

**Michelle Nikou**

**2004**

**by Ken Bolton**

I am seeing a number of new Michelle Nikou works for the first time. They have been lined up arbitrarily, and about a metre apart near the foot of a stretch of well-lit gallery wall, three or four of them—and to the right are two more, on plinths, neighbouring each other, close up to the wall. One (*Over*), a phallic, 'bananary-shaped' object, stands on its plinth, aided by a kind of crutch that is, in fact, part of the sculpture. The other, a metre-long plank of metal, leans against the wall, base on its plinth. There are other objects, too, but these are what I note first. On the metre-length of metal there seems to bubble at one spot a kind of fungal growth.

At floor level, closest to the plinth, is an elongated, undulant curve—like a cartoon depiction of a sea serpent, but short. Just one hump. Like all the others it is cast in metal. And, while the shape can register as cheerful movement, it is raised off the ground by two tiny stands, over which, in fact, it seems draped. So the 'movement' quoted is frozen, almost as if its up-and-down, roller-coaster silhouette is the result of droop in casting or in cooling off. The stands—as is usual with many of Nikou's pieces—are the still-attached results of the casting process. Like launch-pad scaffolding or umbilical cord: it would be usual to take these off. They are called 'runners' or, sometimes, 'sprus' and Nikou regularly leaves them attached. This work, I find out later, is called *Languish*.

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The body of *Languish* is smeared, to irregular, greyish effect, with white paint. A brush, we can feel, might have been cleaned on it. The

spru 'legs' or runners remain dark. This treatment of the surface lends the whole an air of accident, of the object's being a purely contingent survivor, a chancer, a happy fact: modest, cheerful, a little abashed? It doesn't look like Art, like a statement, something declarative. Maybe it is something hummed, as it makes its way jauntily along the foot of the wall—or, alternately, it is seen as stranded, propped, motionless, a discard.

Next in line is a capital letter 'A'. It stands on a diminutive metal fez—one of these same base-cup runners—on its right leg. The base is fluted. 'A's other, 'leading' foot kicks out on the left into space.

Beside 'A' is what looks to me like a platform-style sandal, something ancient—from Herculaneum, or classical Rome—but others more in the know are referring to it as 'the toast-rack'. The loops of thonging I thought might serve to bind foot to sole evidently divide absent pieces of bread. The platform is raised—not on a heel and a ridge under the ball of the foot, but on the same 'runners' or 'sprus' from which the hot metal has been cast or poured. *Rack* is its given name. Interestingly the curves have reminded others of barbeque ribs.

As a line these objects appear graphic, rococo, gaily witty shapes against the white wall and concrete floor. This is an aspect of Nikou's work not available via photographs of individual pieces, an impression of variousness and of family resemblance that is not just a product of, say, working in series. It makes clear their formal appeal and the degree to which they come of involvement with materials and with shapes and volumes at least as much as from pursuit of any cerebral theme.

Each piece in this sequence has strong graphic presence as shape or silhouette. The 'traditional' material—cast and treated bronze metal—might almost seem a reference to historical sculpture. Their energy and gaiety suggest to me the between-the-wars period of modernist sculpture, when objects were typically of the small to medium size that suited the commercial galleries of the time—a retreat from public,

monumental sculpture and also from large allegorical meanings and sentiments. Also a time when painting (Cubism, Matisse) was in the driving seat and sculpture was confined to a more decorative role: think of Archipenko, Lipchitz, Laurens, Brancusi.

Scale is an important and telling issue in Nikou's work. The scale is small. To a degree it says something about the artist's development. To another it is both an aspect of her themes and a formal strategy. It is not usual practice among contemporary sculptors to work at this size. Larger works are the norm, and in fact installation has been the realm of ambitious sculptural work for some time.

