

Wednesday, January 3, 2007 THE AGE

Doors of perception

VISUAL ART
MIKE NELSON

Lonely Planet, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 111 Sturt Street, Southbank, until February 25

Robert Nelson Reviewer

MIKE Nelson's installation at ACCA is like a film set in which you are the actor as well as the audience.

The first room you enter contains a few photographs in an otherwise bare room. The black-and-white images of young men posed at outdoor locations are framed in black tape, makeshift and fragile. From this offputting visual thinness, you sense that the installation is sparse and a bit precious. Little prepares you for what is inside.

There are two doors, which evidently don't belong to the pale world of galleries. They're old, varnished, wooden things, the kind that belong with varnished skirting boards and cornices. They're shut, but the urge to open them is irresistible. They give on to a narrow chamber, with creaky worn floorboards and damaged masonite; and these passages lead to a labyrinthine suite of small rooms, of a dowdy, run-down nature.

There are windows high up on the lowish walls, presumably so as not to interfere with peripheral furniture, and the space can be exploited for optimum usage. There's little furniture, just the remains of people who have gone. Suddenly you're like a child, illicitly exploring a forbidden deserted place and wondering who lived or worked there.

Outside the dark interiors is a series of projections, also somewhat dim, suggesting a place in the country at dusk. In one part is an unclad workshop with a fan going, and in another there's a garage with a rusty old car parked in it. So you're aware that people are around, the place is still being used, though most of the rooms are empty.

A long corridor services small rooms with traces of squatting, shifting inhabitation by youth who have left photographs, sandal and basketball. One of the rooms has an old toilet door, though there are no facilities inside. At the end of this sequence is a room with a large desk, such as might have been used for a hotel, a railway or an office.

This mix of authority and vagrancy is uneasy but also somehow melds in the fantasy, an abandoned institutional place where boys and adventurous girls hang out. It's partly innocent and partly eerie, silent, as if you could spontaneously do anything in there that took your fancy. Here is the spot for the fond



Installation artist Mike Nelson with part of his work.

PICTURE: EDDIE JIM

hobbyist and bricoleur and here are the nightly digs for lovers and delinquents passing through.

You try to create a narrative that might make sense of the place, but it's too obscure. It's a shack, a stop-over, but also a derelict suite of government offices. The dust, even on vertical surfaces, genders the place as male, which the workshop and car confirm. It's a place where dirt and grease are welcome and if you touched any of the surfaces you might be absorbed into the grime.

Mysterious and moody, a bit nostalgic, this odd place from around 1940 seduces you and confuses you at the same time. You want to believe in it, and even the light fittings and the smells have a certain credibility, with all of the carpentry undoubtedly sourced from junkyards. The complex confesses its tales and histories in the very sprawl, a misshapen ground plan, where the economies of an original design are deformed by growth over the decades or mutilated by the reconstruction process of the artist.

In the world of real estate, this

ramshackle edifice would be condemned. Its offence is its idiosyncrasy. Land use is dictated by commercial return — which encourages neat conformity — just as architecture is dictated by style. So this tired ambulatory of grot and splinters would face demolition. Depending on your psychology, you might feel you're trespassing as an intruder or perhaps as the inspector about to agree to its effacement.

All of this makes it a moving artwork. With the old masters, you wonder how they achieved their effects. With Nelson, you wonder how he (as a British artist) sourced the components. The stage set has a credibility right down to the fittings, the coatings of dust and the odour. The only part that breaks the magic is the slide show outside the rank of offices. The flicker and clunk of the projectors are distracting and messy; it would have been better if Nelson had created an atmospheric scene painting of mural size, yielding a single mood, and committing to it.

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