

VISUAL ART

Nina Sanadze's powerful sculptures – now showing in a major survey at NGV Australia – grapple with the brutal histories and emotional contradictions of public monuments. *By Stephen A. Russell.*

Artist Nina Sanadze interrogates dark histories at NGV Australia



Sculptor Nina Sanadze.

CREDIT: LILLIE THOMPSON

One of Nina Sanadze's closest friends jokes she may be a visionary. They're convinced her work predicts – or perhaps even inadvertently wills into being – the future. Sadly for the Soviet-born, Melbourne-based artist, Sanadze's glimpses of "destiny" keep manifesting as war. "I'm no prophet," she says, shaking off her friend's suggestion. "It's just that history repeats itself."

We're in the third-floor gallery that houses Sanadze's eponymous exhibition – a monumental new sculptural survey at the Ian Potter Centre: NGV

Australia – standing in front of a giant toppled statue. Eagle-eyed visitors may recognise this upended work, her still-attached arm held aloft, as *Call to Peace*, Sanadze’s response to a City of Port Phillip call-out that asked artists to recontextualise public space.

A memory of a memory, it echoes the work of the same name by Soviet sculptor Valentin Topuridze, a towering figure from Sanadze’s childhood. His *Call to Peace* drew inspiration from the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*, which famously graces the Daru staircase in the Louvre. *Call to Peace* was installed on the roof of a theatre in Chiatura, then part of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, not long after the end of World War II.

“There’s a real problem in that victorious stance,” Sanadze says. “A lot of them also have a weapon, a sword or something, which I find quite jarring. If it’s peace, is it victory? You won over the enemy, but it’s not that black and white. How many people are dead? It’s all in that brokenness. Victory means that so many things are taken away.”

Sanadze began carving her version in November 2021. It’s not made from Parian marble but chameleonic polystyrene: the weight of history made light. By the time it was temporarily installed on a scaffolding plinth outside a South Melbourne noodle shop the following March, Russian President Vladimir Putin’s army had invaded Ukraine.

Navigating our relationship with public sculpture and the complex history it represents is a key thrust of Sanadze’s practice. “It’s about questioning the public square as a psychological space for the community, and what does it reflect?” And so we’re looking at this toppled statue recontextualised as part of a larger work, *Call to Peace, Anatomy of the Dream* (2023), now face-planted on a construction-pallet-like plinth.

The figure’s unattached arm sits nearby on top of two boxes. There are multiple variations in various mediums and degrees of completion. A stepladder from Sanadze’s studio suggests the work is caught in medias res. “We’re actually looking at the process of anatomy from the idea’s conception,” she says. “That’s how my creative process goes. I should never end up with almost the exact image of what I wanted, because I changed everything along the way.”

Nothing is static, not even a statue. “No matter how much we try to be immortal through sculpture, through art, we cannot get through this barrier of mortality,” Sanadze says. “It’s very human, to look at what’s supposed to represent the perfect body and, in fact, love the aesthetic of its decay, because we are not perfect, like classical art wants to show us. My art uses this hope of beauty, with its awful perfection, and shatters it into what’s more real. It looks at the end of perfection, where the cracks are.”

A trio of armatures – the skeletal forms on which sculptures are built – heightens this sense of a work in progress. Many of her sculptural

installations are evolving series.

One of the *Call to Peace* figures features a harrowing face, grimacing as if screaming. Sanadze sculpted this new version after war broke out between Israel and Hamas. “You just didn’t think, after the war in Ukraine, that we needed another one,” she says, adding, less sure this time: “I don’t want to be a prophet.”

“I’ve dealt with a lot by just moving on, forgetting and putting things away. With art, you can’t do that.”

Sanadze was born into tumult in Georgia’s capital, Tbilisi, in 1976, as the Soviet Union staggered towards dissolution. Georgia reclaimed independence in April 1991 but its first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was removed by coup d’état at the end of that year. Civil war followed. Sanadze’s family fled to Moscow and then, in 1996, to Melbourne.

“It’s almost as if my sculpture journey of the last five years has been reconnecting with my past,” Sanadze says. “Reliving it through art was more painful than living it in real life, strangely enough. It’s been more challenging than some of those traumatic experiences. I’ve dealt with a lot by just moving on, forgetting and putting things away. With art, you can’t do that. You’re really looking and digging.”

Even in *Monuments and movements*, the playful provocation flanking the gallery’s entrance, there’s a barely buried history. It depicts statues of British monarchs dotted around Melbourne – Queen Victoria, Edward VII and King George V – in two-dimensional form, fashioned from enamel-painted steel and hinged aluminium.

Set on castors, *Monuments and movements* can technically be rolled away, though it’s not recommended that visitors take a joyride down the escalators. “How do I design a sculpture that walks, so it’s part-performance, part-action, and raises curiosity?” asks Sanadze. “All you need is a silhouette to recognise so many monuments. It’s kind of like flat-packing them into one single image, the silhouette of someone on a horse and the queen. Whether it’s New Zealand or here, they all look the same. Propaganda is propaganda, so I was having fun messing with that.”

They look like theatre sets or perhaps shadow puppets, I say. “Oh, shadow puppetry is my little hobby!” Sanadze, a former set designer who has worked with theatre maker Nadja Kostich, smiles. “I haven’t thought about that connection. But I love that you did, because it’s something I have always done with my children for birthday parties.”