For the classic Minimalists of the 60s and early 70s a work should aim to be near to, but not more (or too much less) than human height. This applied to their early cubes and boxes particularly. It gave the work, as intended, an existentially confronting presence of equality with the human—not towering above the viewer, not too easily held within his or her view. The work should confront, but not overwhelm. Exceptions are easy enough to find of course, but I refer to the boxes and cubes of Robert Morris, or Serra's *One-Ton Prop*, for example.

If there is a handy rule of thumb for Nikou's pieces it might be that they should be perceived as smaller than 'Art' yet bigger than inconsiderable. Thematically, this will be seen to relate to their opposition to reigning discourses and to hierarchies of size (where size is taken to equal importance). Their themes are often a counter-discourse to that of humanism, the patriarchal, and to the universalist and idealizing editorial. Formally, this relates to the artist's close involvement with the objects as material, form and shape and serves to draw the viewer closer to these often 'homeless' objects. It makes for an engagement and intimacy outside the rhetorical space normatively constituted by viewer and art, in which the viewer (any viewer) is constituted—and to a degree responds—as a Kantian sovereign individual (stripped of particularity) who observes a proposition-making condensation of form and meaning. A Nikou piece, typically, having gained any sovereign individual's attention, begins to

make its appeal to that person's quite specific (at least non-rhetorical) curiosity. Correspondingly, their natural viewing distance, it could be argued, is the intimate one of an arm's length or less—within reach of our hands.

As it happened, on this day the placement of the works was perfunctory and purely arbitrary: they had been quickly carried (not all by the artist) from another room and placed for simple ease of viewing and discussion.

In any case, their placement is never 'established', especially not so as to obviate closer scrutiny. The metre-length plank, for example, in the course of discussion, is moved to the floor, then replaced on the plinth and, finally, set lying flat. Other works are sometimes wall-mounted, then seen later standing up, on the same base that had formerly attached to the wall. The works mostly do not aim at enhanced authority or coherence thru their orientation to space. (So much for modernism.) They hanker after the status of 'things' more than to be distinctly or unequivocally 'art'. And as you home in on any one of them you find yourself getting 'curiouser and curiouser'. The furze of imperfections that clump together at one point along the metre-length piece, for example, seems basically to function as just that, as an interruption to, or vitiating of, the simple shape's perfection and coherence, an aberration. We must move closer.

The attached 'feeders'—the sprus or runners—of the casting process have a related effect. The runner remains attached. It cripples, handicaps each item with a generic imperfection. This makes them 'family'. It also states 'representation', 'art', facsimile — a falseness, even—so that the objects are in some ways ghosts of their originals.

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*Over*, the object that I have been calling 'phallic', reminds me, for that reason, of an early, startling Giacometti piece, *Woman With Her Throat Cut* (1932) and, in a more obvious way, another, also of the

early 1930s, Giacometti's *Nasty Object*. This latter is a cruel phallus with a thorn-like spike in the end, while the scene-of-violence piece is a schematic representation of a female figure lying spreadeagled, partially skeletal, partially diagrammatic. It is shocking because it is subject matter so rarely represented outside the histrionic history painting of the Baroque and Romantic periods and because Giacometti's piece comes with none of their edifying scaffolding. I am reminded of Alberto Giacometti for a number of reasons: his *Nasty Object* has the perfunctory, direct quality Nikou's work employs. It is the way forms are openly examined and found interesting—for the way they lie, fold, find their place—that reminds of *Woman With Her Throat Cut*. Finally, the finish and small scale of many of his classic works—the thin, etiolated, elongated figures—catch the light similarly, and have an initial graphic register that resembles that of many Nikou pieces—and they similarly draw you closer, reel the viewer in, to a close encounter with their material presence.

