

## Fill Me Up

*Your feet sink into the soft carpet as you tread over the image of the open mouth. But then you slip. You feel the rasp of wet tongue.*

A photograph of a mouth becomes a wool rug; a chocolate bar becomes a bronze ingot. Michelle Nikou's alchemical transformations often turn around hunger and sustenance. She uses a wide range of everyday materials but seems especially drawn to objects like cups and plates, buckets and shoes—to vessels. Many of her works feel like they could be filled and emptied again; like Nikou has captured them at one point in a cycle. *Vacancy*, a work she made in 2014, was a series of cast lead buckets lit with neon letters. The lights were alluring, like a motel sign glowing in the dark, but they also blared with loneliness.

Nikou's language is allusive and poetic. She has a knack for drawing out the tensions and metaphors bedded in her materials. Her latest body of work, *In Vivo*, includes two untitled faces that extend from earlier drawings and prints. This time, she's chosen to make them in bronze and cast them in two panels. Split personalities. Mirror images. They're really gestures at faces. Two circles for eyes; a line for the mouth. Their expressions are empty enough to hold whatever you might want to project but they're also obdurate and unyielding.

*The cup is heavy. Your shoulder sinks as you lift it down from the wall. Your fingers close tight—tighter even than the coils of a snake.*

Nikou has been casting lead and bronze since the 1990s. Last year, she also began working with a new medium, producing a wool rug as part of a group of works for the major cross-institutional exhibition *The National*. The rug was pale grey with a monochromatic image of a bath plug. She'd worked with simple household plugs before, casting them in concrete, paired like little clams. The new medium unlocked very different associations. There was a comedic edge to it, and not just in the thought of a grand Méret Oppenheim-style bathtub. Plugs are temporary measures, after all. Holding devices. What else do you do with them but pull them out?

She has made two new rugs for *In Vivo*. The first, *Singing the chorus* (2022), has side-by-side images of open mouths. The throats are black pits. The tongues are wide. Tastebuds ripple in the pile. The second, *The world is flat (fucking me down)* (2021), is a dun, muddy brown with a cluster of green circles. It suggests crops, and the centre-pivot irrigation used in

industrial food production. Beside it, Nikou has placed a pair of worn shoes, cast in bronze. You might wonder who they belong to, but part of you is already striding over this strange landscape, the mud squelching between your toes.

Nikou's works often fire like this, in the dissonances between our past experiences of everyday objects—rugs, cups—and what she's done to them. She once made a series of spoons, but instead of the smooth metal we're used to putting in our mouths, hers were cast in lead with lumps of what looked like chewed food stuck to them. Her works can be blunt, impolite even. They make you suck your teeth, or curl your toes.

*In Vivo* means 'within the body'. Several of the works in the exhibition question what we're putting into ourselves, including a small cup cast in lead. To drink from it would be to poison yourself. A snake is coiled around the base, as if in warning. Nikou has titled it *In Vitro*, or 'within the glass'. A joke, of course, but not just that.

*The lead weight sinks through your body. It settles low in your pelvis; a heavy ache like your periods are coming in, or afterpains. You resist the thought. Too personal.*

*But you can't drop it now, it's inside you.*

Sometimes, Nikou seems to be giving shape to physical feelings and psychological states, much like Louise Bourgeois. At other times, she is asking very literal questions about how we keep ourselves going. For *Act exactly as before* (2022) she photographed the repaired sole of a shoe. It's almost archaeological. When I get home from the gallery, I find myself making clumsy lists and mindmaps. *Protection, I write. Effort, repetition, wear, exhaustion.* And then, *walk a mile in my shoes.*

Worn shoes are the kind of objects Nikou is drawn to. They're things that most of us would disregard as valueless or banal but she takes them up and studies them with a tender and quizzical eye. She's attentive to their formal qualities as materials but seems most interested in the associations, memories and histories within them—in testing where they fit in the world. She thinks with her hands, as the saying goes, and her process involves trial and error, chance and patience.

Nikou doesn't want to direct how her works are understood. She says very little, preferring that viewers trust their own instincts. When critics ask about her practice she often answers with quotes from other artists, poets and writers. The invitation for *In Vivo* is sent out with a quote from Agnes Martin's notes for *On the Perfection Underlying Life*, a lecture she gave in 1973 about artistic surrender and the need to make art. "There is no way out," Martin

said. “You may as well go ahead with as little resistance as possible—and eat everything on your plate.”

