IAN DAWSON VISITS NIKA NEELOVA'S STUDIO

A lot of the work happens outside the studio, before any actual production begins. But I'm also very attached to the material and the tactile. I often invent or alter the way I work with materials – which can go against traditional techniques.

Ian Dawson: I wanted this to be a studio conversation, so meeting you here, in your creative space, was important – rather than talking elsewhere or through email. Would you like to start by telling me about how you work in the studio?
Nika Neelova: Honestly, I never really know how I work in the studio. My process has always been quite scattered. My work comes from many different sources; I'm an obsessive reader, for example. I usually read about eleven books at the same time, so I rarely remember specifics, but the information aggregates. Eventually, certain ideas or images resurface and start connecting to things I see or experience. I also love visiting architectural salvage sites or demolition areas, not with any specific mission – it's more like visual reading for me. I enjoy observing objects or histories. Museums, especially the more obscure ones, also play a role in this process of gathering information. It's an aggregation of ideas and references from different sources. Then, at some point, it all converges – a book I've read echoes something I've seen, or a place I've visited – and that becomes the starting point for the work. Where the physical work actually begins is very fluid. I'm not a technical person in the traditional sense – I don't set up elaborate tools or machines. Each piece requires its own process, and I respond to that. I'm not bound to any one technique or approach, which means there's no strict continuity in the way I work. One day I might be casting; another day, building; or making something small and intricate. This need for flexibility means I've never had a permanent studio or even storage for my work. I recycle a lot – if a piece doesn't find its form, I'll rework it until it becomes something else. I prefer not to be tied to specific spaces or methods.
ID: It sounds like there's a complex process of incorporation that forms the core of your work, even before you enter the studio. The echoes and connections from all those different sources become the beginning of your pieces.
NN: Absolutely. A lot of the work happens outside the studio, before any actual production begins. But I'm also very attached to the material and the tactile. I often invent or alter the way I work with materials – which can go against traditional techniques. That's why working with artisans can be challenging – my approach is very experimental, often pushing materials to the brink. I mix everything by hand, combining things that don't naturally mix – so many outcomes rely on accidents or chance interactions. It's about tapping into and amplifying processes – whether chemical or entropic – that were affecting matter naturally before I started working.
ID: This transformation and evolution of materials brings to mind archaeological concepts, like object itineraries. Rather than seeing objects as having fixed lifespans, an itinerary follows the movement of matter from its earliest origins to its eventual decay, tracing a more intertwined narrative.

Lazarus Taxon II
2023
Jesmonite and wire cable
Dimensions variable

Photo courtesy of the artist

NN: Exactly. There are narratives that began long before us, and the recycling of matter is ongoing. I often think about Reza Negarestani's essay *Undercover Softness*, where he suggests that decay is a form of malleable architecture. All surrounding structures are in a state of constant deconstruction, but that process is also the beginning of something new. I find this beautiful because it lets us trace broader historical flows and see how matter transforms over time. I work with materials such as wooden bannisters, which were originally imported from Africa or South America, or clay, which has been part of geological formations for millennia. Recently, I've been using fossilised shark teeth – teeth that are 30–40 million years old, long predating humanity.

ID: In a way, you're collaborating with these materials, creating hybrid objects with them, where materials and narratives are written together.

NN: I'm very interested in the enmeshment of objects and narratives. Objects are vessels, temporary containers for the transformation of matter. I don't aim to solidify a specific narrative in an object; it's more like exposing a fragment of a larger, existing narrative. For me, it's not about creating new stories – it's about revealing information that is already there and the multiplicities of histories concealed within the objects I use.

ID: In the studio, you have a small sculpture made from a bannister that curves in on itself.

NN: Yes, that's the first small one I made. I was originally drawn to bannisters because they are designed to fit in the palm of the hand. They are based on human proportions and extruded to an architectural scale. There's something poetic about a bannister that was handmade over a century ago, then spent a century interacting with countless hands, and is now reshaped by hand into an imperfect infinity symbol. It carries the memory of human touch and the history of the houses it was part of. These pieces become portraits of the places they came from and the people who interacted with them.

ID: Do you remember how you made your first bannister piece?

NN: I saw some construction workers tearing out a beautiful mahogany staircase in Lewisham; they were about to chop it up. It reminded me of a house I used to live in, with a set of beautiful winding stairs – a very personal memory of a place that no longer exists. That connection made me buy the bannister on the spot. It sat in my studio for a while until one day I started playing with it and arranged it into a figure-eight shape. That form, for me, represented the link between human bodies, architecture, and time.

