

Nabilah Nordin Birdbrush and Other Essentials

3 July to 17 October 2021







Mess and Stuff: The Abundant Generosity of Nabilah Nordin

Julia Powles

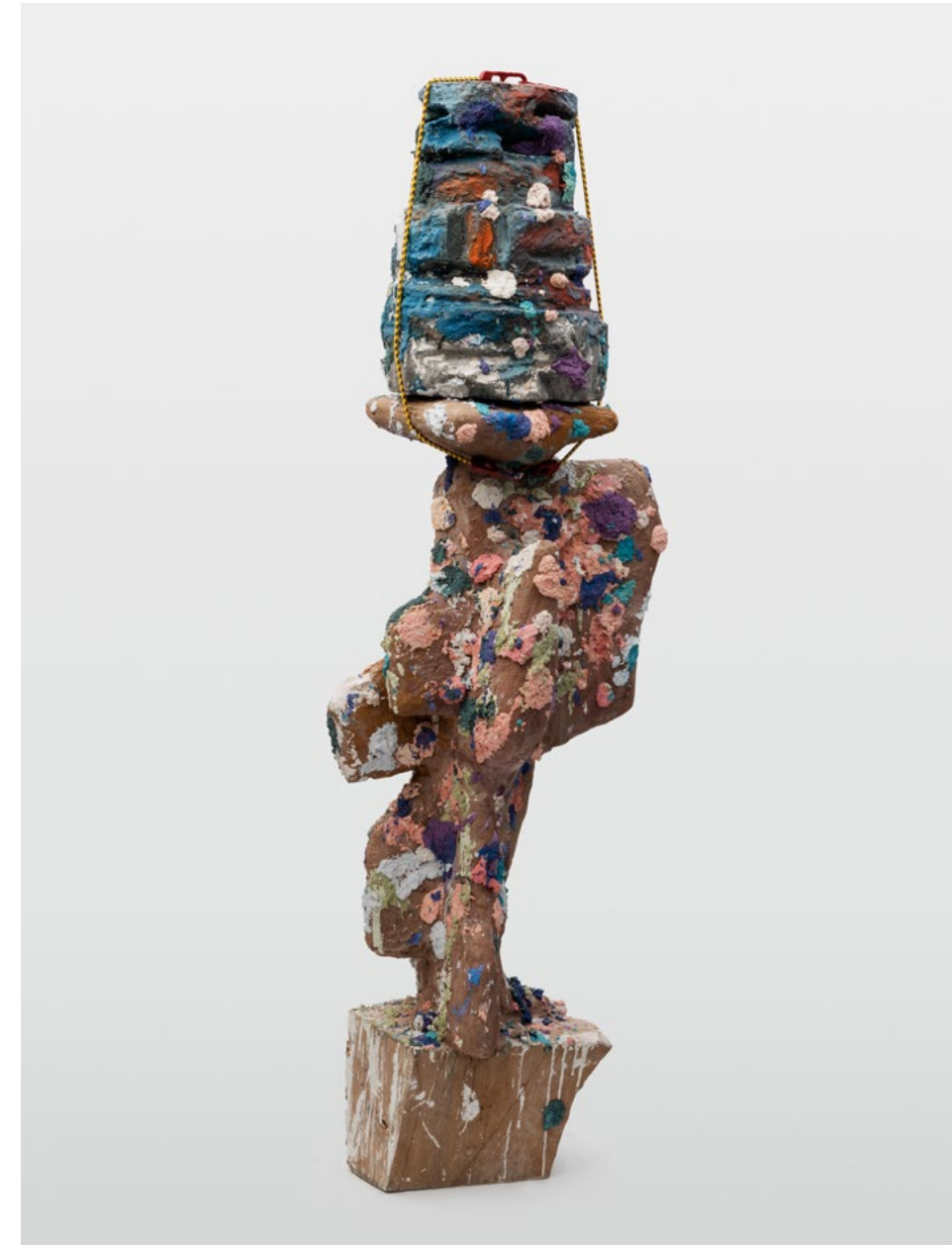
Nabilah Nordin invites us into her installation *Birdbrush and Other Essentials* with the same sense of hospitality as she would welcome guests into her home. The objects we encounter as we wander along the pathways formed between piles of scattered rags are as unfamiliar to us as other people's furniture, yet we accept this, understanding that this terrain has been formed by someone who is not us, someone other. Here we are visitors in another person's world.