One of the works in *In Vivo* is indeed a plate. There is also a bronze of the underside of a plate, *As if nothing* (2022), and a photograph, *Blueblack* (2022), with the plate blown up to many times its original size. The photographic paper is velvety. The black is as dark as the night sky. The imperfections in the glaze look more like clouds of cosmic dust, or blooms in a petri dish. Only at the very edge of the circle is there a lip to get your fingers round.

Another work, *Space Sailor* (2021), is a rumpled jacket, pinned to the floor by small bronze bars like scattered bullion. Treasure, you come to realise, that is topped with chocolate ripples. Mars bars. A food that may as well have come from outer space.

*You slip your arms into the sleeves and take a few ungainly steps, laughing as the bars clank about you. One digs under your arm. You shimmy, trying to get it off, but you're covered in them. They disgust you now.*

In another series of new works, Nikou has also taken serving trays and set them with neon. One is the kind of oiled wood platter for dinner parties, with different compartments for the cashews and the chips and the French onion dip. Another is the kind of stackable plastic you might find in a cafeteria or a prison. Peas here, mash there and next in line please. Nikou has set them both with neon—two emoji-yellow quadrants in the wood platter, *As if easy* (2022) and a red curve, like the parody of a mouth, in the green plastic tray, *The natural world* (2022).

I make another mindmap, this time about food. It sprawls from divided plates and controlled portion sizes to Monsanto and monocultures; from abundance to scarcity; caring to class politics; sustenance to toxicity. *Every day needs*, I write. *Personal choices, cultural choices*. The works in *In Vivo* show how deftly Nikou explores both individual experience and the wider world. By employing food, containers and vessels—and returning to and reworking ideas and objects through the years—she has developed a way to think through many different cycles of need, hunger and consumption. Bodies are vessels too, albeit leaky ones.

Writing about her work feels like cutting bits out of a spiderweb and trying to lay the pieces in a line. I shuffle paragraphs. This and then... this? The associations spiral and spread. To consider these directions, to find a path through them, is ultimately to consider personal experience and memory.

I find myself back with Siri Hustvedt's essay, *My Louise Bourgeois*. "My L.B. and yours may well be relatives," she writes, "but it is unlikely they are identical twins." Hustvedt is writing about her fierce and personal connection to Bourgeois' work. She proposes that art is made in the encounter between the spectator and the object. When we bring our own lives and bodily experiences to artworks we become, in a sense, co-creators. "The perceptual experience of art is literally embodied by and in the viewer," Hustvedt writes. "We are not the passive recipients of some factual external reality but rather actively creating what we see through the established patterns of the past, learned patterns so automatic they have become unconscious."

The smooth edges of a plate in our hands. The give of a rug beneath our feet. Nikou's talent is in calling us into our bodies. We measure her works against our memories. A spoon in the mouth. A cup against the lips. Through a kind of mirror synaesthesia, we feel the weight of her works. We feel their textures, their dissonances and their jokes. We imagine our way into them. Or, we imagine them into us.

Jane O'Sullivan



Michelle Nikou 'In Vitro' 2022, lead, 11 x 9 x 8.5 cm



Michelle Nikou 'Vacancy' 2014, Cast lead alloy, lead, neon, latex, variable dimensions



Michelle Nikou 'no sound of water. Behind him the hot dogs, split and drizzled.' 2021, Bronze, low melt metals, lead, neon, ceramic, wool textile, plastic, wood, steel, variable dimensions



Michelle Nikou 'Singing the chorus' 2021, hand knotted pure new wool, 253 x 300 cm & 'Space Sailor' 2021, Black cotton jacket, bronze, 6 x 86 x 79 (variable)



Michelle Nikou 'The world is flat (fucking me down)' 2021, hand knotted pure new wool, 215 x 315 cm



Michelle Nikou 'Act exactly as before' 2022, photographic print on cotton rag paper, 126 x 92 cm



Michelle Nikou from 'no sound of water. Behind him the hot dogs split and drizzled'' 2021, bronze, Scale 1:1



Michelle Nikou 'As if easy' 2022, wood, neon, 25 x 25 x 3 cm



Michelle Nikou 'The natural world' 2022, plastic, neon, 20 x 20 x 3 cm



Michelle Nikou 'Blueblack' 2022, photographic print on cotton rag paper (photo by Grant Hancock),  
110 x 110 cm