



**THE GREAT OOLITE, Nika Neelova, 2021**

Writer Lizzie Lloyd discusses the creative commission for Honeybourne Place, Cheltenham with the artist.

Curated and project managed by [www.suzanneheath.co.uk](http://www.suzanneheath.co.uk)  
Photography by [www.stillmovingmedia.com](http://www.stillmovingmedia.com)

## A Fictional Fold

*The Great Oolite*, a piece of public art by London-based Nika Neelova, was installed on the façade of Honeybourne Place in April 2021. Commissioned by the owners of the new building, it was conceived in late 2019, before the pandemic had taken hold. Writer Lizzie Lloyd talks to the artist about how the idea for the project came about. They discuss how Nika found her place in Cheltenham, rooting around the local museum, scouring local Cotswold quarries, and reading about the history of the city. They explore the poetic intersections between landscape, architecture, deep time, and human life, through which real and fictional geologies surface.

Lizzie Lloyd: Let's start with a really open question. How did you go about developing *The Great Oolite*?

Nika Neelova: I'd never been to Cheltenham before so on my first visit I spent a whole day in the Wilson Museum where they have an amazing archaeological display. It was a really useful way to connect to the history and the archaeology of the area.

LL: It's interesting that you chose to get to know the site of the public artwork to-be by visiting the museum rather than walking or travelling around the city?

NN: I am very interested in the concealed sides of cities, which are often underground. A lot of my research takes place in Natural History museums – I love to look at rock samples. There is something so fascinating about looking at these samples that have been extracted from land, and to think about how you can derive meaning about the world based on the study of these objects. It's about drawing a larger image around a series of fragments. But my work in general has a lot to do with archaeology and uncovering layers to reveal the interconnectedness and coexistence between ourselves and the ground that we walk on.

LL: It seems to perform a kind of metaphorical archaeology, in order to bring into focus different relationships between the ground, the city and the human?

NN: In a sense I wanted to replay the sequences of human activity in relation to the landscape in the area by analysing local stone and connecting the human element with the history and geology of the place. I'm fascinated by how the construction of any city requires extraction from the land from somewhere, so I wanted to tap into this industrial underground history. I headed to a range of nearby quarries, where the distinctive honey coloured Cheltenham limestone comes from that is used in the construction of the city. It is like a chain link of cycles: quarries and stones made this town and this town now forms this landscape. Now, of course, all these quarries are disused, abandoned and have become overgrown.

LL: And what did you find on these site visits to quarries?

NN: Gloucestershire contains some of the most varied geology within the UK. Its geodiversity has had a very strong influence on its landscape, vegetation and wildlife, as well as on its industry and heritage. There are over 20 million years of geological time represented in the Cotswolds, mainly through layers of Jurassic rocks, oolitic limestone and beds of clay. Through my visits I mapped the different colours and textures of outcrops that I could see and collected almost a tonne of eroded rocks and soil samples. As I was doing this I was thinking about how geological environments provide the framework for life on earth, and how the interaction between people and their landscape guides the culture that develops from it.

LL: The way the city of Cheltenham has literally grown from the land around it?! Can you tell me more about limestone and its particular appeal for you?

NN: I'm fascinated by the fact that limestone is formed of compressed bodies of marine organisms that lived, thrived, died, and then settled on the seabed. But also by the fact that these creatures would have got minerals from the water in order to form their shells to form their own architectures!

LL: And it also reveals the mutual porosity between physical environments and architectural forms, which makes a lot of sense in relation to your work here in Cheltenham.

NN: Yes, and when you view it like this you realise that limestone is just a phase in a much larger and more dynamic earth cycle, it is alive and active. From the perspective of deep time there is so much movement in stone.

LL: You have alluded to an interest in the changing landscape through the development of industry and the creation of cities, for example. Where does the direct human contact with rock come in?

NN: Well, in Darwin's *The Origin of Species* he writes about how the human hand evolved according to human activity, so the act of designing stone tools has actually redesigned the human hand. And in the Wilson Museum they have this beautiful display of Neolithic polished rocks that show various techniques and processes involved in transforming these rocks into tools. It's like the discovery of the tear shaped stones in layers of geological strata together with the bones of extinct creatures that led people to believe that the tear shaped stones were shaped by human activity, that humans started their activity of design by interacting with the stones.

LL: So the relationship between humans and geology is actually much more two-way than it might at first appear? How does this relationship manifest in the quarries themselves?

