points, especially for women. Menopause: unbecoming fertile. Divorce: unbecoming married. Childbirth: unbecoming pregnant. While there are plenty of rituals to celebrate a new baby, I've yet to find one that quite captured the acute sense of joy and loss that occurred when my babies were born and I unbecame pregnant, no longer able to feel their every move, protect them completely, or have them all to myself.

To unbecome is not associated with things that are new and exciting. To unbecome is to let go of the constant march toward becoming something new.

But life is both becoming and unbecoming, and feminist scholars of religion have taught me that unbecoming is worthy of ritual too. These rituals rarely take place in the big public places of sanctity and celebration. But they are there, if you look for them, in the spaces where unbecoming matters, and among the people to whom it matters.

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Diana Al-Hadid, *Mother in the Middle*, 2023.
Photography by Charlie Rubin. Courtesy the artist
and Kasmin Gallery, New York



Diana Al-Hadid, *Untitled (Mother Series)*, 2023.
Photography by Charlie Rubin. Courtesy the artist
and Kasmin Gallery, New York

Diana Al-Hadid, *Untitled*, 2014–21. Courtesy
the artist and Kasmin Gallery, New York



Acknowledgments

This celebration of Diana Al-Hadid's creative practice would not be possible without the generosity and support of the many communities and collaborators who help the museum achieve its goals and vision.

First and foremost, the museum expresses its deepest gratitude to Diana Al-Hadid for partnering with us on this project and sharing her work. This exhibition is made possible through support from the Eli and Edythe Broad Endowed Exhibitions Fund. Support for the accompanying publication *Diana Al-Hadid: unbecoming*, published by Kasmin Gallery in September 2025 and distributed by Distributed Art Publishers, is made possible by Kasmin Gallery, Lisa Applebaum, and April Clobes.

We would also like to thank: Katelyn Davis and Nathaniel Edgar at Al-Hadid Studio; Dieu Donné, including Eliana Bleichman, John Shorb, and Serena Trizzino; Jaynelle C. Hazard and the Georgetown University Art Galleries; Katherine Delony and Adam Green at the Green Family Art Foundation, Dallas, Texas; the team at Kasmin Gallery—Jason Drill, Eric Gleason, Emma Moore, Michal Patchefsky, Charlie Rubin, and Molly Taylor; and Morten Viskum.

Our gratitude also extends to the many collaborators on campus who supported the research for this project, facilitated its development, and helped us realize the exhibition and its programs: the Diana Al-Hadid Advisory Committee, including Lorelei d'Andriole, Soma Chaudhuri, Jon Frey, and Silvia Tita; for their contributions to this brochure, Samira Fathi, Lily Woodruff, and Laura Yares; MSU Department of Art, Art History, and Design Chairperson Robert McCann; Interim Provost Thomas Jeitschko; and Vice Provost for University Arts and Collections Judith Stoddart.

Finally, our utmost gratitude extends to the museum's many members and audiences, whose ongoing support makes our work possible.

Cover: Diana Al-Hadid, *Blue Medusa*, 2023. Photography by Charlie Rubin. Image courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery, New York

unbecoming is organized by the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University and curated by Dr. Rachel Winter, Assistant Curator, with support from Laine Lord, former Curatorial Research Assistant. Support for this exhibition is provided by the Eli and Edythe Broad Endowed Exhibitions Fund. Support for the accompanying publication *Diana Al-Hadid: unbecoming* is made possible by Kasmin Gallery, Lisa Applebaum, and April Clobes. The museum also extends a special thanks to Kasmin Gallery, New York, and Dieu Donné.

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The Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University (MSU Broad Art Museum) connects people with art through experiences that inspire curiosity and inquiry. Presenting exhibitions and programs that engage diverse communities around issues of local relevance and global significance, the MSU Broad Art Museum advances the university values of quality, inclusion, and connectivity. Opened on November 10, 2012, the museum was designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Zaha Hadid and named in honor of Eli and Edythe Broad, longtime supporters of the university who provided the lead gift.



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Jun. 7-Dec. 14, 2025

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