

Memo

Nabilah Nordin, *Birdbrush and Other Essentials*

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Nabilah Nordin's sculptures have philosophical weight. In *Birdbrush and Other Essentials*, located in the Kerry Gardner & Andrew Myer Project Gallery at the Heide Museum of Modern Art, her sculptures take us on an epistemological adventure. The artist invites us to conjecture what these idiosyncratic objects are, and in doing so she challenges our sense of what it means to command knowledge of a thing. They are slimy and dry, coarse and refined, colourful and monochromatic and abstract and concrete. The animated peculiarity with which these pairings are expressed sparks my curiosity, but it is the final pair that I find particularly interesting.

To explain my epistemological reading of Nordin's work, allow me to indulge in the following pithy summary of Immanuel Kant's theory of knowledge: "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind". By this he meant we can never cognise or know a thing without having access to both that thing's intuitive content (through our sensibility) and its conceptual form (in our intellect). Nordin's epistemological adventure takes place between these poles of sense and intellect. She presents a

perceivable sculptural form, but only a clue to the concept adequate for us to know what it is we really see.

Birdbrush and Other Essentials beckons visitors entering the main entrance at Heide. An immediate and indeed essential glance to your left will garner excitement. Here, you will be greeted by an irresistible realm containing a jumble of objects; some might say a mess. In this weird and wonderful world, our senses come face to face with tall and skinny, short and stumpy sculptures made from chicken wire, steel, cement and sand and so on. A bright blue *Toothbrush Hat* houses wobbly white toothbrushes; an armoured *Egg Forte* guards a collection of swollen *Ostrich Eggs* ready to hatch and an impressive *Laundry* facilitates green intestines digesting something orange and hairy, as the remains imply. The playful nature of this work allows our imagination to run amok. But however abstract the forms appear, Nordin veils the works in inchoate and surreal conceptual titles. The notion of “birdbrush” is as abstract as its sculptural referent appears—that is, after you locate it of course.



Installation view of Nabilah Nordin, *Birdbrush and Other Essentials*, 2021, Heide Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Christo Crocker

It is difficult to resist the urge to search for the star of the show, the *Birdbrush* itself, but not “in-itself”. Kant considered a thing-in-itself to be like a metaphysical monster that we can never experience but which hides behind appearances. Bristles and feathers and brooms and brushes appear to be hiding around the gallery and they keep the viewer guessing, “just where is this *Birdbrush*?” These suspect sculptures are placed on the ground, hanging from the walls, dangling from the ceiling between an adjoining gallery, and one candidate (*Tickler*) is grasping the metal strip that supports *Cake Pipe*, connecting the industrial cake maker or *Creamifier*, which passes the *Cakequeen* and finishes with the *Couch Cake*.



Nabilah Nordin, *Couch Cake*, 2021, welded steel, chicken wire, polyurethane foam, cushions, plaster, fabric, house paint, movers' dolly, coloured gap filler, 198 x 110 x 105 cm. Photo: Simon Strong

Curator Julia Powles describes Nordin’s work as new “improbable” objects for the future, and she offers some insights into the use of such an object. In the exhibition’s online catalogue, Powles writes: “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”. Both instances may host some prospective, and indeed peculiar, use-value for the future, but they are also useful as a means of knowledge today. In this epistemological framework, *Birdbrush* becomes a form of knowledge for human cognition when the viewer consolidates their intuition with their concept of the thing. To understand these objects or to reflect on them is Nordin’s essential challenge. We are prompted to relate the work of art to ordinary objects of experience in order to exploit them for what they are or what they could be. This provocative journey of the imagination is precisely what I think makes this work so interesting.



Installation view of Nabilah Nordin, *Birdbrush and Other Essentials*, 2021, Heide Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Christo Crocker

But to conceptualise Nordin's work would be to miss the mark. In an exchange with independent curator, Talia Smith, for the Institute of Modern Art podcasts, Nordin explains that materials lend themselves to the impulse of creating, whereas ideas do not. Nordin has described her work as a "protest for materiality" which underscores abstraction:

When it's about materials ... there's so many questions that you can ask and it's open ended and I like art that is open ended. I don't want to be told answers, I don't want to be told what to think. I want to look at something and feel a lot of different things and ask questions about things.

While Nordin's remarks were contextualised by her sculpture *Anti-Poem* (2020), this is also central to what visitors can expect from her Heide show. *Birdbrush and Other Essentials* remains as abstract as intended. Nordin continues: "I would never ... make a sculpture of a figure; it's too obvious for me. I can see a figure. I don't need to make a figure. It's just too literal. I like abstraction". We find here something of Nordin's desire to make things that are not obvious, that are not literal, that are beyond what we can see. But to say so directly sounds as if the work belongs to a "supersensible" world, yet this is no call to produce the thing-in-itself, nor is it an attempt to make the strange familiar or the familiar strange, but an appeal to the strange, *tout court*.



Nabilah Nordin, *Sniffer*, 2021, wood, chicken wire, epoxy resin, plaster bandage, sand, polyurethane pigments, spray paint, epoxy dough, 34 x 60 x 21 cm. Photo: Simon Strong

As a visitor services volunteer at Heidi, I have no choice but to reflect on the strangeness of this work. It is my duty to tarry with *Birdbrush and Other Essentials*. I watch and watch over the work from an invigilator's point of view. As a Melbourne art critic once put it, art makes demands such as "look at me!", "look again!", "look harder!", "look longer!" and "don't look!", all of which summarises the cycle of my engagement with Nordin's work. In obeying the works' final command, it is as if these sculptures come to life when my back is turned. I imagine them breathing, speaking to each other, laughing and dancing around the room, all to be frozen the moment I look back. I ask myself: Was that grey and white rag hanging there before? Did the *Macaroni Chair* get taller? Where did *Pyjamas* go? What is *Sniffler* up to? How many eggs were in the *Egg Forte* before? The paranoid questions of the volunteer go on and on. The rags, however, may explain part of this paranoia. They are scattered across the ground, as well as across works, and visitors inevitably shuffle them about as they navigate the space. It is not all in my head. The rags move, or so I tell myself.



Installation view of Nabilah Nordin, *Birdbrush and Other Essentials*, 2021, Heide Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Christo Crocker

Nordin has recently integrated food into her practice, and these sculptures at Heide are not the first to whet the appetite. If *Birdbrush and Other Essentials* is an attempt to mediate the abstract and concrete, *Please Do Not Eat The Sculptures* (2020–2021) is an attempt to mediate the work of art and gastronomy. Once a month, for six months, Nordin invited guests into her home for a home-cooked meal placed above, below and dangling from sculptures. The interactive banquets culminated in a one night only show at Missing Persons in the Nicholas Building. Do yourself a favour and check out the photographs if you haven't already seen them. *Mouse Trap* and its surrounding fromage and fruit is a sight to behold. The sculptures are mouth-watering. And the continuity of an appetite is evident at Heide, particularly for those with a sweet tooth, or, if you're like me and you fancy al dente pasta (raw, really), the macaroni on the *Macaroni Chair* might just stir your stomach silly. And now I'm being silly; a possible side effect from encountering these works.

Birdbrush and Other Essentials, like many shows in recent months (or years?), was severely disrupted by another lockdown. Fortunately, the powers that be have decided to let it breathe again. Nordin's show returns for its second iteration at Heide where you can have the opportunity to become the bearer of objects of experience, the kind of things you could never imagine, nor do you have to. You will have the chance to sense them and make sense of them for yourself. This is Nordin's gift to the viewer.