Nikou's *Over* is limply propped up, a gourd splitting open, ripe, leaning upon its prop, like an old roué on his cane. So the cane seems a comic masculine register in keeping with the joke on vulnerable male sexuality. Closer up, the form seems less phallic and more akin to an ear of corn or a banana, some pod about to burst or deliquesce: the visual conundrum is the softness and near fluidity of the original and the solidity we know it has as a cast object. The surfaces operate illusionistically to mimic the organic. *Over* is bronze—and my reading of it is 'wrong'—or it recedes at any rate, becoming a supportable reading or meaning, but not authoritative, not an absolute and sure identification—because the closer view reveals the work to be one of Nikou's familiar draft-stopper snakes, cast as usual in bronze but bent in the middle and doubled back upon itself: an examination of the shape when treated this way

The plastered and painted surface treatments given Nikou's works are often much tested and mulled over. Casual, brushy, the grey whitewashing the serpentine *Languish* has been subjected to has a

number of effects. It counters the piece's formal autonomy. Rather than appearing as a 3-D object with an organic or purposive-seeming shape and mass, a closer view has us attend to its surface, a surface broken into bits—interesting in their own right (as passages) and detracting from a view of the object as whole and coherent. The distressed, brushed, stained surface acts also as a commentary on the object, as inflection added to it. In both ways what would be the piece's traditional formal coherence or integrity is lessened, even 'insulted', rendered passive. This effect of the painterly surface would be anathema to traditional modernism and to Minimalism alike. As would be the anthropomorphising readings the work seems happy to invite.

Within teaching institutions stylistically reductivist practices are now normative, an orthodoxy derived from Minimal Art, that art schools both articulate as something of a basic grammar and encourage students to subvert or act against. The models for this anti-form reaction date almost from the first days of Minimalism itself: Eva Hesse (1936 — 1970)'s reaction against the movement's main manner in the 1960s, Louise Bourgeois (b. 1911)'s re-emergence in the 1970s and 80s, and art povera, the contemporaneous 60s movement and sensibility emanating from Italy. Their effects have been reinforced by their subsequent revivals and reconstructions as punkish, as 'Bad' art, as grunge, the abject etc. Michelle Nikou's work seems to stand in some proximate relation to both these lexicons or syntaxes of contemporary work, though not at all programmatically. Nikou regularly features the properties of the material in classic enough Minimalist way—note the poured metal, the drooping shapes that have obviously formed as the material hardened. The retention of the mechanisms through which the metal was poured, usually to double as stands for the piece, has something of both Modernism's and Minimalism's desideratum of 'truth to materials' and to the Minimalist and Conceptualist liking for making evident 'process'. But it tells, as well, against formal coherence, and these runners can read as excrescence, making Nikou's practice more compatible with the informal trends derived from such as Hesse, art povera, and grunge-

art assemblage.

The works often exhibit a silhouette that stands in no relation much to the work as closely experienced physical object. The initial appearance might be almost rococo. Take for example the curlicue shapes of the toast-rack/sandal. Or the cheerful vitalism with which the letter 'A' puts its best foot forward, kicking airily to the left while the work is weighted and stabilized by the minuscule plinth on which it is balanced. Some of Nikou's works from this period have a Parisian modernist 20s/30s poise. It is a curious jumping between eras and pleasurably chameleon.

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Nikou has cast a number of small boxy shapes. They catch the eye as disconcerting and tantalisingly un-art-like. Too small to be Minimalist homages to the cube, not so small as to signal 'craft object', they are also strangely familiar. These are bronze-cast tissue boxes, we realize, their surfaces roughened with residually attached plaster, irregularly blackened and discoloured.

Their detached lids—oval lozenge shapes—are wall-mounted and are much harder to recognize: the penny drops only when we see the nearby boxes, minus their lids. We hardly see the popped-out lids in real life. Detached from the boxes that they seal, they are normally disposed of. Nikou presents them in a constellation (cast in lead)—spent shells, or a brave or humiliating, or merely factual, tally. In a sense the lids' presence recalls the boxes: full volumes, hollowed, possessing a degree of mystery, soliciting use—in every way the ghosted opposites of the small oval lids pressed and removed from the receptacles—but evoking them, like smoke implying fire. It is partly that our hands know them so well. We've opened so many die-cut packages and contemplation of these lids that we normally give no thought to recalls this haptic knowledge, makes it press for some satisfaction now as we view.

