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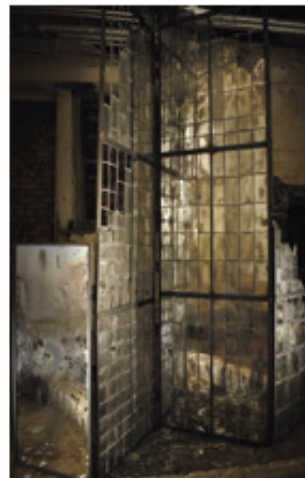
Saatchi Online artist Nika Neelova talks to Paul Carey-Kent

By Paul Carey-Kent · April 3, 2011 · Art News · Tagged: Featured, Nika Neelova

Nika Neelova, winner of the 2010 New Sensations Prize run by the Saatchi Gallery and Channel 4, talks here to Paul Carey-Kent about her new solo show at Charlie Smith in London



Nika Neelova 'The Night also Falls' Charcoal, burnt wood & rope 2010 (Private collection, London)



Nika Neelova 'Prophecies for the Past' Mirrors, lead & steel 2010 (Private collection, Berlin)

Your installations resemble architectural ruins. What draws you in that direction?

The evocation of architectural ruins is indeed very important in my work, as ruins signal simultaneously an absence and a presence. As fragmented and decayed structures they point to a lost and invisible whole, whilst their still visible presence also points to durability and survival. I'm interested in representing spaces which capture the transience of time and contain a sense of lost experiences.

Is that a reference to death or destruction?

No, I don't see that as representing death. The work is not driven by the tragedy of human loss or the mere brutality of destruction. There is however strong allusion to the fear of mortality, a certain fear of the end, which is so inherent to human nature and perhaps in other metaphorical ways to objects and spaces... That way the sculptures are often shown in the very state before fully collapsing, at the moment when the end is inevitable but isn't there yet.

Though black is the dominant colour...

In this show black mainly refers to the 'last state' of materials, wood is charred and burnt, becoming ash and charcoal dust.

These aren't ruins as found, are they, or as ruined by you, but are constructed out of separately discovered elements?

Yes, I attempt to shift histories using objects that belong to one history and putting them into another context. I like the idea that those other lives bring along a cultural or historical displacement. And though I work with things which are likely to fall apart, I wouldn't make something broken. It's always natural decay – due to gravity or age – I don't force things. I see the decay as something beautiful, but from which you cannot retrieve the original state. It all obeys the law of entropy, which is so persistent in life: you cannot turn back.

Do you have strong visual memories of places?

Most of the works are based on visual memories. I relate to how memories are preserved through places, and how memories preserve corners of places, like floorboards of a once inhabited house or a particular light in the window. I have memories of rooms which I want to recreate – albeit in an exaggerated manner – because articulating the past does not necessarily mean recognizing it the way it really was. Past is the concern of history, and to relive a situation belonging to this history it is necessary to forget everything about the later course of events.

So they are collages of various histories but also make up your own history?

Well, yes, my work incorporates much of my personal history, but I don't want it to be purely personal – that's why I try to find objects which belong to a larger history, so it becomes a combination of personal and collective and adopted histories. That is why I often use objects that belong to other histories, that are the real traces of the past. They are the true material witnesses or evidence of the events that have happened. They are the residues of certain histories that are then woven into scenarios which come from my past that I have lived or imagined.

That said, how has your specific personal history informed the work?

I've moved around a lot: I was born in the Soviet Union then lived in France, Russia again and the Netherlands before coming to London. That's why many of my works are inspired by places I have lived in and lost – in the sense of missing something which you can't get back to, which lives in your memory and is exaggerated or distorted by the years which have passed. That's how I've lived my whole life – raised for a while in a particular place, but knowing I must move on to a completely different beginning. You create or adopt a history which you're going to have to give up, and that failure to get attached and be grounded somewhere originates this idea in my work.

Are you directly influenced by Russia?

I feel the very different Russian culture is still strong in me, though I have adapted to the West. I find I have both roughness and polish in the work, both the overwhelming baroque exuberance of Russia together with the more minimal, condensed and refined culture here. Both are somewhat distorted in my interpretations, but nevertheless very present and important.

Is London also a particular influence?

I was influenced by the extent to which London commemorates its history. The idea of how people replace memories of people with stones, creating rituals around it. I think this invocation of ritual and heritage creates an interesting meshing of the present and the past. The flag came first from wanting to use the ash which comes from the burning in making previous installations: that tries to preserve a line of continuity in my work. I'm very attracted to the coats of arms and heraldry and dissolving the idea that it should carry an emblem – it carries nothing but decayed material from previous works. The rubber is there just to hold the ash – I would have wanted it to just be ash! Maybe I'm commemorating my work, maybe something else. I was inspired by similar flags in stone at Westminster Cathedral, of which these are fragile versions...

You used performance in some of your earlier work, for example covering a floor with thousands of eggshells to be walked on. Does that remain an aspect of your sculpture now?

I prefer to leave the performance element to be implied now. My work has become more permanent – it is caught in the moment before collapse but can be frozen. It can collapse easily but there is a tension – it has a potential to survive, though it might not. But the relation between the human and the architectural remains important. I keep the scale to natural proportions so the viewer inhabits the work as they would the architecture, so it does have a physical conversation with the viewer, and is also a fragment which refers to being part of something bigger.

This isn't the first time a staircase has featured in your work...

That's true... I relate strongly to the gestures of going up and down. The staircases always go nowhere and have some inaccessibility, but they are still reminiscent of the attempt to make the movements. It's not only about hopelessness, though: the spiral in the staircase is something which never comes back to where it started'

Nika Neelova
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About the Author

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