Imagination informs all aspects of Nordin's practice. Her work reveals her ceaseless desire to invent, and the scenarios and narratives she uses to describe her work are as idiosyncratic as the way she reconfigures the language of formal abstraction. And while we feel an affinity with it, there is always something unexpected. The titular sculpture *Birdbrush* sits in the middle of the gallery, a sentinel indicating a division in pathways. Loops of fleshy pink create a slender standing form with an elongated 'neck' of stiff bristles, topped off by a tiny purple cap, hovering somewhere between a museological model of a long extinct creature and a bottlebrush for a giant. *Birdbrush* is also a clue to understanding the thinking behind Nordin's exhibition.

All the objects in this installation are improbable, newly developed in anticipation of unknown future needs. By working with the premise that we do not know what things will be essential to our lives until we require them, Nordin focuses on the concept of *use* and by extension *purpose*. Interestingly, in economics use is replaced by the term utility, referring to the amount of satisfaction received from consuming a good or service. This satisfaction does not necessarily correspond to cost, as usefulness is necessarily subjective. In Nordin's world a brush for combing a bird, or a bird that is also a brush for combing wigs has extremely high utility, given it is absolutely essential. Her interest in the usefulness of things is the result of what she describes as a preoccupation with 'home-making', or setting up house. The term itself implies a performative action, as the home is made through the efforts of the home-maker and is a future-looking project. Possible scenarios and imaginary encounters are fertile ground for a fertile imagination.

A large white sculpture, *Cream Machine*, sits squatly within the tumult of the installation. A pipe runs up, along and through the gallery to terminate at *Couch Cake*, a sculpture that has Venus of Willendorf-esq proportions, bulging and plump; a human-sized abstraction made of cushions, plaster and gap filler (amongst other things) painted fleshy, fawny browns and decorated like a wedding cake with lacy piped plaster ornamentations. Together these two sculptures are components of a machine for pumping cake mixture that responds directly to Nordin's growing interest in the relationship between sculpture and food.

Cooking and the hosting of guests have become increasingly important aspects of Nordin's art practice. Early works such as *Malay Wedding*, 2013, which included food as a ritual offering, have been expanded in recent years. In her





monumental project *Sculpture House*, 2020, Nordin turned her entire home into an exhibition venue, filling every room with large abstract sculptures in such a manner as to render the sculptures and the furniture almost indistinguishable. Even more recently her ongoing series of dinners *Please Do Not Eat the Sculptures*, 2020–21, act as gatherings for artists to meet and exchange ideas. As this series of dinners has progressed the food (served from sculptures) has become increasingly akin to Nordin’s actual sculptures—lumpy, misshapen, oozy and oddly coloured. The alchemical nature of combining ingredients into recipes finds an equivalence in the studio as artists mix and blend colours, textures and shapes to create formal compositions, while at the same time understanding the physical properties of their chosen materials. Just as it is in the kitchen, this knowledge is acquired through the act of doing. The processes we employ while cooking—tasting, adjusting, stirring, waiting, evaluating—allows for the meal to arrive at the point of conclusion. Similarly Nordin’s sculptures in *Birdbrush and Other Essentials* coalesce into completion.

Not really an installation, but more than just a grouping of sculptures, Nordin’s exhibition does indeed ‘manifest’ inside the gallery, inhabiting the space in much the same way as we inhabit our homes: purposefully and also incidentally. Sculptures are placed yet rags are tossed, there is no tidying up, despite the fact that Nordin is expecting guests. The messiness of life fascinates her, as does the idea of a place that is ‘lived in’. It is through the lens of ‘lived in-ness’ that we glimpse Nordin’s overriding conceptual framework. Art and life have always intersected, artists routinely draw from and make reference to their lived experience. However, for Nordin, living in the same physical space as her often very large sculptures, sitting next to them on the couch while watching TV, manoeuvring around them in the kitchen as she cooks,

moving them aside to reach window sills in order to water pot plants etc. has impacted her practice profoundly. Increasingly Nordin's artwork has come to physically dominate her tiny house and backyard studio, especially during the COVID-19 era, with its stay at home regulations, when the overlap between studio and home has all but disappeared. Cooking in the kitchen becomes the same as mixing materials in the studio.