ID: Did that experience lead you to explore architectural salvage sites more deeply, or were you already doing that?

NN: I was already interested in architecture. It's always been part of my work...

ID: Behind us in your studio are some upright sections of piping, which look like remnants of plumbing pipes from a piece called Silt.

NN: Silt was developed specifically for Brighton CCA. It began by discussing water and its cultural and historical significance with Ben Roberts, the creative director. I had read *The History of Plumbing*, which starts with using cupped hands to carry water from streams. It's fascinating how humanity has evolved methods for transporting and preserving water, from simple vessels to the complex Roman aqueducts and buried networks. Like many of my works, it's tied to customs that precede us and processes that might outlast us. As I mentioned earlier, I try to bypass straightforward means of fabrication to uncover the latent information within materials or objects themselves.

Opposite:

Lemniscate IX
2020
Mahogany reclaimed handrails, two flights of stairs
310 x 130 x 70 cm

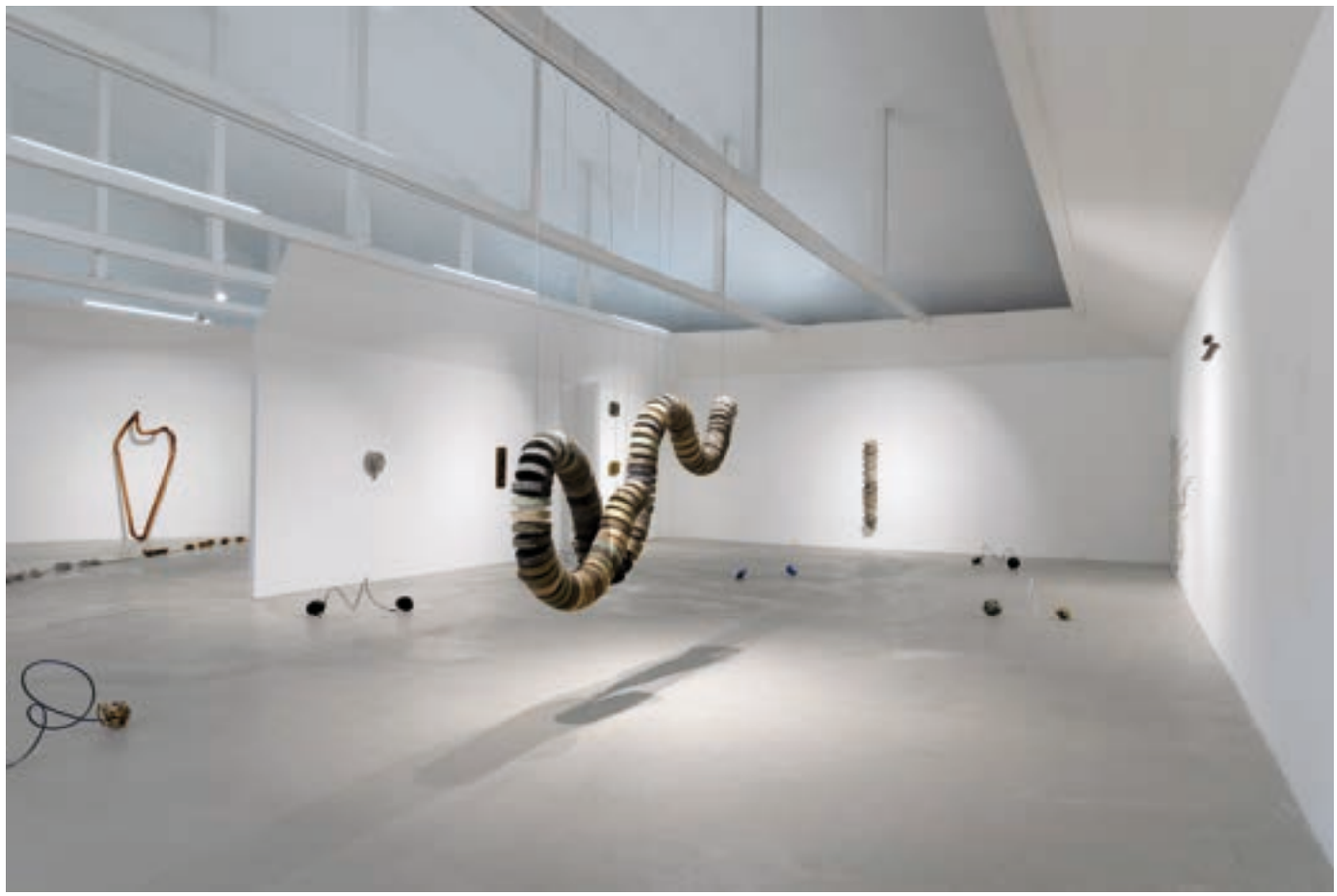
© Nika Neelova
New Art Centre, Roche Court Sculpture Park, Salisbury (Winterslow)