Before settling on visual art, Sanadze was a children’s book illustrator who

did theatre design on the side. “It’s interesting, because I got to theatre through books,” she says. “I was taught in Russia that books are the theatre space, the deep window that it creates. And so I used to always make theatrical boxes for my cats.

“Is there sculpture that is not theatre? It’s part of being an installation, setting the scene like a landscape of sorts. I’m questioning my own works because they’re so theatrical, but that doesn’t make them less real.”

In another flourish of theatricality, *Head under the bed* features the 160-year-old head of doomed reformist Russian emperor Alexander II. It lies, Yorick-like, under a spotlight in a darkened corner, with a curtain behind pulled back to reveal a startling glimpse of the NGV atrium below. You can just make out the ghostly lines of a bed and side table in dark metal frames, partly mirroring the bedroom layout captured in an amber-hued photograph mounted on the wall. There lies the same head, incongruously placed next to a pair of Sanadze’s thongs. It’s not Alexander II’s actual head, of course, but the decapitated remains of a statue sculpted by Peter Clodt von Jürgensburg. It once stood in Tbilisi and was replaced by Topuridze’s statue of Lenin. Topuridze held on to the head and his family passed it into Sanadze’s care.

Playful artifice is also on show in Sanadze’s 2018 work *Bollard City*, which wrestles with the proliferation of concrete barriers that sprang up around our public squares following attacks that used cars on pedestrians, and how artists have attempted to soften this defensive architecture with colourful graffiti. Sanadze has created polystyrene look-alikes. Their arrangement in the gallery space brings to mind the broken columns of ancient ruins.

“After I first exhibited them, somebody asked me, ‘All these bollards in the city, are they your sculptures?’ and I laughed so much,” Sanadze says. “I just thought this was hilarious. But it’s also beautiful, in that sense, how art can change your thinking. When you see something as an artwork, you stop seeing it as a bollard. It can turn things upside down.”

Sanadze has several bollards at home that function as side tables, but as ever with Sanadze’s practice – even her more mischievous works – their history isn’t easy to shake off. “I always assume now, when I see somebody’s art, that it’s their self-portrait,” she says. “But if the bollards in my home are my self-portrait, then how much fear do I live in?”

Looked at from another angle, *Monuments and movements* recalls Sanadze’s political action at the 2022 Venice Biennale, an agit-train of sorts in which she walked through the Italian city with a polystyrene replica of Moscow’s Solovetsky Stone, which memorialises the millions of people, including members of her own family, who were victims of political repression in the Soviet Union.

There’s a glimpse of Stalin jutting out of *Apotheosis* (2021), a continuation

of her work *100 Years After, 30 Years On*, which marked the 30th anniversary of the modern Georgian independence movement in 2019. A seemingly random pile of fractured statuary, it's a tribute to the abandoned archive of Topuridze, a beloved neighbour of the Sanadze family. "I grew up with much larger versions of his sculptures," Sanadze recalls. "In their garden there were massive pairs of Lenin's hands and his head scattered around and we kids would climb them. All these figures would be overgrown with grapes and it was really beautiful, that ruined aesthetic that's sort of classical art, but not in its perfect museum form."

Apotheosis reconstitutes fragments of Topuridze's work that she was given during her return visit to Tbilisi in 2018. While his public monuments were destroyed with the fall of the Soviet Union, his family hid small-scale works, plaster models and their moulds, which Sanadze has turned into an intriguing statement: another ruin of sorts with hints of Georgian tradition, the Napoleonic Wars and classical antiquity, including the *Nike of Samothrace*. "I don't necessarily want the viewer to think only about the Soviet kind of monumental ruins, but also all of civilisation," Sanadze says. "It's also an archive and a lifetime of an artist, of what he left behind."

She isn't sure how much longer she can present Topuridze's remnants in this way. "Maybe one day I'll exhibit this work with each one on a plinth," she says. "It's more and more painful to exhibit it every time like a pile, when I actually take a lot of care with them, individually. They are beautiful despite what they represent: Stalin and all this horrible history that killed a lot of people. Maybe they are propaganda, but they're also an artwork, and an artist, that I really care about, and the work combines that conflict."

Does Sanadze think about her own legacy? "I'm thinking about the nightmare I'm leaving my children," she says, laughing. "I'm also dealing with my dad's archive. He was a composer and there's all this stuff. So when you make a sculpture, there's a big responsibility, in a way. You're bringing something into the world, then you leave it and somebody else has to worry about caring for it or throwing it away."

In a dark chamber at the end of the exhibition, *Hana and Child* features 314 clay figures, each an attempt to capture the horror of the "Ivanhorod *Einsatzgruppen* photograph", in which a Nazi soldier points his gun at a mother who is trying to shield her child. Hana, Sanadze's maternal great-grandmother, and three of her children died during the Holocaust. Fired but not glazed, the clay figures preserve Sanadze's thumb marks, with a secret second sculpture within, which Sanadze's mother carved into their interior. "I kept making them until I was exhausted and gave up." Sanadze is overcome with emotion in this unmooring place. "If I am a prophet, then I'm not a very good one," she says.

"There's this sense that there is no hope. How can you lead people to the Holocaust? To more broken sculptures in this ravine?"

There is no exit to the gift shop. Visitors must circle back, instead, towards the light.

“The hope is in empathy,” Sanadze says finally. “It is in our tears.”