This resource has been designed to support students’ learning and experiences of sculpture and contemporary art through the exhibition Michelle Nikou: a e i o u at Heide Museum of Modern Art. Learning activities can be undertaken during a Heide Education program, alternatively teachers can use this resource for pre- and post- visit activities.

Curriculum links:
This resource complements the Victorian Curriculum: Visual Arts Levels 3-10 and teachers can adapt the learning activities to meet their requirements for primary or secondary students. For senior secondary art making activities can be used by students independently for individual folios or for teacher led learning with class groups. Exhibition in Focus and Analytical Frameworks activities are designed for VCE Art.

The catalogue, Michelle Nikou: a e i o u includes curatorial texts and extensive information about the exhibition. This resource can assist senior students in substantiating interpretations of artworks with reference to a range of additional resources.

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Ekphrasis or ecphrasis is the graphic, often dramatic, description of a visual work of art.

Teacher’s tips: Students can begin to explore Ekphrasis, writing inspired by art, during their time at Heide. This activity can generate some rich ideas for individual folios and also engage students who enjoy literature. There are many examples of poetry written about art such as John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. Keats describes two lovers dancing to music in perpetual motion but who have been frozen in time.

What men or gods are these? What maidens loth? What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

Materials: Grey lead pencils and notebook or digital device

Method: Select an artwork in the exhibition *Michelle Nikou: a e i o u* and spend some time closely looking and brainstorming words that relate to the piece. As you begin to write your poem, you can consider the following approaches:

- Write about your experience of looking at the art
- Imagine a story behind what you see depicted in the piece
- Speculate about why the artist created this artwork
- Write about the scene or subject being depicted in the artwork
- Write in the voice of a person or object shown in the work of art
- Relate the work of art to something else it reminds you of
- Imagine what was happening while the artist was creating the piece
- Write in the voice of the artist
- Write a dialogue among characters in a work of art
- Speak directly to the artist or the subject(s) of the piece
- Write in the voice of an object or person portrayed in the artwork

Michelle Nikou
*a e i o u* 2015
edition 1/1
etching
Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney
LINE drawing at Heide

Create a **contour drawing** of Michelle Nikou’s artwork *Sage, Rosemary and Thyme* 2012–16. Keep your eyes on the sculpture and without taking your pencil off the page, draw the lines and outlines of this artwork. Try to use only one line to create your drawing.

**Materials** Grey lead pencils and A4 or A3 paper

**Method** Sit far enough from the sculpture so it can all be seen at once – be mindful of the other artworks in the gallery. Look at the outline of the artwork and trace with your eyes the contour lines of each different part of the sculpture. With your pencil in hand, continue to look at the sculpture and when your eye moves so should your hand – but! keep looking at the artwork and try to follow all the lines around without looking down at your paper at all.

**contour** | ˈkæn,tɔːr |
noun (usu. contours)
an outline, esp. one representing or bounding the shape or form of something: she traced the contours of his face with her finger

**Teacher’s tips** Blind drawings are a really effective way of getting your students to loosen up their approach to drawing and really focus on the subject. You are asking them to fix their eyes on the outline of the sculpture and track the edges while simultaneously drawing the contour very slowly, in a steady, continuous line without lifting the pencil or looking at the paper. Depending on the age group, the first drawing can be a challenging one as students are naturally tempted to look down at their hand. Blind drawing can give a sense of freedom and allows students to use their senses of sight and touch. Complete 3-4 blind drawings and from these students can select one to share with the group. These drawings are great to develop into paintings back at school.

Michelle Nikou
*Sage, Rosemary and Thyme* 2012–16
cement, sand, plaster, fibreglass, Boncrete, wood, neon, lead, steel, electrical components
Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney
**TEXTURE**

**Materials** A selection of scrap papers, A4 cartridge paper, crayons and pencils, scissors and glue sticks

Michelle Nikou, *Untitled* 2001 (pictured) or another artwork from the exhibition

Michelle Nikou creates many of her sculptures by casting metals, such as lead. The surface textures are often intentionally coarse and rough to lend the artwork an expressive quality. Closely inspect the textures of the sculptures in the exhibition.

**Method** This is a drawing/collage activity using frottage. Select a few different types of paper and some coloured crayons or pencils. Using the external environment at Heide for inspiration - create some rubbings from different surfaces, for example the wooden benches, walk way and building surfaces, stones and trees. These rubbings can be collaged together to make an artwork that is all about texture. Looking closely at Michelle Nikou’s cast sculptures, students can

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**frottage** |frtZH|
noun
1 Art the technique or process of taking a rubbing from an uneven surface to form the basis of a work of art.
2 A work of art produced in this way.
Tonal drawings can be created in the exhibition with grey lead pencils. Students can also take advantage of the exhibition lighting to make photographs that can be used for tonal drawings in charcoal and conte.