Nikou's boxes alert us to an interest that boxes never have, except perhaps for children. As sculptural object the size and shape and hollowness of each box is interesting, intriguing, curious. Cast as they are, their weight and solidity is sensed, read from their appearance: the particular darkness and mystery of their volume can be gauged. It tempts us to handle the object, verifying what we know intuitively. We tend not to do this with art objects and this playful allure of mystery remains.

For such small objects they have a strange aura (which, amusingly, they share with Robert Morris's boxes)—it is gravitas. The cast tissue boxes seem generic, somehow sourced to an 'idea' (the platonic, original, ideal tissue box). The 'thingness' they thus isolate seems, on some register, a source of dignity—and it lends this to these objects' metonymical sadnesses, griefs. (I am taking the boxes to refer to a past of suffering: each box a measure of sadness, grief, consolation—or a reproach, record, reminder, silent witness. Unnervingly, we realize, they may indicate *futures*.)

The surfaces of these boxes present a range of beautiful tones, like fire-damaged factory sites, corrugated tin burned and blistered, charred and weathered. Here surface becomes an expressive vehicle. More correctly, the surfaces allow and lend expressive form to any investment we find we make. The industrial finish is also a kind of joke or sarcasm about the boxes—and our feelings about them—because it is a brutalist industrial finish, its hardness the opposite of the softness any real tissue box promises.

Other tissue boxes are covered in cloth materials that render them 'homely' yet 'dressed'. The materials and patterns suggest bedroom and comfort. These are old-fashioned blanket patterns (patterns humorously at odds with their industrial, mass-produced, modular shape), a different invisibility from the mass-produced products' usual pale, 70s/80s, floral patterns.

Such casting and selection of ordinary objects is hardly

unprecedented. A number of oeuvres and artists' names could be cited—and specific well-know works. None seem quite the same as Michelle Nikou's various series of artworks. Obviously works of the 60s and later have constituted 'permission' for this direction, if they have not constituted actual influence. One naturally thinks of the soft toilet, soft fans, the giant lipsticks of Claes Oldenburg, of Jasper Johns' cast beer cans, of George Segal, perhaps Ed Kienholz. These are names associated with Pop and 'Neo-Dada'. The Minimalists had a kindred fascination with and attention to the droop and heft of various materials (as already remarked). Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois can be cited as fellow-travelling with Nikou on the same broad aesthetic enterprise. There is the ghostliness of Gober's cast limbs. We might think of Rachel Whitread's castings—similarly domestic, more uniformly funereal. Nearer to home in Australia there have been kindred but not identical bodies of work: Louise Haselton's work would sit well with Nikou's, though it pursues something else—similarly the hand-thrown works of Gerry Wedd or works by Olive Bishop.

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An early group of works by Nikou is useful to consider. They were shown at Adelaide's Greenaway Gallery in the early 1990s—three or four small bed-frames with springs and mattress. These were less than a foot long, made of metal, wire, and cloth and straw. They were immediately alarming, like crime scenes, seeming to speak of domestic arrangements predicated on violence, on suffering—at the very least some kind of grim bartering and stand-off. They were stark and hallucinatory. Their material—all plainly junk, detritus, 'distressed', make-shift—caught the light, offered itself to it, drank it up, every gleam and glint and contrast sordidly telling.

To many this would have seemed a promising vein of work broached. It would have played to a ready enough reception. It was undeniably

powerful. Yet it has not been followed up with more of its kind. It is instructive to look at this work's differences from the more abiding procedures Nikou has developed. And if the ongoing work is thought reticent in comparison, the many continuities that are shared shed light on the success of the much more subtle work of the last decade.

