

MIKE NELSON

lonely planet

“Nelson’s art has the psychic malignance of surrealism, as it pursues the city’s forgotten corridors and long-locked rooms. It’s gothic, baroque, it’s whatever name you give an art that fabricates alternate worlds. His installations are a means of storytelling, but the kind of story he tells is not a narrative. It is a series of moments, an atmosphere.”

Jonathon Jones

Mike Nelson was born in Loughborough, London in 1967. He studied at Reading University from 1986-90, and went on to complete a MA in Sculpture at Chelsea College of Art & Design from 1992-3. His work has been exhibited extensively in group and solo exhibitions in London, Europe and internationally.

Mike Nelson was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2001 and represented Britain at the Venice (2001), Istanbul (2003) and Sao Paulo (2004) biennales. He has since earned a reputation as one of Britain’s most exciting artists. He is represented by Matt’s Gallery, London, www.mattsgallery.org and Galleria Franco, Turin www.franconoero.com.

inspiration and investigation

Nelson began creating his narrative based works in the early 90’s, exploring his interest in Soviet science-fiction; stories that were created by writers to bypass censors and reflect the modern-day human condition.

Nelson uses found objects and materials to create large-scale architectural installations built within existing spaces including buildings, old buses and gallery spaces. His work includes maze-like constructions of interconnecting rooms and corridors which are filled with a range of salvaged trash and treasure.

His work has often incorporated the theme of “the journey” and the experience of travelling to another time and place. The experience of negotiating Nelson’s work is often disorientating and intriguing as the viewer embarks on a scenic tour of his other worlds which are embedded with references to literature, film, politics and culture.

His exhibition, *The Coral Reef*, 2000, took viewers through a labyrinth of rooms and corridors, carefully constructed to emulate some other place; a taxi cab office, an arcade parlour, a junkies squat, each filled with carefully selected objects to complete the scene and provide clues about past inhabitants.

Nelson’s literary influences, include the C20th writer Jorge Luis Borges, whose stories mixed the real and the fantastic; Stanislaw Lem, the Polish science-fiction, philosophical and satirical writer; HP Lovecraft, American author of fantasy, horror and science fiction and Jules Verne whose stories include: *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and *Around the World in Eighty Days*. Mike Nelson’s exhibitions have also drawn inspiration from obscure cults, bikie gangs, utopian architecture, and subcultural mythologies.

In 2001, Nelson created a “Tardis-like” time travel experience, called *Nothing is True, Everything is Permitted*, in which he first began playing with the idea



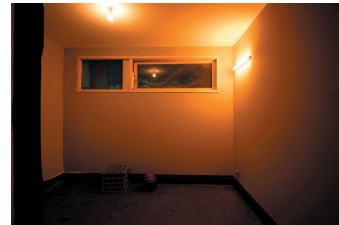
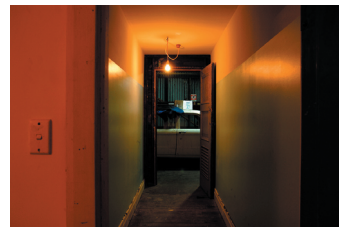
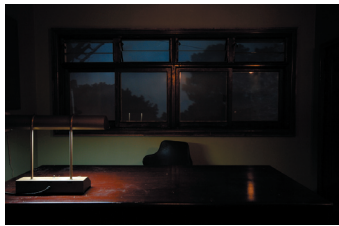
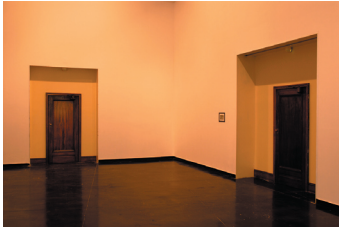
photograph
Mike Nelson’s *Lonely Planet*, 2006
courtesy the artist



Mike Nelson
The Pumpkin Palace, 2003
courtesy the artist



Mike Nelson
Triple Bluff Canyon, 2004
courtesy the artist



Mike Nelson
Lonely Planet, 2006
 ACCA
 courtesy the artist

of the cultural travel guide, *Lonely Planet*. Nelson was intrigued by the fact that old editions of these guide books describe countries and places that no longer exist, such as the USSR. The work featured numerous copies of *Lonely Planet* guides, placed in many of the rooms.

