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entertainment

# A generation sent packing

■ VISUAL ART  
Alison Barclay

**B**Y THE time Mike Nelson finished building what looked like a backpackers' hostel, it was already derelict.

The spartan cells would never shudder to the footfall of "travellers" — never tourists! — or echo with the self-congratulation that often accompanies those who choose to do it rough.

Yet Nelson spent several weeks roaming Victoria for the salvage that became these 17 rooms, and the "few bits and pieces" that adorn them.

He even named his edifice *Lonely Planet*, after the Melbourne publishing house that sells six million travel guides a year, mostly to backpackers.

One day, perhaps, travel guides will be the only evidence that the cultures they describe once existed.

"I think that Lonely Planet generation has already passed," the 39-year-old British artist says. "It has now given way to mass tourism."

"There is this kind of awkward relationship between tourist guides and the countries they describe. They encourage people to visit and the country is slowly eroded. And the world was a very different place."

"Not long ago there were no mobile phones. Now you can step into an internet cafe on a mountain in Tibet."

"The idea of travel, for a sense of escape or loneliness, has gone. The international has shifted to global."

He chuckles, recalling his own "hardships". "Trying to find a phone in Istanbul took ages. You had to queue up for one, and then it wouldn't ring."

For all our cyberian wonders, London-based Nelson feels curiously isolated when he comes to Australia.

The Reading University graduate, who was short-listed for the Turner Prize in 2001, is used to creating strange spaces around the world. For

the 2001 Venice Biennale, he evoked what might have been a Muslim prayer room and, next to it, a grungy London squat.

In 2002 he took over a shabby Kings Cross shop to build a reptile museum for the 2002 Sydney Biennale and feel the first flutters of a great Australian desperation.

Expertly knocking together his *Lonely Planet* — he worked as a builder to pay his way through art school — Nelson wonders why such a large proportion of Australians go travelling, and why some turn to illegal drugs. Is it all about escape?

"When I was rebuilding that old place in Kings Cross, I was pretty shaken by the full-on heroin use in that area."

"Howard Arkley, Nick Cave, a lot of your cultural icons have a history with it. And that sort of intrigued me."

"What is it about the Australian psyche that turns to it? Because it is kind of like paradise here. It is an easy life compared with most countries."

"And yet there is something about the lack of remnants of a past civilisation; there is no sense of presence of people who have been there before."

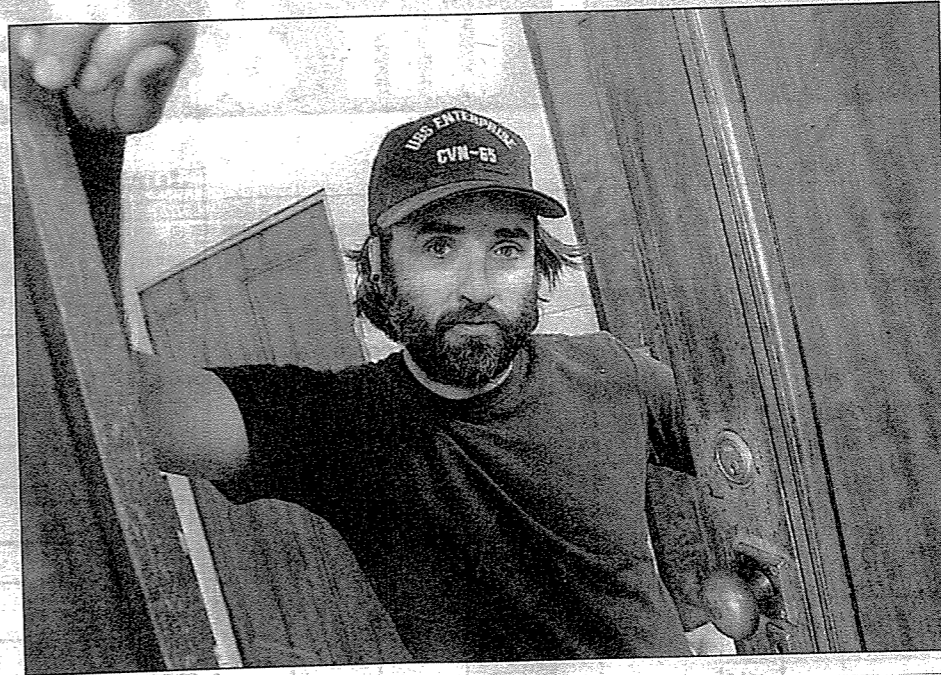
"In Egypt, the pyramids are a marker of the end of that civilisation. The lack of that marker here is quite disconcerting. Somehow the vastness of the landscape can make you feel claustrophobic."

Sitting in his borrowed workshop across the road from the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Nelson admits to feeling like Robinson Crusoe.

"You do a show in London and they are looking at it from Berlin, Rome, Turin," he says. "But here it is so far away. You shout and you can't be heard. It is like space travel."

## ■ LONELY PLANET

Where: ACCA, 111 Sturt St, Southbank until February 25



**On top Down Under:** artist Mike Nelson, inside his walk-through installation *Lonely Planet* at ACCA, believes Australia is "kind of like paradise".

Picture: BELINDA O'NEILL