

“The English subject: a review of Mike Nelson’s work in a recent exhibit”

Mike Nelson: Extinction Beckons

Hayward Gallery

By Rui G. Cepeda



Photos 1 & 2 Installation view of Mike Nelson, *I, Imposter*, 2011; and, installation view of Mike Nelson, *Triple Bluff Canyon (the project room)*, 2004. Various materials. Photos: Matt Greenwood. Courtesy the artist and the Hayward Gallery.

Mike Nelson’s installations and sculptures take the viewer through a fascinating journey composed by fictive worlds that echo the eerily modern English society. Nelson (b.1967, England) reflects and presents the viewer with the strange and startling idea of an England as it was when it was a producer and a consumer of the means of production. He does that by allowing the viewer to spend time inhabiting, in a passive mode, the artistic installations and sculptures in themselves. Those are art objects that have been assembled in a method to allow the viewer – us – to experience the multiplicity of personal states through

an interconnected labyrinth of psychological environmental rooms. We, as passive foreign audiences, on our side, can perceive those artworks as multiple representational environments within one world, the artist own vision built with discarded objects of a derelict past that has passed.

In his most recent exhibit, under the title 'Extinction Beckons', at a local brutalist art space, in London, Mike Nelson' transports us into the realms of what was modern England through what can be a Tarkovskian framework. Many of the art works on view were shown for the first time since their initial exhibition, including, for instance, *The Deliverance and The Patience* (2001), a labyrinth which was originally conceived inside a large disused brewery at the 2001 Venice Biennale; and *I, Imposter* (2011), an immersive installation originally made for the 2003 Istanbul Biennial. Nelson' fictional art works remind and allow us, the viewers, to experience from the present, even if for a just a moment, the disused and abandoned traits, costumes, habits, and system of belief that use to lead and define modernity, and, subsequently, might come to define the upcoming future. According to artist's fictional observations into the outside world, all things are central to human existence and the future is without future. Analogous to psychological dreams his works can be interpreted as "dissociative episodes in which the past is re-lived vividly as if it is occurring in the present."¹

Slowly moving through the art space brutalist corridors leading to abandoned interiors, the viewer shifts through the debris of modern life, and, gradually, enters into a psychosomatic dream like state. In this *I, Imposter* (2011) the visitor is initially invited to walk through an enclosed red-room and make to pan over a space packed with dusted doors, gates, carved stores, chandeliers, boxes with disused paraphernalia that we tend to ignore. As if standing in a dark-room waiting for light drawings to come to be photographs, those disused objects still don't have a fully elaborated meaning attached to them, but, rather,

¹ Wall text, *Mike Nelson: Extinction Beckons*, Hayward Gallery, London.

rely on our illusion of a captured mnemonic reality to be interpreted and completed.

As if when we start to go to sleep, getting deeper and deeper into a dream like state, we continue to walk through the interior of the brutalist art centre and are, then, invited to willingly enter an enclosed corridor.



Photo 3 Installation view of Mike Nelson, *The Deliverance and The Patience*, interior, 2001. Various materials. Photo: Liam Harrison. Courtesy the artist and the Hayward Gallery.

Down the rabbit hole *The Deliverance and The Patience* (2001) sustain us sleepiness in a state of desolation of lost, while reflecting upon short-lived journeys through belief systems, on stories and cultures that resisted inclusion and multiplicity. Abandoned rooms laid-out after abandoned rooms transports us to a strange disarray of sets that seem to be suspended in time. Recollections of a gambling den, a captain's bar, a travel agent's office, a living room, some travel suitcases storage together with voting placards under a staircase, etc. Those ambiguous sets, connected by deserted corridors, bear witness to a homogenised political ideal that was transformed into a decadent

and deserted present; or, what we have come to define as being contemporaneous. At the end, as if one is looking for a place to lay down, for how tired one might think one is, is where we will be laying down to be able to finally sleep.

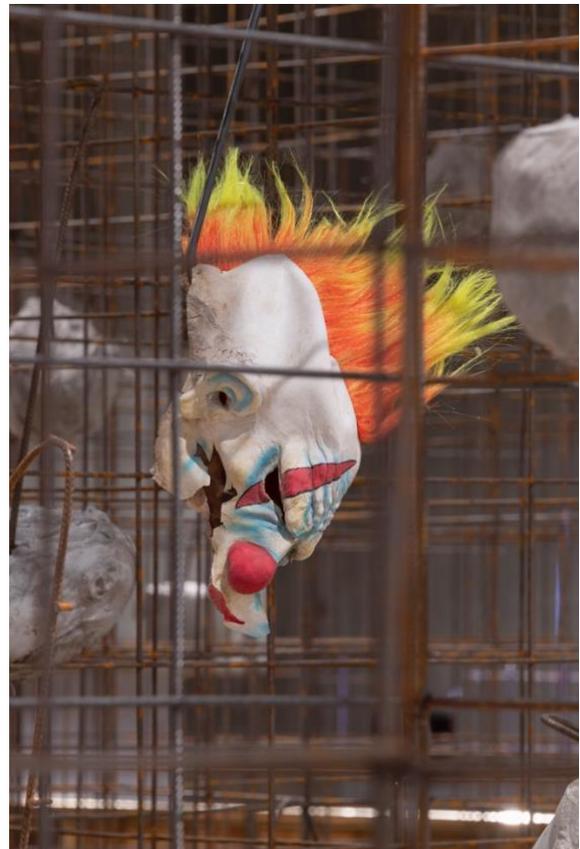
As expected, in *Untitled (Public Sculpture for a Redundant Space)* (2016) it is suggested that we all (intellectuals, critics, artists, visitors, etc.) should lay to rest under a set of stairs as redundant living props. Under modernism intellectuals, writers, artists, and visitors, who believe in what they believe, in nothing, had their capacity for critical thinking atrophied. To some subjects it happened through the lack of use; in others, the look in their eyes is blank, loss; while, others, were thinking how to sell themselves expensively, how to earn more, how to get paid for every breath taken regardless of how passionate they are about the subject-matter. Material bodies scavenged from society as with any other vagrant looking for shelter, in a city where million pound residencies commune together side-by-side with charity and gambling shops, and social-drug and entertainment addicts. Within those personal dominions what kind of people are we? Only Nelson knows. As Nelson' reminds us, his art works resemble science fiction novels. Science fiction has long been confronting what it means to be 'human' in a technological age; or disputing 'post-human' narratives imagining possible futures in which humans live alongside androids, aliens and robots, and AI' power for imitation and replication. More specifically, Nelson's tension lies in the inescapable idea of humans' predicting and controlling the future, while living in the present and working with the past.