The bed pieces help us name the effects and manner—and note the finer calculation and control—of the works Nikou has made since. There are obvious similarities. The beds speak of nightmares, night-sweats, 'dirty linen'. Nikou's work regularly treats things both common and personal, and often the tragic, shameful, or otherwise negative. Her work often has a quasi-verbal existence—translating quickly to old saws or to a phrase of folk wisdom ('you've made your bed / now you've got to lie in it'), or to almost buried metaphors (like 'dirty linen'), which the work might be said to literalize. Commonplace materials, shapes and items are often employed, as here: beds, metal, ticking cloth, straw. The work is typically small and not grandly framed as major statement.

Yet, triumphantly, the current work, while it shares these properties, makes none of these moves in the same way. The dramatic content the beds might be said to signal is too much a summative headline: the bed functions as synecdoche for a whole, too well-acknowledged area of discourse and for our presumed responses to it.

The meanings are too many and too easily called up, too easily nominated as a group, as related. Offered so, the meanings are not embedded in the material presence of the it as 'sign', as symbol.

Far more assured, Nikou's newer works do not quote full, extended, pre-existing arguments. Instead they surreptitiously amplify the building blocks of a thesis or feeling, an animus: they give rise to, or quietly compel, an exploratory line of thought or intuition..

The verbal quality of later Nikou pieces is at a more micro, less amplified level: typically, bits of instinctual, or moody, verbal response.

This gives us pleurably empathetic work to do. (By contrast, the beds, the dolls, and some other early works allowed quick translation, and immediately our work was done.) Other works concurrent with these early pieces foreshadowed later developments: 'quiet' beside the beds, they were intriguing and informally shaped, amorphous almost, and made of felt and other 'lowly' materials.

Nikou has continued with commonplace, ordinary and, usually, domestic materials and objects. And her work tends still to be small in size. The beds were large things miniaturized. Now Nikou works with small things done to full scale: not symbols, but literal 'things'.

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Nikou's work has begun to gain particular attention since the mid nineties. Since 1998 the artist has exhibited solo in Adelaide at Greenaway Galleries and in Sydney with Darren Knight on a more or less alternating basis.

Asked about the art/craft distinction, Nikou's response is very interesting.

The distinction would have it that, basically, art is to do with exploratory, iconoclastic, mould-breaking discovery and 'idea'—that it is conceptual, or conceptually driven. Craft, by contrast, is about the level of (traditional, conventional) skill involved, in delivering a known, predictable product: the production of beautiful bowls for example. Duchamp or Pollock might be taken, by way of contrast, to represent Artists—Pollock inventing a new style that changes the look of painting so much that it is initially unacceptable and not even recognized as serious painting. A Duchamp overthrows concepts of artmaking still more radically. (A problem with this heroic, avant-gardist conception of art, for most artists, should be the realization that they will inevitably not, themselves, fit the bill: most will be producing artworks that resemble other artworks almost exactly to the same degree as bowls conform to the notion 'bowl'.) Artists are often happy to bask in the

light of the concept 'Art'. Craftspeople and designers often find the implied hierarchy annoying—and many make things they feel are as inventive and 'conceptual' as most art-works, but which are also better made.

Nikou joins a number of artists whose work confounds the distinction between art & craft, one way or another, while operating distinctly under the notion Art. Based in Adelaide, Fiona Hall and Hossein Valamanesh are two such. Hall has moved from photography to staged, large-format photographs of tableaux she manufactured herself, thence to objects that utilize and further develop the same extraordinary skills she has acquired in the earlier phases of her career. These works are conceptual, yet also delight because of their hybrid and inspired mix of technique and vision. Valamanesh makes sculpture, installations and wall pieces. Typically his work makes great play with earthen textures and colours, barks, leaves, sand. Its conceptual deployment means that it treats important themes (of displacement, identity, cultural shift) that lift it well above the charm of mere good taste. Michelle Nikou might be yet another—though her link with craft is more tenuous: merely that her early training was in craft media rather than, say, in painting or sculpture as such.

