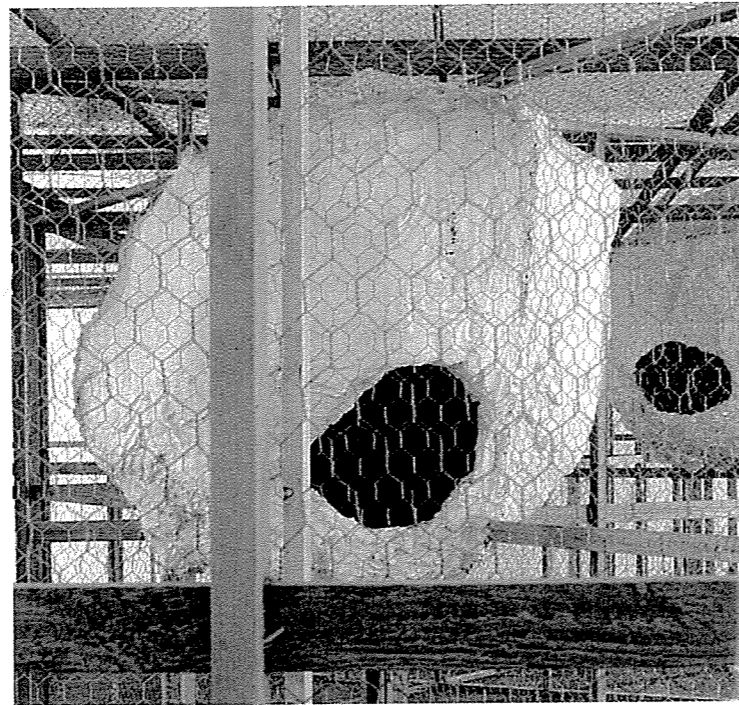


Mike Nelson

Bridget Crone

Mike Nelson, AMNESIAC SHRINE or Double coop displacement, 2006, courtesy the artist and Matt's Gallery, London.



British artist Mike Nelson has been nominated for the Turner Prize and has represented Britain at the Istanbul, Venice and São Paulo biennales. Well known for his labyrinthine and meticulously constructed installations within both 'found' buildings and gallery spaces, Nelson will present a major new work at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), Melbourne, in December 2006. Here Bridget Crone talks with Nelson about the magical language of everyday objects, shrines, and the Australian landscape.

Bridget Crone: I want to begin by talking about *AMNESIAC SHRINE*, or *Double coop displacement* [2006], your most recent work at Matt's Gallery, London, and ask you, first of all, about shrines. You said the work was partly inspired by the shrines you had seen in São Paulo ...

Mike Nelson: I've always had an interest in shrines, or what could loosely be termed 'shrines'. My interest is particularly focused on the way that they illustrate people's belief structures, and it is this motif that has often been used in my previous works. I suppose the work at Matt's Gallery is a conscious attempt to deal with the issue more poignantly and to use the idea of the shrine structurally as opposed to merely symbolically or as a signifier. I think that São Paulo was an influential moment in that I came across a lot of objects and situations that involved Condobla, which is a kind of voodoo, African beliefs mixed with Catholicism, that is widely practised in Brazil. In my 2004 exhibition, 'Modernismo Negro', I distorted a section of the Oscar Niemeyer Pavilion (where the biennale is held) by building a curved wall in the style of the building to create a new space between my wall and the original wall. Up a spiral staircase, a mezzanine contained a scenario that included objects from this religion – the distortion of the façade of modernism containing darker roots of belief.

I've become interested in the structure of shrines; of how objects taken from everyday life are elevated once placed within a given situation. For example, a bottle can become a receptacle for a ceremonial liquid, and cigarettes and monies from different economies can become offerings to a god. There is a

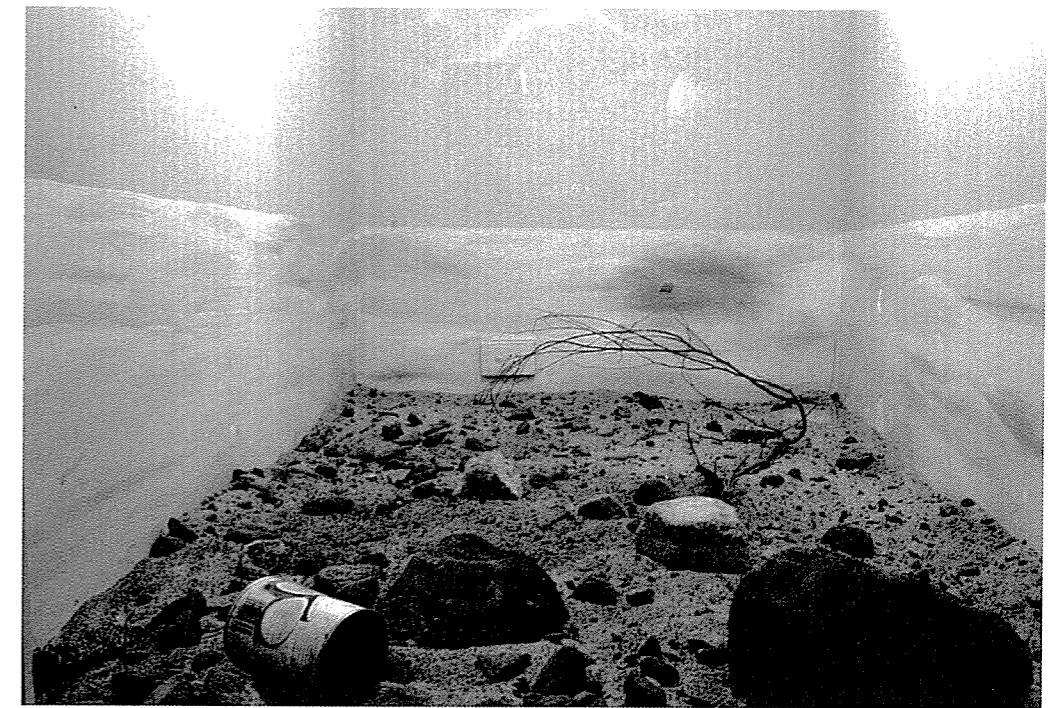
slightly trite and obvious analogy here between that and the making of art, in terms of taking something that essentially might have no value and mythologising it – elevating it to a new level of meaning and value. In a way *AMNESIAC SHRINE* functions using this as a motivation, however, the motifs and imagery are borrowed from the recent history of art: Bruce Nauman's *Double steel cage piece* [1974], mixed with the chicken coop of Paul Thek's *Artist's co-op* [1967], with a little Robert Smithson, *Mirror displacement* [1967]. However, I'm doing it in such a way that it is not a piece of postmodern 'I spy' or pluralist reference-making but slightly naïve or joyous, like an act of worship. These motifs and structures are used in the same sort of way that you would use a bottle or a cigarette within a traditional shrine.