Photo courtesy of the artist

And Their Phantoms
2023
Fossilised shark teeth
set in clay, epoxy, oil
Dimensions variable

Photo courtesy of the artist

ID: Yes, you're using the material's inherent properties to reveal the histories concealed within it.
NN: Yes, exactly. Matter precedes the object – it carries its geological history. With *Silt*, the processes I used were already happening in nature. The sediment building up inside old water pipes resembles the geological process of sedimentation. I wanted to amplify that. I seek out entropic, chemical, or manual processes that are already occurring, borrowing them and amplifying them in the production of my works. I started collecting reclaimed water pipes that were being discarded. On the inner surfaces, sediment had accumulated over the years. I wanted the sculptures to capture the repressed memory of that sedimented material, which holds echoes of geological history, but also traces of the water that touched human bodies as it travelled through various homes, connecting them in an invisible network. Water brings together different architectures and bodies, and the pipes act as the arteries of the city. The installation became like calcified veins of the metropolis, exposed as if the city had disappeared. The exhibition was constructed like an archaeological site – viewers entered underground and gradually ascended toward the surface, moving through layers of buried networks until they reached the surface of the earth. I'm interested in obsolete or reclaimed objects because they carry information – they are archives of past experiences that would otherwise be lost.
ID: Silt acts like a piece of media archaeology, where obsolete communication technologies are unearthed to offer alternative histories.
NN: I was intrigued by the idea of mediation: when you bring something back from the past into the present, you mediate the interval between its origin and the present moment. It's like an echo – it can bring back more or less than what was initially there. There's a fascinating dialogue between the original and the reproduced, between past and present. I'm always interested in making that interval visible – revealing those silences between the two. Mediation is about being in between things; it's a conversation, a bridge, but also about maintaining the separation. For me, the compelling part is revealing the interval while preserving that separation.
NN: Speaking of mediation, while researching *The History of Plumbing*, I came across a discovery from the Victorian era in London. Back then, many pipes were made of hollowed-out logs. As the wooden pipes disintegrated from contact with water, the clay-rich London soil compressed around them and formed new pipes in place of the wood. This interaction between geology and human-made artefacts struck me as beautiful. Silt is about the dialogue among geological processes, deep time, and human artefacts. It attempts to infiltrate that feedback loop where humans design the world and, in turn, are designed by it.
ID: Those pipes in the corner sparked this conversation. What's your relationship to them now?



Thaw
Installation view
2023
Noire Gallery Turin

Photo courtesy of the artist

NN: They've become phantoms of their original selves, haunting me from a different place. All my work, and the objects I use, carry reverberations of the past. When installed, as in the CCA exhibition, these pipes formed a landscape inhabited by the suggestion of sentience, as though matter itself is conscious and interconnected. I'm fascinated by the entanglement of matter and the cycles of its metamorphosis. These pipes, now skeletal remains, symbolise that – just like imagining prehistoric creatures through their bones. In many ways, they represent my attempt at time travel, acting as portals to cycles of transformation through time.

ID: Alongside the pipes, there are some twig-like forms with shark teeth as thorns. They look like a work in progress, as if you're experimenting with them here in the studio.