**Materials** Grey lead pencils, phone/camera, charcoal, conte and A3 paper

**Method** Look at the three dimensional artworks in the exhibition *Michelle Nikou: a e i o u*, observe all the surfaces and different textures of the artworks. Which areas are rough and smooth? Have a close look at where the light is on the sculpture from your point of view – are there some shadows on part of the sculpture? Which areas are the brightest and which are the darkest? It might look like there are many shapes created by the tones. Using your drawing material and looking at the tones draw the areas that are light and dark, concentrating on the textures and the shapes. Don’t worry too much about the lines and remember the drawing materials can be smudged and rubbed back so you don’t have to be too light and gentle.

**Teachers’ tips** Depending on your students’ experiences of charcoal/conte you could choose to begin with some short drawing exercises where students experiment with the material. Using the side to shade, rather than the tip, smudging with fingers and rubbing back. Encourage students to look at the shapes created by light and shade and draw these, rather than an outline of the sculpture to fill in.

Michelle Nikou
*Untitled (Basket with neon)* 2012
Cane basket, neon, electrical components
Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney
Adelaide-based artist Michelle Nikou draws on surrealism in a reflective and productive way to transform mundane domestic objects and materials into sculptures of humour, poignancy and marvel. In this exhibition of new and recent work she utilises surrealist strategies such as chance, psychological metaphor, deadpan wit and juxtaposition, and inventively mingles high and low art sources and cultural references. Her work intentionally blurs and extends the boundaries between fine art and craft and often invests unremarkable or overlooked facets of daily existence with new and unexpected significance. Nikou’s practice is also characterised by a deep engagement with language and she forges connections between art and literature that invoke suburban life, family interactions and food. Seemingly disparate concepts and materials are regularly combined to produce unsettling and sometimes absurd effects, such as the fried eggs made in bronze that lend the exhibition its title, the flattened egg forms suggesting the vowels of the alphabet.

As a result of imaginative exploration Nikou has evolved a distinctive visual vocabulary and sophisticated practice with a strong conceptual basis in its play of poetics, aesthetics and forms.

Michelle Nikou
*a e i o u* (detail) 2012
bronze, edition of 3 (with variations) 5 parts
Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

**Curatorial intention – KEY THEMES**

What do the curators say are the key themes or ideas of the exhibition?
Check that you understand the language that is underlined. Add to the glossary any definitions you looked up.

What do you think is meant by high and low art sources? Find an example from the exhibition to support your response.

**Personal response**

Michelle Nikou’s artworks are enigmatic and deliberately left open to multiple interpretations—all of which are equally valid. The viewer is encouraged to make associations, heed their sensory responses, and come to their own conclusions. In this sense Nikou is affirming her belief that art can ‘show us who we really are’.

How do you feel viewing Michelle Nikou’s artworks?
What atmosphere does the work create in the gallery space?
Do the curatorial intentions for the exhibition resonate with you?

**Glossary**

**surrealism** |ˈsərəlɪzm| 
noun [ mass noun ]
a 20th-century avant-garde movement in art and literature which sought to release the creative potential of the unconscious mind, for example by the irrational juxtaposition of images.

**juxtaposition** |ˌdʒʌskəpˈzɪʃən| 
noun
the fact of two things being seen or placed close together with contrasting effect: the juxtaposition of these two images.

**aesthetic** |iˈθɛtɪk, ɛs-| 
adjective
concerned with beauty or the appreciation of beauty: the pictures give great aesthetic pleasure.
language and **ART** : folio

*a e i o u* 2012 pictured above is the artwork for which Michelle Nikou’s exhibition is titled.

Here Nikou reduces the spoken and written word to its essential forms: the five vowels, which are represented by five fried eggs cast in bronze and painted naturalistically. The embryonic shapes of the eggs echo the forms of the vowels. Nikou reminds us that language is often inadequate to express what we really feel. Vowels are in themselves incomplete, they exist as only fragments and require other letters to generate meaning. Nikou demonstrates that, with simple building blocks, there are many alternative forms of expression and exchange available, so long as you remain open to the possibilities.

Create a folio using language or text as your starting point. Take a word or phrase and combine with a simple object, such as an egg.

Michelle Nikou
*a e i o u* 2012
bronze, edition of 3 (with variations) 5 parts
Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

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Artist Paul Klee described drawing as ‘taking a line for a walk’.

In her work Acolyte 2013, Michelle Nikou was curious as to where a line from a toilet roll could go? It spirals around and around and seems to go nowhere.

*Where would you take a line for a walk?*

You might begin by creating your own line drawing or by finding an existing line and considering where it would end up…

**acolyte** |ˈakələt| noun
a person assisting a priest in a religious service or procession.  
• an assistant or follower.

She runs the department through a small group of acolytes.

What do you think the meaning or message of Acolyte 2013 might be after looking at the definition of the artwork’s title?

Michelle Nikou
Acolyte 2013
toilet roll, neon, electrical components
Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney
FORMAL FRAMEWORK is used to analyse how an artwork’s formal elements and principles contribute to its meanings and messages.