From the perspective of this imagined collective of fictional experiences, Nelson' installations and sculptures lead me to somewhere else. To the idea that the true illusion about modernity is that it is more humiliating, and reminds me of how precarious democratic contemporary societies are. Specifically, in regards to the re-examination of being without one of its most "valued" principles: free speech. Thus, the idea is that contemporary Western societies are societies that have got loss in the process of exporting services, being those financial and

economical, cultural, educational, of entertainment, etc., to other nations across the globe in order to become human. Like many other European and North American societies, contemporary England in the past one hundred years has moved away, by means of two deadly ideological conflicts, from being a society supported by the agricultural and industrial industries, to become a society based on an industry of services. In the process, many traditional public celebrations of common and natural living, such as May Day and the Spring harvest have been taken from society by an infrastructure of retrograde thinking, autocratic governance, and despotic power. For instances, in England, as a so called democratic society, laws were passed by an an allegedly democratically elected government to restrict the exercise of the right to publically protest and to voice dissent, when, concurrently, it is publicly asked for public allegiance in the support of the actions of a non-elected figure. Regardless of what a government spokesperson might say, the political difference to places like Russia, North Korea, China, or Middle Eastern countries starts to become marginal.

I am thinking more along the line of immersive experiences representing external coercive forces than material conditions that the subject lives productively within. In contemporary Western societies the modern idea has become contested both as a political object and as subject of criticism. Increasingly, liberal and social-democratic ideals have been losing their social status, authority, and influence towards political thoughts that are usually placed at the fringes of society; or, are, instead, giving up and being replaced by the intense madness that encompasses popular apathy and social-media distractions; while, on the other hand, an ambiguous sleepiness space is created through the progressively unfitness of existing institutions to meet with social, economic, and natural challenges that have been arising in contemporary society and that are in conflict with the very foundations of the modern thought – thoughts related both with the environment and with then human body. Therefore, questioning the validity of their own social legitimacy and political sovereignty and leading towards a growing disillusion with the

political ideologies promoted by those same political ideals. The difference between those two thoughts is that one is about people, the other is about the material, since, all over the world innovative solutions are being researched in to how things are interconnected. While, Nelson work remains open to what later consequences the manipulation of natural processes on earth could lead since he works with the society' abandoned or discarded leftovers. However, with his installations and sculptures, rather than depicting the failure of the modern project, Nelson's fictional worlds re-examine and depict modern English society as a failed utopian project, among many other utopian propositions.



Photos 4 & 5 Installation view of Mike Nelson, *Triple Bluff Canyon (the woodshed)*, 2004. Various materials. *M25*, 2003. Found tyres; and Installation view of Mike Nelson, *Studio Apparatus for Kunsthalle Münster - A Thematic Instalment Observing the Calendrical Celebration of its Inception: Introduction; towards a linear understanding of notoriety, power, and their interconnectedness; futurobjecs (misspelt); mysterious island** *see introduction or *Barothic shift*, 2004. Various materials. Photos. Matt Greenwood. Courtesy the artist and the Hayward Gallery.

Mike Nelson is well aware of this crisis of modern institutions' legitimacy and of his position in the contemporary art scene, and acts accordingly by combining the experience of interconnected fictive worlds and the promotion of psychological environmental rooms that deal with modern hierarchies and social imaginaries. By using fictional narratives, for instance in *The Amnesiacs* (1996-ongoing), *Triple Bluff Canyon (the woodshed)* (2004), or *Triple Bluff Canyon (the projection room)* (2004), a strange disarray of objects is assembled and stands in front of us. A parody of installations and sculptures about art is made with discarded materials and disused everyday life objects: abandoned petrol cans and photo prints, and distorted and destructed car tires; redundant industrial and agricultural machinery; dissociate helmets and cartoons, a discarded clown mask, and science fiction novels. At the very best of the senses his installations are humorous, since, when playing with objects from the pass, leftovers, what we are left with are colourless bodies and representations.

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Rui has been working as a freelance art critic, curator, researcher and arts producer/manager for more than two decades. He has a MA in Cultural Studies from Goldsmiths College, University of London and a degree in Arts and Events Management from London Metropolitan University. His expertise crosses the fields occupied by arts and cultural management and production, the market for and contemporary art theory, as well as social criticism and participation, and epicure. He is the founder of the cross-cultures festival Trienal, a festival that brings together all those interests.