NN: Yes, they were part of a growing bush of decapitated roses from my exhibition *Thaw* in Turin, which traced the myth of Medusa across centuries. It was about everything petrified by her gaze released from archaeological constraints, fluidity returned to objects calcified by history. One piece, a jellyfish made from reclaimed chandelier parts fused together, referenced Medusa – since *'Medusa'* means jellyfish in many languages. The exhibition title, *Thaw*, evoked a phase transition from solid to liquid, symbolising transformation and in-between states. The sculptures were suspended in flux between fluidity and petrification, exploring that boundary. The shark teeth in this piece came from an esoteric shop in The Hague, labelled as fossils from an extinct shark species. They immediately reminded me of thorns, and the piece emerged from that

Medusa series
2023
Crafted from antique glass chandelier fragments
Dimensions variable

Photo courtesy of the artist

visual connection. It was an intuitive process, not a rational one. Later, I was reading *The Cosmic Serpent* by Jeremy Narby, about ayahuasca ceremonies in Peru, and he discusses how the hallucinogenic effect reveals the language of nature. For instance, the shaman saw a flower with petals resembling cobra fangs – leading to the discovery of an antidote for cobra bites. This direct, visual communication without categorising knowledge fascinated me. It's the same with the jellyfish piece – an intuitive leap where I fused glass fragments into something resembling a jellyfish. That connection between the visual and material is always a leap of faith in my work. Sorry, that was a bit convoluted!

ID: No, I followed every bit of it! For me, it raises ideas about the skeuomorph, which describes when one object mimics the form of another, like how you saw the shark fossils as rose thorns. It's fascinating how these mimetic forms allow for material and temporal transformations.

NN: I like to think my work exists in a liminal space, where myth meets reality, and dreamscape meets materiality. I'm always exploring the interval between form and material – the space suspended between two worlds.

ID: Could the skeuomorph, by transitioning between different materials and time periods, allow for a form of time travel?

NN: It's more about the process than the destination. I love that feeling when you think you're travelling but can't pinpoint the source. There's a scene in Tarkovsky's *The Mirror* – a great inspiration for me – where a field of grass suddenly sways without explanation. The

cause was a helicopter outside the shot, but in the film, it feels like a sudden gust of wind coming out of nowhere. I want my works to suggest that there's a larger, unseen process at play, when it feels found rather than made, as if emerging from a hidden, natural process. When I travelled with the roses in my hand luggage, airport security was convinced they were real flowers. I love that – on closer examination, you see they're not. It's like introducing a subtle fault into the system that eventually collapses it entirely. My handrail pieces, for instance, are supposed to guide you, but they loop endlessly, bringing you back to the point of departure. These subtle errors disrupt the entire system.

ID: There's something captivating about media that's self-swallowing, recursive, revealing not just the world but the apparatus we use to view it.

NN: I'm interested in those moments when a process collapses in on itself, revealing the error that exposes it. I like the idea of the almost-perfect object that carries within it the seeds of its own destruction.

ID: What are you working on right now?

NN: I just concluded a residency at the Sir John Soane Museum, working from his original Drawing Office for over three months with unprecedented access to the museum's library and collections. I am now working on an exhibition at the museum presenting a new body of work based on the research undertaken during the residency. And just after that, in Spring 2025, I should have a solo show open at the Museum der Moderne in Salzburg, which will showcase my work curated in conversation with the museum's collection and artefacts loaned from the Salzburg Archaeological Museum. It also references my last solo show in Turin, creating larger narratives through sculpture, particularly with a focus on metamorphosis, and the endless transformation of matter on the planet, connecting geology, myth, history, and personal narratives.

ID: That sounds fascinating. When you talk about multi-layered narratives, it's like you're creating a field to explore specific areas of interest.

NN: Exactly. In the last show, I introduced the *Harris Matrix*, an archaeological tool used to map the time scales of objects. Normally, older objects are found deeper, but geological shifts mix up the layers. The *Harris Matrix* helps map these objects, and I applied this concept to my exhibition, presenting it as an archaeological site with a speculative dimension. I'd like to explore this further – mapping the entire exhibition as a single archaeological find.

ID: That sounds like a beautiful way of thinking about time and material. It reminds me of the concept of relationality – things existing in relation to each other. How does that resonate with your work?

NN: Absolutely. The networks and relationships between things are key. In sculpture, you can materialise those connections. It's not just about what something looks like but how the materials behave in relation to each other. That creates layers of relational movement, much like how a snowflake's uniqueness comes from its journey through the environment.

ID: Yes, it's the uniqueness of each point in time, the idea that no two moments are the same. It's a fascinating way to think about your work.

NN: Exactly. I like to think of it as an echo – something that brings back a fragment of the original, slightly changed by the distance it's travelled. That loop of sending something out and seeing what comes back is always present in my work.

ID: That feels like an appropriate poetic end to the conversation. Thank you.

Ian Dawson
Flint 150
2024
3D Printed plastic
150 x 110 x 100 cm

Courtesy of the artist