Look closely at Michelle Nikou’s artwork and complete a visual analysis of formal elements of the artwork:

**Visual analysis** Describe the subject matter – what can you see?
How have the formal elements of line, colour, tone, texture, shape, sound and form including focal point and space been applied by the artist and to what effect?
How do these qualities contribute to the meanings and messages of the work?

**Technique** What materials and techniques have been used? How have the materials been utilised and applied in the artwork? How has the artwork been made? Precisely? Carefully? Roughly? Expressively? Something else?
How do the materials used or the technical skills shape or affect interpretation?

**Style** What are the distinctive stylistic qualities of the artwork and how do they contribute to meaning? How does the work relate to other works in a similar style?

**Symbols and metaphors** What physical aspects of the artwork contain symbolic meaning and use of metaphor?
This may include the use of formal art elements, the compositional arrangement of figures or objects, the medium or the technique used by the artist, the style in which it is created.

Use the **Analytical Frameworks** to construct a response to a different artwork you have seen in this exhibition.

Michelle Nikou
No Vacancy 2010
powder-coated ceramic, neon, Parker table, electrical components
Cruthers Collection of Women’s Art
University of Western Australia, Perth

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PERSONAL FRAMEWORK is used to interpret how an artist's experiences, feelings, thinking and/or personal philosophy can be reflected in an artwork. It can also be used to gain awareness of the effect of the viewer's cultural background and experience on the interpretation of the artwork.

What relationship does the artwork have to the artist's life and experiences? What visual evidence supports this reading? Has the artist used a specific process or practice in creating the artwork that may reflect their personal philosophy and ideas?

How is the artwork linked to people, places or experiences of personal significance to the artist such as the artist's personal feelings, thinking, aspirations, beliefs, desires or preoccupations to memories, dreams or personal world?

How does the experience and background of the viewer (consider yourself) affect the interpretation of the artwork?

What are the symbols or metaphors explored or utilised in the artwork?

What evidence in the artwork reflects aspects of the artist's life or ideas?

Are there any symbols that might reflect the artist's personality?

What is your personal response to this artwork?

To support your responses for Personal Framework the catalogue, Michelle Nikou: a e i o u

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CULTURAL FRAMEWORK is used to identify the influences on an artwork of the time, place, purpose, cultural and political settings in which it was made. These influences may include historical, political, social, socio-economic, religious contexts as well as aspects of ethnicity and gender.

How do the social, political, cultural or religious contexts of the artwork contribute to its meaning? How have historical or contemporary events shaped the intention of the artist or our understanding of the artwork’s meaning? How do gender values reflect the social context of the time the artwork was produced? How do these values compare to the values of today? How does the physical placement of artworks affect their interpretation? How does the cultural background of the viewer influence the interpretation of an artwork? Select an artwork that appears to represent a particular time period or societal concern. What aspects (subject matter, techniques) of the artwork reflect the culture in which it was made? Are there any cultural symbols used in the artwork? How does the social, political context in which the work was made contribute to its meaning? How does the intention of the artist differ from your view? What meaning did the artist give to the work? Are you interpreting it in the way that was intended? You may have to further research these ideas.

Michelle Nikou
*Sylvia’s Jumper* 2013–16
wool, cement, sand, plaster, Boncrete, wood
Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney
The catalogue, Michelle Nikou: a e i o u includes curatorial texts and extensive information about the exhibition. This resources can assist senior students in substantiating interpretations of artworks with reference to a range of additional resources. Here are some of the texts included in the exhibition that can support student's interpretations.

In her art Nikou frequently engages with language and she will sometimes construct a work from a single word or phrase. No Vacancy and the related installation Vacancy (displayed in the next room) explore similar states of mind from different angles and operate on a number of levels. No Vacancy, for example, deploys the familiar roadside motel signage to convey the sense of anxiety and heightened vigilance induced by encountering the flashing text. At the same time the words point to a mental state of extreme fullness, and the inability to take in any more information.

This playful surrealist work may be interpreted in any number of ways. It appears lightly erotic, taking an unconventional look at how things, people and forces join together and become entwined. Such a reading of the elements triggers various psychological connotations, both positive and negative, associated with close relationships. Yoked is the result of trial and experimentation with different materials and patinas. The forms are rendered with a high degree of naturalism, which is disquieting given that it would be impossible to arrange them like this in reality.

The companion floor pieces Sylvia’s Jumper and Ted Hughes’ Scarf emerged from the artist’s ongoing fascination with the tumultuous and ultimately tragic marriage of leading British poets Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. Plath’s pioneering confessional poetry is both intensely emotional and brutally honest. Crippled throughout her life by severe depression, she committed suicide in 1963 at the age of thirty. Hughes’ role in her decline became the subject of controversy among Plath’s admirers, though after his 1998 publication of Birthday Letters, a poignant recollection of their relationship, he has been viewed in a more sympathetic light.