NN: In quarries you can really see the interaction between humans and nature. It's this in-between space; the rock has been cut and shaped by humans and then the quarry is left, allowing nature to reclaim it. It's a really interesting boundary between the two worlds.

LL: You went to the local museum, you visited the surrounding quarries, now let's zoom into the site of your artwork which is situated on the wall of Honeybourne Place opposite a large supermarket and a school. How did your thinking about geology, archaeology and deep time feed in to how you developed a work for this particular site?

NN: It happened in parallel to my research on the history and geology of the city of Cheltenham. I started to think about *The City and the City* by China Miéville, the way the two cities in his book exist on the same geographical site but are considered essentially as separate entities.

LL: It goes back to your interest in working across time, seeing the historical time of the city as existing on the same plane as the present-day city as represented by the newly built Honeybourne Place?

NN: Yes, I was interested in designing this work in such a way that it felt like an intersection – in Miéville's book he calls these areas of intersection 'cross-hatched' – where two very different architectures or landscapes merge. I liked the idea that the work might allow you to catch a glimpse of something like another world.

LL: The work is quite subtle; if you weren't looking for it, if you didn't know it existed, could you miss it?

NN: Yes, I see it as like a glitch that happens when landscape and architecture intersect...

LL: ... your rocky outcrop could at once be emerging from, and dissolving, into the wall of the building. Your reference to Miéville's science fiction novel also links to the fact that the stone 'bricks' from which your outcrop is made are not real, they are produced and made by hand, themselves a kind of fictional retelling.

NN: Exactly, they are artificial. My brick slips are made to fit the dimensions of the slate-coloured bricks of this part of the façade of Honeybourne Place. They are like copy-and-pasted bricks, which appear to be cut out of, or added on to, the existing brickwork. For me it was almost like erasing a bit of the façade of the building to uncover a semi-fictional layer behind it.

LL: Given that you spent so much time collecting real stone in the quarry, why not just make a work from the stones in the form that you found them? You have spoken elsewhere about long studio hours spent breaking and making stone..

NN: I'm very interested in larger cycles and cyclical processes. For me collecting the rocks, breaking the rocks and remaking the rocks was a necessary part of the cycle.

LL: In a sense this cycle echoes or emulates, on the one hand, natural geological processes (compression, gravity, erosion, weathering) and on the other, the building of the city from the stuff of its surrounding landscapes (finding, digging, cutting, building)?

NN: Yes, it's like attempting to accelerate the natural geological processes by hand. The 'master' was actually made from all the rocks I have collected that were broken down and reassembled to create this imagined geological fold. Then it was cast in stone dust (from the collected rocks) suspended in Jesmonite. It's a way of almost leaving my own imprint on the landscape, moulding it according to my design, while at the same time trying to make myself invisible by suggesting that these might be naturally formed stones, and so erasing the human artist's agency and presenting it as something that might have appeared here due to larger geological forces.

LL: Calling in to question the relationship between what is considered 'natural' and what 'manmade', 'real' or 'fictional'?

NN: The work is developed from the study of samples of natural rocks from my visits to the surrounding quarries, but through the process of trying to replicate these different layers of clay, bedrock and limestone the forms start to deviate subtly from the original samples. It's important to me that it is an attempt to fictionalise. In the end this is a work of transformation; *The Great Oolite* is a fictional geological fold.

LL: I am fascinated by the title of the work, *The Great Oolite*. 'The Great', here suggests something majestic, even monumental, which contrasts your modest intentions for the work to almost disappear, or blend into its surroundings. And then you have this fantastic word 'oolite' which has such a strange, and unfamiliar ring to it. I had to look it up; Wikipedia tells me that oolite means egg stone and is a sedimentary rock formed from ooids. It sounds like something from science fiction!

NN: When I was researching this work I discovered that The Great Oolite refers to a group of Jurassic rock. I thought it such an alien word to describe something as ordinary as the ground beneath us. It made me realise how little I know about what is really going on under our feet. It feels like a whole other world!

LL: And finally, we should address the particular conditions under which this work was developed, through a global pandemic. How did that impact the experience for you?

NN: It was a very physical journey: visiting the museum, searching through quarries, collecting stones, transporting them back to my studio in London before breaking, recycling and making new stones. It felt quite calming to spend time with these rocks whose lifespan extends far beyond my own, at a time, through the pandemic in which time has felt so relative. It felt really valuable to think about these different historical, geological and human timelines that coexist in the world but often go unnoticed.

May 2020