Nelson's installation at the Venice Biennale, *The Deliverance and The Patience*, 2001, was based on William Burroughs' *Cities of the Red Night* and named after the two ships which were used to transport settlers from Bermuda to Virginia during the eighteenth century. According to Nelson, this piece "deliberately drew parallels between seventeenth-century trade, piracy and the birth of capitalism with present-day trafficking in human beings."

Much of Nelson's work looks to the past for inspiration and refers to a time gone by. The work, *Triple Bluff Canyon*, 2004, included a wooden structure and a series of oil drums partially submerged in tonnes of sand which referenced the work of US artist, Robert Smithson, *Partially Buried Woodshed*, 1970 and the Iraq war. Other installations such as *Spanning Fort Road and Mansion Street - between a formula and a code*, 2005; *Magazin: Buyuk Valide Han*, 2003 and *Mirror Infill*, 2006, all also feature the increasingly redundant photographic dark-rooms that recur throughout Nelson's works.

More recent works have drawn inspiration from religious and cultural beliefs such as *Modernismo Negro*, 2004, which included objects from a widely practised religion in Brazil called Condobla. Known as a kind of voodoo, Condobla combines African beliefs with Catholicism. *Amnesiac Shrine, or Double Coop Displacement*, 2006, also explored Nelson's interest in shrines and "the way that they illustrate people's belief structures."²

Parallels can be drawn between Nelson's work and the work of Russian artist Ilya Kabakov who creates theatrical installations based around specific characters. Interestingly, Kabakov's installations are accompanied by a written narrative which explains the work, while Nelson relies on the viewer's own recognition of symbols and clues which have a myriad of possible interpretations.

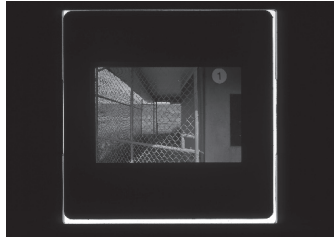
lonely planet

Lonely Planet, Nelson's latest project, transformed ACCA's exhibition spaces into a labyrinthine series of rooms and corridors littered with objects collected by Mike Nelson on his travels around Melbourne and Victoria, including an old, beaten-up 1962 Ford Falcon!

The title of the exhibition is a reference not only to Australia's global position, but also to the iconic travel guide, *Lonely Planet* which originated in Melbourne in the early 70's. These guides provided travellers, often travelling on a shoe-string budget, with detailed information about far and exotic destinations all over the world. Nelson was interested in the idea that while these books opened up the pathway to many 'undiscovered' places, they have also contributed to their erosion and exploitation by Western civilisation.

Lonely Planet builds on Nelson's ideas explored in his 2001 installation at The Institute of Contemporary Art, London, *Nothing is True, Everything is Permitted*. The theme of travel is central to the work, referenced by numerous carefully selected objects such as the three poorly framed black and white photographs of travellers, a collection of shells and a newspaper clipping titled "Holiday of a Lifetime, Travel Tips for Travellers".

Nelson was also inspired to create *Lonely Planet* after his visit to Sydney, for the 2002 Sydney Biennale, where he created the work titled, *24a Orwell Street*. In particular, Nelson noticed the striking presence yet absence of the Australian landscape, which he describes as both "vast and claustrophobic", with a striking absence of any historically significant or monolithic structures created by our indigenous peoples. This message, Nelson conveys in part through the placement of a photograph of an aboriginal boy, sitting cross-legged with a claw hammer in front of him, strategically placed in the work shed.



Mike Nelson
Lonely Planet, 2006
 ACCA
 courtesy the artist

Nelson also included a series of slides in the work, selected from 800 images recording his travels around Victoria; from the mining areas of Castlemaine and Bendigo in the north, to Bright and the southern regions of Gippsland. These images, projected onto convex mirrors, morphed and manipulated, suggested a narrative or filmic structure, which attempted to capture the vastness, the isolation and sense of claustrophobia of Australia.

materials and techniques

Nelson's installations incorporate a variety of materials salvaged from wreckers, second-hand shops and flea markets. For *Lonely Planet*, all of the materials were collected after Nelson's arrival in Australia, which meant embarking on a rigorous program over a 2 month period of sourcing, collecting and constructing. A part of the work was prepared off-site within a large warehouse and then, with the help of a team of builders and tradespeople, constructed within ACCA's exhibition space.

