

The Saturday Paper

NABILAH NORDIN'S NEW EXHIBITION, *PROP SHOP*, EXPANDS HER CRITIQUE OF MONUMENTAL SCULPTURE WITH AN INCREASED CONFIDENCE. BY **AMELIA WINATA**.

Prop Shop



Installation view of Nabilah Nordin's *Prop Shop*.
CREDIT: MADÉ SPENCER-CASTLE

The motto for Nabilah Nordin's recent work seems to be "go big or go home". The Melbourne-based artist makes huge, amorphous sculptures that overload the retina with their bright colours. At this year's Melbourne Art Fair, for example, she exhibited a 5.2-metre pink, blue and green sculpture that had to be dismantled with a hammer. For a 2021 presentation at Heide, *Birdbrush and Other Essentials*, Nordin filled the Kerry Gardner & Andrew Myer Project Gallery with a dizzying maze of sculptures, including masses of rags that spilled onto the designated pathway and which viewers had to carefully navigate their way through.

Her current exhibition at Neon Parc, *Prop Shop*, demonstrates a new-found paring back. While the sculptures mostly remain large, there is now a balance between works of various scales. Take, for example, *Ballroom* (2022), a two-metre-tall pink epoxy work composed of narrow, tower-like structures that are draped in an oversized string of foam pearls. Next to it, installed on

the same platform, is *Fortune Nights* (2022), a squat blue epoxy frame that stands just 42-centimetres high and balances a glass sphere – masquerading as a crystal ball – in its hollow.

At no point in the exhibition does the viewer feel that the smaller sculptures are dwarfed by their larger siblings. Rather, it is as if the sculptures have each grown from a single rhizome. Each carries the same formal core – Nordin’s signature use of bumpy, elongated, handmade forms – but has evolved to become a unique entity.

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Nordin is the most recent addition to Geoff Newton’s Neon Parc stable, and *Prop Shop* is her first solo exhibition with the gallery. Those whose most recent experience of Nordin’s work was eating off her roughly hewn, knobbly sculptures at the 2021 exhibition *Please Do Not Eat the Sculptures* at Missing Persons might have wondered how her practice would translate to the art market. Often studio artists complain of having to make compromises for their work to be marketable – crudely speaking, to make it fit the decor of the collector’s home. It turns out that Nordin has made the transition to commercial artist with shocking ease. Certainly she has adjusted her work, but it’s not compromised.

She has always maintained that her work is an exploration of materials. To my mind, this material exploration is inextricably linked to a deeper interrogation of sculpture’s traditional use as a medium for monumentalisation. Where Greek and Roman sculpture used permanent and expensive materials – marble, bronze – Nordin chooses cheap, mass-produced or perishable products.

On opening night, a wall of baguettes baked by Nordin threatened to topple onto the guests who lay in front of it to take selfies. The sculpture’s title – *Bread Prison* (2022) – seems almost tongue-in-cheek, given the flimsiness of the medium. Nordin baked wooden sticks into the dough and painted the finished baguettes with resin to give the structure more stability, but viewers were fully aware that this sculpture would deteriorate over time.

One notable addition is the inclusion of plinths made by Nordin herself. In previous work, she upturned the logic of the classic sculptural device by building the work’s support into its overall form, making it a completely self-sufficient object. Here she addresses the idea of the plinth head-on.

The use of readymades is one of the most welcome additions to this suite of new works, and underscores a new-found confidence. If a plinth is traditionally used to elevate the sculpture above its audience – physically and symbolically – Nordin negates that elevation through her use of cheap readymade objects for plinths. In *Creamed Angel* (2022), an eagle-like form that appears weathered and covered in bird poo is placed atop a clear acrylic plinth filled with feathers, while *Glut Cherry* (2022) includes a clear plinth filled with walnuts.

In *The Elves of Whistletown* (2022), the plinth is a trapezoid-shaped acrylic container on castors filled with white foam mannequin heads. On top is a much smaller silver epoxy sculpture of an organically shaped blob and something that resembles a spear, recalling a miniature soldier in armour. This highlights another function of Nordin’s plinths – they invert the traditional logic of illusive representation in monumental sculpture. Here the viewer infers an entity from the

sculptures on the plinths – the bird, the human form, the tree – but these forms are abstracted away from the lifelike representation that, for example, Greek and Roman sculpture sought to embody. The living things signified by the materials that fill Nordin’s transparent plinths are more realistic than those loosely represented on top of them. Nordin muddies the clarity of classical sculpture’s language, using the signifier to do the work of the sign.

Lately there has been a marked craft revival in contemporary art, represented locally by the likes of, to name a few, Teelah George, Jahnne Pasco-White and Brendan Huntley and further abroad by Diedrick Brackens and Simone Fattal’s late-career success. These artists certainly don’t share conceptual underpinnings – indeed, it would be wrong to propose they do – but the success of their work does suggest that craft techniques have become a kind of antidote to the increasing acceleration of daily life.

Nordin is arguably part of this craft renaissance, but her work incorporates a marked acknowledgment of contemporaneity within this return to the handmade. Nordin’s work has often embodied a grotesque but appealing distortion of form. Her increased use of acid colours and synthetic materials in *Prop Shop* exacerbates the feeling that her work is ingrained in the present moment rather than a nostalgic return to a “simpler” time.

This combination of the handmade with a recognition of the unsettling present is epitomised in *Horror Show* (2022). A green, pronged epoxy form on top of a reclaimed timber table leg is crowned with a red, curly wig that might very well have been snatched from the head of Ronald McDonald – a symbol of capitalist spectacle if ever there was one. It is uncomfortable, endearing and funny all at once. The wig might be displaced with the slightest nudge, destabilising the logic of sculpture as permanent monument and perhaps acting as a metaphor for the fragility of once sturdy norms. Nothing, not even sculpture, can stand unchanged for perpetuity.

Nabilah Nordin – *Prop Shop* *is showing at Neon Parc until July 23.*

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