The Amnesiacs were a motorcycle gang I invented in the mid-1990s. Originally they were formed after a friend died; the device allowed me to articulate some ideas about loss, not in a sentimental way but in a low-fictional even clichéd sort of way, which is how I perceived the articulation of loss at the time. The Amnesiacs built things through flashback so, for example, a fire would be a representation of a fire but without the heat that it creates. This method of flashback provided a perfect fictional device with which to select the visual languages within the shrine.

B: *AMNESIAC SHRINE* evokes a kind of bodily sense or sensation and sometimes loss is exactly that, a feeling that is not translatable into language. Is this something you were consciously trying to achieve?

M: Yes, but I'm not sure how conscious such a thing can be. I didn't set out to do it the way it was finally resolved. I knew that I would use a double cage and the chicken coops, and build plaster semi-skull nest-like receptacles for the shrines. But I also collected loads of junk – my normal stuff to use inside the shrine – but it just didn't work and it seemed like a different, cartoon language that somehow jarred against the formalism of the work. So that's why I stripped it all out again. That sense of loss, which I wanted, was much greater when it

detail
Mike Nelson, 24a Orwell Street, 2002,
installation, mixed media, dimensions variable,
courtesy the artist, Matt's Gallery, London and
the Biennale of Sydney.



was empty, of course. It's exactly what you were saying: it's acting in a very different language that, while abstract, is sort of associative. It couldn't be read. The other works have a certain sort of psychology, which affected you but then you could read the encoded triggers and clues. So it took me by surprise a little. I was very keen to make a work that was jarring, not what people would expect.

B: I felt incredibly affected by it. And I wonder, is it more powerful for someone to gain a sense of this? To experience a sense of loss or enclosure, rather than having it described or represented through a language-based or visually representative system?

M: Maybe, in a sense, the use of imagery or props to articulate or to point towards certain situations isn't so necessary any more. The way that the given [political] situation pervades everything now, it's like it's constantly on your mind anyway so to guide someone into that territory by leaving a loaded object such as a newspaper isn't quite as relevant as it might have been ten years ago or even five years ago.

B: Magic has been a big thing in your work over the years, hasn't it? Magic and illusion – I'm thinking about the 2005 Margate show 'Spanning Fort Road and Mansion Street: Between a Formula and a Code', in which you said it was a shame if people realised that it was art ...

M: Yes, however this was most relevant to the 2002 Sydney Biennale work, *24a Orwell Street*, which was probably the least well-received work I've ever made. It caused some antagonism in the Sydney press: one reviewer described it as the most indulgent work in the biennale but apparently hadn't actually realised that we'd built it all; he thought that we'd just found this place and opened it up! Which is a perfect compliment to receive but ...

B: So what about your plans for Melbourne?

M: I'd always had this idea with Melbourne that I wanted to do something about the strong sense of alienation I'd felt when I was in Sydney: a very particular type of alienation that you get in Australia that's to do with the landscape, the

enormity of it and the fact that everybody is clinging to the edges – at the point where you can escape out again.

There's a sense of unreality I find in Australia, which I don't find in other countries or continents. What I know of Australian cinema touches upon this – *Picnic at Hanging Rock* [1975] or *The Long Weekend* [1977]. I suppose that's the kind of territory I'm interested in. It's quite heavy and obvious territory to deal with, but I suppose that's what attracts me.

The work for ACCA builds on works made for Istanbul in 2004 and 'Modern Art Oxford', also 2004. The former used multiple images with the darkroom site of their own development, while the latter used the juxtaposition of real space with the projected image. But the ACCA work also may entail a bit of a road trip into the interior of Australia.

B: Have you thought about what route your road trip might take?

M: Well, I don't want to get too sort of nerdy about it: I don't want to start doing the 'I've traced the footsteps of blah, blah, blah, ... and spuriously reference something. The journey you take is itself an actuality, and whether this experience can actually be sensed in the resulting work, I don't know. We're back to language and experience again. This reminds me of a conversation I had with [American artist] Mike Kelley a few years ago. We had a discussion about the props in his early performances; some would be crucial to the reading of the work while other objects would just be there – they all somehow knew their position or their part in the performance which would imbue them with a certain authority. Sometimes I find that work that tries to validate itself in too conscious a way by invoking some historical reference or factual remnant doesn't have the strength or the resonance that an object might have if its purpose had been kept quiet.

Mike Nelson, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, December 2006 – February 2007; *AMNESIAC SHRINE* or *Double coop displacement*, Matt's Gallery, London, 7 June – 30 July 2006.