



# MIKE NELSON

## stepping into the story

Nelson is known for immersive installations that take over entire gallery spaces creating an architecture entirely other to that of the white cube. His palette consists of empty corridors, maze-like interconnecting rooms, bare light bulbs, dereliction, junk shop props, detritus, Marie Celeste-like dis-inhabited spaces. One commentator provides a concise overview of the Nelsonesque immersive experience noting that one can find oneself:

in just a few steps, travelling between a banal office space (complete with working PC, desk, plants, plug sockets, light switches) to the inside of a garden shed (petrol smell, old tools, planks, nails, rags) to an empty room bathed in eerie red light. Both disorientating and mesmerizing {Rogers, 2003 #883}

And Nelson is a particularly English species of visual artist in the sense that his environments stem from literary influences including: Joseph Conrad, Jules Verne, Jorge Luis Borges, H. P. Lovecraft, Stanislav Lem. Concerning the storytelling aspect of his installations he observes:

It's like when you read the first few pages of a book. You know it's not real, it's a fiction, but you agree somewhere



The Delivery and The Patience, 2001

along the line to go along with it and enter the fictive realm ... You can almost start to read things subconsciously; you become interested in the spaces, doors and the objects within that space, as opposed to thinking constantly: 'I'm in a piece of art'. {Grieve, 2001 #884}

The seduction of literature lies in the 'suspension of disbelief': the way in which we can be drawn into a narrative to the point where we are unable to put the book down, or can't wait to reopen it. In his immersive installations Nelson seems to want to awaken the intimate relationship between the reader and the storyteller. Yet, in the case of installation sculpture there is usually no clearly defined narrative structure. The medium of sculptural installation provides a potential advantage over that of the conventional, linear literary narrative because sculptural installation usually places the viewer in the position (as in life) of making sense out of a scattered array of objects.

Nelson's immersive installations take over entire art galleries, however large the space may be, creating theatrical *mise en scènes* based on a palette including: bare light bulbs, disorienting corridors, Marie Celeste-like rooms, a touch of decrepitude, and sand. His sculptural installations are carefully constructed spaces of neglect, that sometimes turn towards the dark side of the human condition.

For example, Nelson's 2001 Venice Biennale installation *The Delivery and The Patience* was based on a particularly horrendous episode in British colonial history. On 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1610 two ships *The Deliverance* and *The Patience* landed in



Jamestown Virginia to investigate the troubles there. There were only sixty survivors out of the previous year's complement of 500-600 settlers. It was a gruesome story of bad weather, Indian attacks and the lack of survival skills in what was then a wilderness. These vicissitudes led to the settlers eating all their livestock, then their cats and dogs, rats and eventually resorting to cannibalism {Borio, 1998 #885}. This grim background story is reflected in the uncanny psychological atmosphere running through Nelson's *mise en scène*: an empty bar, what might be a devil worshipper's alter, a junky-style lone mattress on the floor of a derelict room. As Richard Grayson observes:

We move through the wooden door into spaces that shift us between sweatshop and workshop, travel agents and gambling den, from rooms for pedagogy to rooms for pleasure. Spaces where we can slip from one state and condition into another. The immediately startling thing about this is that these spaces and architectures are unpeopled ... we are perhaps the first person to step there since ... well, whatever happened ... we are cast in the role of part trespasser, part archaeologist and part detective: a person moving through the traces of other's existences trying to understand what catastrophe may have caused this emptiness and what condition may have shaped the inhabitants lives. {Grayson, 2001 #705}

People who have experienced Nelson's work will be able to sympathize with the sense of psychological disorientation evident in Grayson's account. And one can note a similar response in another commentary on a different Nelson instal-



lation, *Coral Reef*, 2000 (Matt's Gallery): 'even now, thinking about those gloomy corridors, I have goosebumps' and 'when you wanted to get out, you came up against a false door' {Jones, 2001 #886}.

In *The Deliverance and The Patience* the sense of eerie vertigo served to underscore the dark portrait of the human condition supplied by the historical narrative informing this installation. The viewer effectively steps into a space of the Id: a psychological dimension entirely antithetical to the coolness and precision of minimal-conceptualism. And on this theme, speaking of an earlier work *To the memory of H.P. Lovecraft*, 1999 (Collective Gallery, Edinburgh), Nelson recalls: 'I'd hung a heavy steel re-enforced door at the entrance to the gallery, inside I had demolished everything up to the height that the unseen beast could have reached which had fictively tried to eat itself out of the white cube' {in \ Rogers, 2003 #883}. In place of a minimalist-conceptualist temple to reason, we enter a sanctum dedicated to the other of reason