Even though the gallery space is filled almost to bursting the exhibition is not over-loaded. Excess is not the subject matter; we are not threatened by over-consumption, rather we are compelled into a space that continues to reveal more of itself—to give of itself—the deeper we go. The abundance Nordin has achieved with *Birdbrush and Other Essentials* is in keeping with the sense of *lived-in-ness*—a place of mess and fermentation (not unlike a studio) full of activity and busyness; a place messy with life. To this end *Birdbrush and Other Essentials* offers evidence of processes: dollops of plaster spill onto the floor, a dish of half-eaten snail stew sits atop a wooden stump, and a custom-made broom is on hand in case the rags need to be swept into neater piles. Yet within this the sculptures themselves are autonomous. This is important to Nordin as she stresses the need for each sculpture to be complete. The process we are exposed to in *Birdbrush and Other Essentials* is not so much the making, but the thinking process.

The grey and white rags that are scattered throughout the gallery enhance the temporary quality of the exhibition, that sense of things forming only minutes prior to viewing. The inclusion of the rags is also a structural device, as their repetition creates a dynamic visual pattern, linking all other components. Despite their potential to overwhelm (they appear on every surface, floor, walls and ceiling) the patterned rags allow the entire exhibition to function as a type of





syncopated music score, one in which expected hierarchies are disrupted. Here an apparently minor exhibition component vies for attention against monumental sculptures. We could also find echoes of Nordin's art school painting studies in her preoccupation with surface colour, texture and finish. Some sculptures are rough, others slippery, still others glossy and dull, while raw materials are rarely evident. Colours are chosen deliberately and mapped to specific forms and content. While Nordin describes her sculptures as abstract they are not formal in any strict sense of the word. Rather, her engagement with abstraction is idiosyncratic, and personal; one that has its own internal logic. The final sculptures form through the process of their making, driven by a particular idea or concept, with room for accident and for new more refined ideas to take hold.

In this way we can see that Nordin's sculptures, indeed her entire exhibition, is akin to thought. These works emerge through a process of discursive internal engagement, one in which some ideas fall away to make room for others while those that persist are formed and re-formed until developed enough to leave their interior cosmos and burst forth into the world.



List of Works

Automobile Brush 2021
chicken wire, polyurethane foam, feathers, PVA glue, paper pulp, bristles, spray paint
7 × 50 × 29 cm

Birdbrush 2021
welded steel, chicken wire, plaster bandage, broom bristles, spray paint, acrylic paint
220 × 113 × 49 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Neon Parc, Melbourne

Cake Pipe 2021
10m suction hose PVC, fabric
2 × 9 × 1000 cm

Cakequeen123 2021
wood, foam board, chicken wire, plaster bandage, cement, sand, sealant, acrylic paint, house paint, paper mix, polystyrene, strap, epoxy resin, sand, polyurethane pigments
217 × 62 × 45 cm

Clogger 2021
wood, chicken wire, polyurethane foam, plaster bandage, plaster, coconut fibre, wigs, acrylic paint, PVA adhesive
147 × 69 × 35 cm

Couch Cake 2021
welded steel, chicken wire, polyurethane foam, cushions, plaster, fabric, house paint, movers' dolly, coloured gap filler
198 × 110 × 105 cm

Creamed Angel 2021
wood, rope, cement, sand, oxides, epoxy resin, spray paint, paper pulp, construction adhesive, polyurethane sealant
63 × 37 × 36 cm

Creamifier 2021
found coffee table, chicken wire, polyurethane foam, plaster, sand, acrylic house paint, steel handle
110 × 100 × 95 cm