Lonely Planet in part evoked the sense of a 1930's institution, with its heavy wooden doors, salvaged from the old Melbourne Cricket Ground Members stand, complete with old speakers mounted high up on the walls and two-tone hospital blue and beige corridor. ACCA's existing doors were concealed and new internal walls, floors and ceilings constructed, resulting in a totally transformed space, taking you out of the gallery and into Nelson's fictional world. The floors, skirtings, trims and windows, complete with layers of dirt, grime and pungent smells, including strategically placed objects such as old photos, newspaper articles, shells, a basketball, a hammock and old tools, all contributed to the eerie sense of familiarity and the feeling that whoever was there, could return at any moment!

curriculum links

Both middle years and VCE level students will have the opportunity to explore a range of learning areas:

victorian essential learning standards

- How does Mike Nelson communicate his ideas in his work?
- Explore the way in which Mike Nelson's work explores particular influences, such as our relationship to the Australian landscape.
- Examine and discuss the way in which Mike Nelson places particular found objects and creates a particular time and 'aesthetic' in his work.
- Compare and contrast Mike Nelson's work to other installation artists.
- Mike Nelson's installations draw on a broad range of influences surrounding other cultures, sci-fi stories, time and history. Construct a collaborative installation from found objects which explores a sci-fi style story or a particular historical event.
- Nelson's work reflects the way in which artists utilise the idea of the narrative or the story in art. Write about the way you felt when you experienced Mike Nelson's work, *Lonely Planet* or write about another environment which made you feel strange or disoriented.
- Nelson's work also refers to subcultures. Explore and discuss what we mean when we refer to subcultures within society?
- Research the history and development of some of the early *Lonely Planet* travel guides and the places they were written about.
- What are your thoughts about ecotourism and the effects of tourism on fragile environments?

uce level

art

- Explore the way in which Nelson responds to current social, historical, and political issues in his work.
- Explore the way in which Nelson has developed a distinctive style in his work.
- Examine the objects, techniques and media in Nelson's work and how each element conveys meaning.
- How important do you think the display and layout of Nelson's installation is to interpreting his work?
- Explore the cultural contexts and social issues raised in Nelson's work. Compare and contrast these issues with the work of other contemporary artists.
- Refer to the formal elements in art (e.g. line, shape, space, value (light and dark), colour and texture) to analyse and discuss the way in which Nelson presents and communicates his ideas.
- Critically analyse the work of Mike Nelson, using two interpretive frameworks (for e.g. cultural or historical context or postmodernism) and interpret some of the meanings and messages to support your personal point of view.
- Compare and contrast Mike Nelson's work to the work of two other artists of your choice, pre and post 1970.
- How do you think Mike Nelson's work compares to the Situationists; a group of politically motivated European artists of the 1960's.
- Review and analyse a selection of Nelson's literary sources, including HP Lovecraft, Jules Verne, Jorge Borges and Stanislaw Lem in relation to Mike Nelson's, *Lonely Planet*.
- Compare other contemporary artists, such as the Russian artists, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov with Nelson, who also create large-scale environments.



photographs
Mike Nelson's, *Lonely Planet*, 2006
ACCA
courtesy the artist

studio arts

- Identify and discuss the broad sources of inspiration Nelson has used in the production of his work.
- Identify and discuss the materials and techniques Nelson uses in the production of his work.
- Identify and discuss signs and symbols used in Nelson's work and the way in which they convey meaning.
- Analyse the aesthetic qualities of Nelson's work and the way they contribute to the communication of ideas, including the development of a particular style. Compare this with the work of another artist from a different period in art history.
- Explore the role of the public gallery in presenting significant works of art by contemporary artists, which may defy the public's perception of what they understand 'art' to be, like Mike Nelson.



paper plate
Mike Nelson's, *Lonely Planet*, 2006
ACCA
courtesy the artist

studio arts cont.

- Describe the range of difficulties which you think Nelson may have encountered in developing and creating a work like *Lonely Planet*.
- What are some of the issues facing artists whose practice deals primarily with ephemeral art such as installation art? Discuss this in relation to the sale, storage, maintenance and longevity of this type of art.
- Gather a range of commentaries on Nelson's work from reviews, press clippings, art texts etc. Critically review the concepts and ideas behind his work based on your own and a range of other viewpoints.
- Explore the labyrinth in history and the work of other contemporary artists who have utilised the labyrinth in their work.

1. Rachel Withers, 'A Thousand Words. Mike Nelson Talks About His Recent Work', *Art Forum*, Feb 2002.
2. Bridget Crone, 'Mike Nelson', *Art and Australia*, vol.44. no.2, 2006, pp.172-173.