Asked if she 'cared' about the Art/Craft distinction Nikou replied, calmly enough but with some underlining, "I don't care at all, quite aggressively." They are not categories that interest her. Nikou's current work presents itself as standing between both categories, unwilling—and, indeed, unconcerned—to invoke the protection of either. Where it strays too far to one or other side then that—it can seem this is the implication—is because the artist won't flatter either category or its assumptions with recognition. Probably it is that Nikou has spent many years freeing her mind of the strictures enfencing both areas of practice in an attempt to operate freely between and beyond them.

Michelle Nikou (born in Adelaide in 1967) grew up in small-town country South Australia—in Yankalilla, on the Fleurieu Peninsula. She

gained a Bachelor of Arts in 1989 from the University of South Australia (at that time the South Australian Art School) and a Graduate Diploma in Visual Arts from the same institution in 1990. She has done more study since. These were interesting times in terms both of teaching staff and the young artists then going through the system. Nikou steered her own course, taking time to find direction and dissatisfied with most of her own early work. She was wary of the art scene's fiats and anathemas as to the acceptable, the 'in', the desired styles and themes. She was, in her own words, "stubborn against Art ... not wanting to get caught up in style, but focus on content and what that was doing for me."

Grants allowed travel to Sydney and to undertake a residency at the Artspace studio in the Gunnery complex. Here Nikou made tentative connection with galleries and collectors and with some other artists. Though not immediately productive in terms of amounts of work produced, the Sydney period would seem to have been for her a forcing ground—a period of concentration and isolation and of attitudes coming into focus.

Since the late 90s Nikou's work has gained a growing critical audience that follows her work attentively, alert to developments and changes..

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Nikou's growing body of work strikes various kinds of balance and distance, emotionally, with its content or themes, and with the issue of expression. Perhaps the early work had wanted to mean too much—and to *declare* feeling? The artist's course since has been to move unconcernedly between autobiographically derived work and the more casually conceived—and not to bother to signal which is which. This suggests that—where they are importantly personal—the work reifies and examines (ironically, coolly, playfully, amusedly, dispassionately) the life-issues represented. The work is not measured by the artist as communication but as objects that might provoke the viewer into seeing from an interesting and unguarded perspective. Often one's

involvement with the material presence of the work serves to act as a baffle, slowing our too eager reading of the content or too hasty arrival at its identification.

The works Nikou makes typically stem from a world 'out of sight' or below the threshold of attention and commentary. Alternatively, they voice the unspoken counter-commentary that accompanies our lives, that is shared as comic recognition of the truth, of the real in everyday life—in relationships, in patterns of emotional response to living. "*Don't pass the ball to me,*" says one work.

Almost a distinct subset within Nikou's work are the pieces made of, and featuring, letters. These utilize similar techniques of manufacture. Their construction is more intricate. It is also clunkily deliberate—and almost forgetful, it seems, of the word chosen: the letters of a word are fitted together, often in ways that reduce instant legibility, ignoring it or forgetting it as a consideration.

Having the circumference of a small dinner plate, *Decided* presents a visually complex confusion (even a 'complicated' confusion, the less flattering near synonym) of spread limbs and radial web. It can be mounted on either a wall or a horizontal surface. *Decided* produces some of the same alarm and recognition as a huntsman spider, a graphic shape and silhouette. Its irregularly finger-sculpted strips read as line—as radiating lines of force, or as circular or spiral web. The lines are stark against any pale-coloured wall. But, cast in a darkened bronze, their irregular surfaces catch the light, bring us closer and slow the eye. We may decide to establish an order for the letters, a sequence that will make them a word. Or we may not. It is certainly not instantly legible. The title helps of course, but then the titles are almost always forced on Nikou by the needs of the gallery, the dealer, the catalogue. They are tags to distinguish one object from another—all of them, in principle, untitled. They often remain *Untitled* where more descriptive naming would be positively harmful or limiting.

Some of the word pieces suggest states, like *Decided*. Others are

injunctions (like *Choose*), or dilemmas.

