



## DISCOVERY SERIES: INTERVIEW WITH NIKA NEELOVA

Alix Greenberg for COMPANY

(October 20, 2011) During my trip to London for Frieze Art Fair, emerging art star Nika Neelova and curator Zavier Ellis joined me in conversation on Neelova's sculptural installation *The Offering at The Future Can Wait*, a show that offers an alternative experience to the art fair routine. Neelova's installation stands tall amongst *The Future Can Wait*'s exhibitors. I was captured by the duality of her work - though strikingly beautiful there is also an intense historical narrative that offers the viewer a psychologically moving experience.

Neelova was born in Moscow and now resides in London. She received her MFA in Sculpture from the Slade School of Fine Art, London in 2010, after having obtained her BA in Sculpture from Royal Academy of Fine Art, The Hague in 2008. Neelova has already had four solo-exhibitions, contributed to multiple group shows. Her work resides permanently at Saatchi Gallery London, as well as in many private collections in German, UK, and the US. Zavier Ellis is co-curator of *The Future Can Wait* along with Simon Rumley, who he launched the project with in 2007. Zavier is also the Director of Charlie Smith London gallery.

**COMPANY:** *Zavier, why was it so important to include Nika in your show? Can you contextualize for us?*

**Zavier:** Our goal for *The Future Can Wait* is to focus on London based emerging to established artists and show the work in individualized booths. In collaboration with Saatchi's New Sensations we created a museum quality and scale surveys of emerging art during Frieze week. Our collaborative vision is exemplified by artist Nika Neelova, who illustrates the shared interest and vision of Ellis Romney Projects, Charlie Smith London, and Saatchi. Nika is an interesting artist and has been discovered by the art world at a very young age.

**COMPANY:** *Nika, as we are standing by your work here at The Future Can Wait, can you explain your process from specific (to this piece) to general (your entire milieu).*

**Nika:** The idea for this piece was triggered by the interest of merging reality and fiction and introducing parts of this fiction into the real world. It approaches the legend of the unicorn and its subsequent explanation as a scientific fact to reveal the contradiction between the perception of fiction and the acceptance of reality. The title of the work, *The Offering*, draws reference to sacrificial practices and also relates to the famous series of medieval tapestries *The Hunt of the Unicorn*. Pagan tradition interprets the theme of the unicorn as beguiled lovers whereas Christian tradition interprets the pursuit of the unicorn and its subsequent death as *The Passion of Christ*. These contradicting Pagan and Christian interpretations were something I wanted to approach.

**Zavier:** Nika, can you speak on your materials?

**Nika:** Those are casts of narwhal tusks that throughout history were mistakenly considered to be unicorn horns. According to legend, the unicorn horns possessed medicinal and magical powers, therefore were highly wanted and nearly priceless. In the 17th century it was discovered that they were tusks of a whale imported to Europe under the unicorn disguise. I cast these narwhal tusks from a copy borrowed from a private collection. They are displayed on a wooden structure, deriving and referring to structures of sacrificial altars and display cabinets.

**COMPANY:** *Nika, what artistic movements have influenced your work?*

**Nika:** One of my former tutors defined my practice as combining minimalism and baroque and I indeed am trying to embrace this notion, developing the work through the conflict of opposing principles. This is a fairly minimal structure in its construction, but the surfacing of the elements as well as the elements incorporated into it, are incredibly baroque and ornamented. Another influence of this piece is the 'Fictions' of Jorge Luis Borges and the way he introduces fictional narrative to his writings, as well as his 'Book of Imaginary Beings' providing amongst others accurate descriptions of the unicorn in literature.

**COMPANY:** *How do your ideas materialize?*

**Nika:** The path towards materializing idea, I think, is often very hard to determine. It incorporates everything ever seen, ever read and ever thought of. To me it gathers recovered fragments of the past, perceptions of the introspective present and sometimes the anticipation of future loss. I often focus on the idea of evoking the past from its history and making it valuable now. There is always an element of chance and coincidence, as articulating the past does not mean recognizing it the way it actually was and the distortions of time and present also shape the work in a different way.

**COMPANY:** *Why sculpture?*

**Nika:** While getting my BA in the Netherlands, I was into installation, performance and other modes of more temporary expression. When I came to London, the influence of this city, the monumental buildings, the strong commemorative traditions, the preservation of history have greatly influenced the approach to my work. My sculptures have become incredibly 'London-based' utilizing elements of architecture and objects that belonged to now demolished or reconstructed buildings. In general, I chose sculpture because it addresses the relationship of the viewer and the work in space. It allows to create not just a projection of imagination, but a real structure, belonging to the same reality as we do and obeying to the fundamental forces of gravity, friction, equilibrium.

**COMPANY:** *What artists have influenced you?*

**Nika:** This changes all the time and I could go on listing forever. I admire Rachel Whiteread, Tacita Dean, Mirosław Balka and Felix Gonzalez Torres. Besides my contemporary influences, I also draw from the old masters, the Renaissance, Medieval galleries, and The National Gallery.

**COMPANY:** *As a woman artist, how does femininity play a role in how you are critiqued methodologically?*

**Nika:** Being a woman artist it is very hard, maybe even impossible, to get away from the feminist critique. But I was never interested in depicting myself as a Feminist artist, I agree it is always visible that the work was made by a woman and I embrace the qualities that it therefore acquires, however my work is essentially dealing with other subjects.

**COMPANY:** *Drawing from what you just said, I can't help spotting a phallic theme in the shape of the horns, as well as the color associations.*

**Nika:** Certainly, and that as well was the hidden symbol of the seemingly innocent unicorn legend in the pagan interpretation. It isn't the primary emphasis of this work, but definitely another layer.

**COMPANY:** *The work is beautiful, meditative really. And easy to live with.*

**Nika:** That is true, this piece is quite different from previous works, which carried a darker edge and were less focused on the element they depicted. This one is specifically built to display this specific object. I was interested in over-aestheticizing the piece. The unicorn theme is very beautiful, however once you know the story and the folklore, you know that the horns belong to an animal that has died. This is a memorial for them - an abstract, aestheticized vision of death.

**COMPANY:** *Who is your ideal owner for the work?*

**Nika:** I think if anyone were to purchase this piece, it would adapt itself to a new setting. This one was designed for this location. If it were to move, it would take on a slightly different aspect. Most of my sculptures take on new appearances when displayed elsewhere. I believe sculpture has to have a real attachment to the space where it is shown to ground it the real world.