Crocodile Icing 2021
wood, chicken wire, plaster bandage, epoxy resin, sand, polyurethane pigments
74 × 38 × 30 cm

Drooper 216B 2021
wood, chicken wire, polyurethane foam, plaster bandage, plaster, epoxyresin, polyurethane pigments
143 × 54 × 47 cm

Egg Forte 2021
wood, spray paint, acrylic paint
95 × 57 × 58 cm

Macaroni Chair 2021
welded steel, polyeurethane foam, chicken wire, epoxy resin, macarini, acrylic paint, epoxyglass resin, epoxy dough
164 × 52 × 95 cm

Metal Structure 2021
metal strip
236 × 4 × 4 cm

Music Shelf 2021
wood, chicken wire, polyurethane foam, cement, sand, acrylic paint, epoxy dough
124 × 51 × 35 cm

Petrol Cleaner 2021
wood, chicken wire, feathers, oil-based modelling clay, monster clay, sand, epoxy
45 × 43 × 15 cm

Pillow Fight 2021
feathers, PVA adhesive, acrylic paint, shaving cream, cement, sand, polyurethane foam
60 × 28 × 26 cm

Pyjamas 2021
wood, chicken wire, plaster bandages, epoxy resin, sand, polyurethane pigments, spray paint
43 × 35 × 31 cm

Recipe Book stand 2021
wood, chicken wire, plaster bandage, epoxy resin, sand, polyurethane pigments
41 × 72 × 51 cm

Ruffler 2021
epoxy dough, spray paint, plastic plant
20 × 80 × 23 cm

Shoe Polisher 2021
wood, chicken wire, polyurethane foam, plaster bandage, plaster, epoxy dough, epoxy rein, sand, polyurethane pigments, acrylic paint
129 × 42 × 20 cm

Sniffler 2021
wood, chicken wire, epoxy rein, plaster bandage, sand, polyurethane pigments, spray paint, epoxy dough
34 × 60 × 21 cm

Sticky Bun 2021
wood, chickenwire, plaster bandage, epoxy resin, sand, polyurethane pigments
57 × 36 × 39 cm

Sticky Butter 2021
styrofoam, oil-based modelling clay
111 × 80 × 30 cm

Tickler 2021
chicken wire, epoxy dough, ostrich feather, spray paint
9 × 55 × 30 cm

Toothbrush Hat 2021
hat, chickenwire, polyurethane foam, confetti, feathers, paper pulp, acrylic paint
47 × 57 × 73 cm

Washing Machine 2021
welded steel, polyurethane foam, chicken wire, epoxy resin, fabrics, spray paint
157 × 96 × 45 cm

All works are courtesy of the artist and Neon Parc, Melbourne

Biography

Nabilah Nordin (b. 1991) is a Singaporean/Australian sculptor. She has recently been a participant in the Singapore Biennale, and the Changwon Sculpture Biennale in South Korea. In Australia her work has been included in exhibitions at the Institute of Modern Art, Monash University Museum of Art, Neon Parc, Yavuz Gallery, LON Gallery, The Commercial, Bundoora Homestead Art Centre, and COMA. In 2020, Nordin was a finalist in the Churchie Emerging Art Prize and in 2021 she was a finalist in the Ramsay Art Prize. This is her first solo museum exhibition in Australia.

Credits and Acknowledgments

Nabilah Nordin is represented by Neon Parc.

Nabilah would like to thank Julia Powles, Nick Modrzewski, Cameron Green, and Neon Parc.

Pages 1, 2, 4, 8, 14:

Nabilah Nordin: Birdbrush and Other Essentials (installation views), Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, 2021.

Photographs: Christo Crocker

Images courtesy of Heide Museum of Modern Art

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Nabilah Nordin, *Cakequeen123*, 2021.

Photograph: Simon Strong

Image courtesy of the artist and Neon Parc, Melbourne

Pages 11, 12, 20:

Nabilah Nordin: Birdbrush and Other Essentials (installation views), Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, 2021.

Photographs: Clytie Meredith

Images courtesy of Heide Museum of Modern Art

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