*Half Of Everything*, the necklace of half-eaten biscuits, is also part of a Nikou family of objects. This would include the potato necklaces, the spoons with gunk on them (remains of food, perhaps chewed, or perhaps the residues of cooking), the tissue-box lids, the boxes themselves. This is the class we create if we look to records of ritual or of repeated, necessary consumption: life measured in coffee spoons, grief measured in tissue boxes, comfort or celebration or relaxation measured in biscuits.

The necklaces are obviously a craft 'form'. They are probably never going to be worn, though who's to say? Their irregularity removes them from the slickness of current design—yet it is not an attempt to achieve the hand-crafted look as a desired end. It does, again, slow the eye and bring us close to the object as physical, material, made thing—but also close to the experience, the meaning, of real biscuits. The meaning of biscuits? It brings us to a recall or recognition of individual biscuits as solace, or small pleasure—a recognition from experience, not a recognition of 'sign' or symbol. This latter reading we will have passed through earlier: it is not irrelevant at all, but were the work to remain at that level it would be mildly kitsch joke only. These objects call up something like a somatic memory, of comforting ingestion.

'I'm with him now' are the words upon a toilet roll cover. This is the delimiting tyranny of any shared life—comic and tragic at the same time—and it is realism. It has the finality of a sentence, a verdict accepted, taken into the soul. And it reminds of melodramatic statements of status achieved or, irrevocably, altered: 'Reader, I married him' is the most famous in this line—and they are typically from women's literature, the women's film, or popular novel, even Mills and Boon. That the sentence is appliquéd on a toilet-roll cover is masterly: so domestic, so unexciting and unglamorous, so every day. Dutiful—and very much of the 'woman's sphere', at least as traditionally assigned. Is it humiliating, mere realism, or despair? Is it

the thought behind the public face that must be put on things? Nikou's detachment, the cool of her irony, is deadly and hilarious.

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The small scale Nikou uses is that of objects continuous with our space, the space we notionally inhabit—with no protective aura of the sort that might attach to Art: often the pieces can be held between finger and thumb. Still more often, the work will clearly have been pressed between the *artist's* finger and thumb before it was cast—moulded, its matter pressed, extended, reduced and stretched out, its pieces thinned, joined together.

It is often the scale of a world smaller than ours, other than ours, not ordered by ours, which might bite, be toxic, hostile, resistant, counter to ours. (It is never the world of the gallery.)

The facture's clunkiness avoids reference to up-to-date contemporary Design and its call for attention—with its look both of inviting luxury and of fetishized, untouchable, unattainable perfection. (In this last respect, of course, designed luxury objects lose their appeal upon being purchased.) Nikou's oeuvre courts the look of neglect, the overlooked, the overlooked-but-surviving.

It is a characteristic that the objects—or their Platonic originals—are never from the world of luxury but from that of ordinary life. Specifically, not the comfortably-off: breeze-snakes indicate bad design and draughts; the biscuits are always cheap; tissues are in fact ubiquitous, but democratic, cheap; as are the potatoes and spoons. Many are made of distinctly ordinary, unremarkable materials: the lint objects, the soft grey tapestry.

It may be that part of their function, or the impetus that gave rise to these objects' selection, is commemorative—that the works aim to

remind and to remember.

Equally we might see them as *about* memory and its half-life. Are they about loss, the pastness of experience? (In a sense these objects are not the originals. They displace them as much as they recall them. Perhaps they replace them with something much firmer, more visually intense. Even so, the original biscuit, the original tissue-box is gone.) One of Nikou's works is the outline, or stain, of some cherries or seedpods on a square of material. The cast seeds/berries are nearby. Stain, cast, and outline seem to point to an absence. This same relation might be a factor behind many of Nikou's pieces already discussed.

