A response to Michelle Nikou’s sculptures in Post-planning: Damiano Bertoli, Julian Hooper, Alex Martinis Roe, Michelle Nikou

It’s illuminating, though unnecessary, to know the methods and materials Michelle Nikou used to create the sculptures that are exhibited as part of the exhibition Post-planning. On the basis of its formal properties alone, Untitled (2001) for instance—five square and bottomless receptacles on anthropomorphic legs, which each bear the antiquated patina of material from an archaeological dig—is intriguing. Receptacles, let alone ancient-looking receptacles are intriguing, let alone ancient-looking receptacles punctured with nails, on little feet. What history do they have? Are they artworks or archaeological relics? They’re at once hollow and of obvious solidness and weight, a peculiar opposition. Unburdened by the associations generated by title, the sculptures inspire an intuitive response.

Nikou’s practice is experimental. Her unorthodox choice of materials requires sensitivity to material properties but also acceptance of unpredictable outcomes. She works in earthenware, porcelain, wire, lead and bronze, but also pulped paper, chewed food, disposable cups, vegetables and hair. Untitled, incidentally, comprises cast tissue box covers. Nikou poured bronze into a sand and plaster ‘shell’, which she cracked open once dry. She withheld from sand-blasting, polishing or treating the works with wax, and instead allowed for the sand and plaster residue to remain like a crust of salty earth; dusty in some parts, caked-on in others.

Over (2004) is a conjoined phallus slumped impotently on a crutch. It invokes, with its plumped, semi-tactile appearance and its reification of the banal, the art of Claes Oldenburg, but on a miniature or domestic scale. That the work is in fact a cast bronze mould of a sand-filled draft stopper, a largely overlooked fixture of the suburban home, leads to more associations still. Bored children play with them, pretending they’re snakes. Bored or frugal homemakers make them. Nikou regards the object detachedly, casts it, and elevates it to the status of art form.

In Post-planning, Over and the tissue boxes of Untitled stand in a row on two plaster and timber plinths, designed by Melbourne architect Pia Socias. A fortuitous example of post-planning occurred in the days before the plinths were installed in the gallery and the exhibition opened to the public. The green, blue and red food dyes that were mixed in order to stain the plaster a uniform, cement-like grey, plotted a resistance to their molecular bind, divided, and rose defiantly from within. The unpredictable and unpredictable colouration process continued for weeks, until the surface dried white, with a deep apricot undertone, verdant streaks settling at the base. As Nikou well knows, materials have their own plans.

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