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Typically of small size, Michelle Nikou's productions speak *sotto voce*, unemphatically. They have a 'refusnik' aspect: a refusal of many of the rhetorical supports or framework(s) of High Art, of Renaissance humanism, of the Enlightenment inheritance. Formally the works come without the 'prologemena effect', a presentation that introduces the work traditionally, with visual eclat and fanfare. While no one would suggest Nikou's work is entirely *sui generis*, or outside art, it is in no way concerned to claim lineage with recent or past Great Art—neither by express affinity, by quotation, reference, or resemblance. Rather, the work—piece by piece—acts to sever itself from links, from association with the well-armed and suavely briefed discourse of 'the major artwork'.

Nikou's work constitutes a refusal of master narratives, of narratives that rest upon too many assumptions. It is literalist/existentialist in manner—and it quotes (rather than speaks in its own voice) only fragments of discourse. These fragments are of the quotidian discourse of lives lived below the level of the Master Narrative, counter to it, oblivious of it, cynical toward it. Or they are fragments of emotional response—(quoted)—or maxims, or captions. They are

quoted as more real than the Master Narratives, are quoted ironically, quoted sarcastically, as abject and inadequate, but irrefutable.

Many pieces are calibrations. They calibrate marks, milestones that might chart and measure a life—in particular, but not always exclusively, a female life—*I'm with him now (Untitled [Love has pitched his mansion...])*, for example, or the tissue boxes, the curtain rings. There is a rosary of necklace biscuits, another of potato shapes, or of chews (like sleeps, like meals). Necklaces are chains of course. It is possible to see much of Michelle Nikou's work as series, links in a chain—as tellers of time, markers of stages, of duration and repetition—and as prayers, rituals (viz the masticated ingestions on spoons, or linked as a necklace).

These objects sometimes seem to interrogate us, ask after the fun that was afforded—by the contents of the opened box, by the occasion (the festive, party cake-moulds). Question asked, they stand as melancholy or dispassionate memory.

The three stainless steel *Patty Pans* capture the festivity, excitement, the promise of parties, children's parties in particular. Their fluted sides hold the light, flickering, suggesting the tizzy fussiness of the event and of the cakes' manufacture. They are intricate, delicate, small, quickly consumed. Are they melancholy? They are moulds *of* moulds, too, which is part of the joke.

Again, Nikou's are objects with which we have a strong association—from use, consumption, disposal. This is very much 'extra-aesthetic' knowledge. In many instances it makes the ordinary (this ordinary knowledge) suddenly valuable (as with the cup cake moulds, or the spoons), or it merely makes their forms available to an aesthetic knowledge or appreciation—as, for instance, with the long bronze carpet-snake. Suddenly it is beautiful, its detail holds our attention, gains an appraisal even as it speaks of its sentence of long years lying on floors.

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Nikou's work mounts distrust of the bland and grandiloquent lie, asserting the intimate but ignored, unknown, or unregistered—from domestic life, from unremarked interstices in time or in spaces. The work can be seen as dealing in the Uncanny, the abject. Yes, but the reality is more entertaining. Their intense here-and-now actuality also has the effect of denying 'idea'—and we are left with physical presence, facticity, objectness. On occasion almost any of Nikou's works, trickily, ingeniously, can seem to be not identical with themselves but, in each case, to be two works. It can be discomfitting, or jokey. Do these doubled modes of being deny each other, live with each other, or more or less endlessly supplant each other? Over time the rhythm of this exchange will slow, or settle, and start again.

The works are witty and their wit is chiefly in their (being acts of) selection—and in their irony (rueful, bitter, self-communing), or in their sympathy or simple alertness to emotional states.

Strangely they combine muteness with almost position-paper summative responses—attitudinal, diagnostic, emblazoned responses. In tune with this 'almost-muteness' is their scale: liminal/liminary, or just larger. Large enough to nag. Large enough to snag attention. Or the work gets under our guard and is suddenly engrossing, interesting and joyful, life-giving—as shape, as play. Witness the series of letters spelling the word 'hair'. They make a chorus line of small, capricious, dancing shapes, innocent yet fascinating partly because of taboos about cut hair, nail pairings and the like. The work lifts the taboo rather than breaking it.

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