

# The New York Times

## THE Arts

August 29, 2007

### Belonging and Belief, Found in Scrap Lumber



FRED R. CONRAD/THE NEW YORK TIMES  
The artist Mike Nelson at the Essex Street Market.

By RANDY KENNEDY

In the world of museums and galleries, the British artist Mike Nelson is highly respected: he was recently included for a second time on the shortlist for the Turner Prize, whose winner is to be announced in December. People tend to return Mr. Nelson's calls. They show up for meetings with him.

But in the other world he has inhabited, just as long and almost as fully — that of junkyards and demolition sites, the shadowy resting places of detritus he mines around the world in search of raw material for his artwork —

his name does not carry quite the same weight.

"Um, I don't know, maybe he'll be here in 20 minutes or so," mumbled a man the other day in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, half napping outside the closed shutters of an unmarked salvage repository whose owner had assured Mr. Nelson that he would open at noon and who, not for the first time, had failed to show.

Three quarters of an hour passed. Another man, wearing a sleeveless T-shirt, black velvet riding hat and a tremendous amount of wooden neck jewelry, arrived pushing a grocery cart and informed Mr. Nelson that the

junkman in charge was having van problems and would not be appearing anytime soon.

Mr. Nelson, in search of old metal doors and jambs for a New York project, returned to his rented Silverado pickup and, consulting his Hagstrom map, plunged back into the streets of Brooklyn.

"The story of my life here," he said, smiling bitterly. "Every time I show up at one of these places, it's some guy who's had problems with his van."

It is no insult, and no exaggeration, to say that Mr. Nelson is one of the best trash trawlers in the international art world, a keen connoisseur of the world's cast-

offs who has haggled with junk purveyors in places as far-flung as São Paulo, Istanbul, Melbourne, Venice, San Francisco, Geneva and London, where he lives and works.

His artworks are not exactly objects but, in the tradition of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, whole environments, warrens of rooms and corridors, fake taxi offices and crack dens, constructed from and furnished with the things he scavenges in the cities where he creates exhibitions.

One writer has described Mr. Nelson's constructions as neither reality nor fantasy but a "third  
Continued on Page 5

From First Arts Page

space" that "opens out onto both."

More than a month ago Mr. Nelson, 40, took up temporary residence in New York to begin one of his largest projects, commissioned by the public art organization Creative Time. That installation, "A Psychic Vacuum," is a labyrinthine construction within a long-derelict wing of the Essex Street Market on the Lower East Side. Viewers will find their way through it (or not, if they become lost), passing by spaces that evoke the tattoo parlors and storefront psychics of the neighborhood, places Mr. Nelson sees partly as emblems of a search for belonging and belief in America.

The exhibition, to open on Sept. 8, is his first major show in the United States and also his first experience contending with the entrenched and enigmatic interests of the junk economy on the East Coast, which he rates alongside Istanbul as the most difficult he has ever encountered.

"It's dreadful," he said of the New York junk market, in his quick, clipped accent. "It's awful."

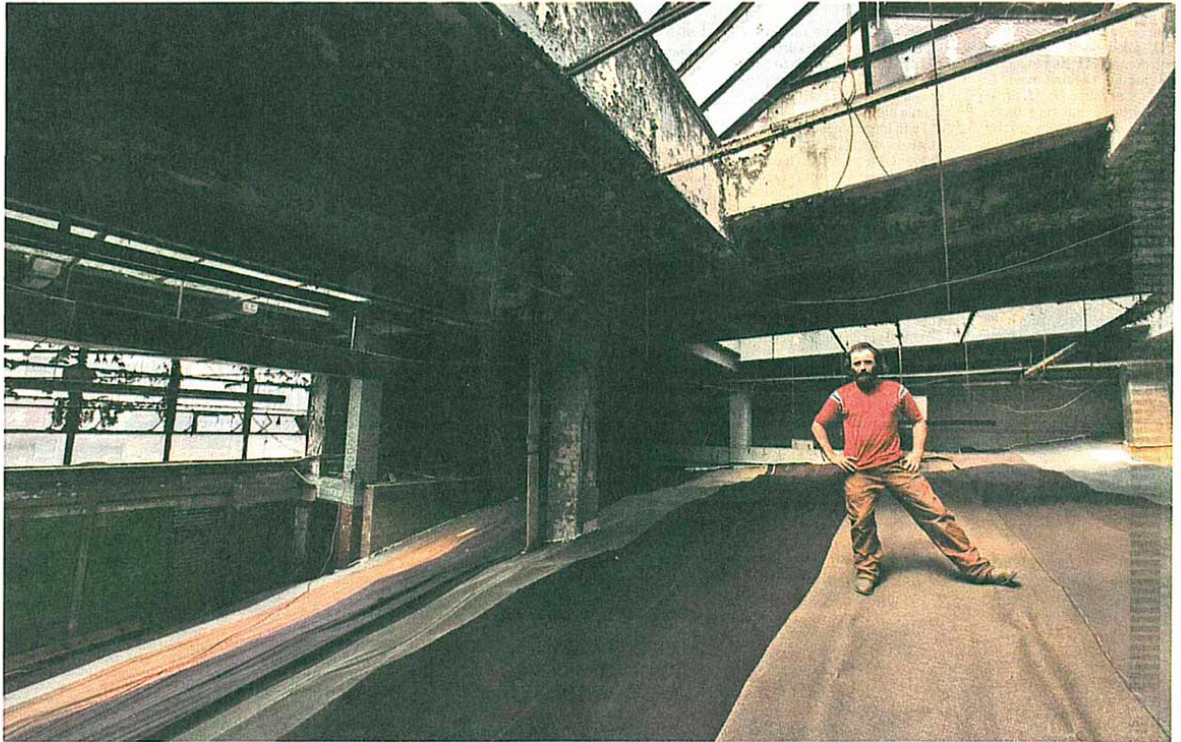
One problem in the sometimes illicit world of salvage, where issues of ownership and taxes can be as twisted as scrap metal, is simply getting the sellers to show up and do business. He had some luck in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, buying convex surveillance mirrors from a man named Georgie, who was closing an old variety store.

Sometimes, as he did the other day on the way to get coffee, he spots a pile of street lumber on its way from a gutted apartment to the dump. He immediately grabbed his cellphone to alert a builder working with him.

"It's some two-by-fours and a nice bit of lath," he reported cheerfully. "Remember that place where we got those radiators that time?"

But he often meets with unexplained reluctance (negotiations with two elusive men near Philadelphia foundered in a McDonald's, where the men do business) or plain old price gouging. "Normally this is the kind of junk people just give away," he said, "but for some reason I can't find any of it here. Or none that I can afford."

Mike Nelson's "Psychic Vacuum" runs Sept. 8 to Oct. 28, Fridays through Sundays, noon to 6 p.m., at the Essex Street Market, 117 Delancey Street, at Essex Street, Lower East Side. Admission is free; (212) 206-6674; www.creativetime.org.



FRED R. CONRAD/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Nato Thompson, a Creative Time curator working with Mr. Nelson, said that part of the difficulty lay in the very nature of Mr. Nelson's work, in which constructed spaces are meticulously made to feel as if they have not been constructed, or at least not as artworks. They seem to have sprung up fully formed, like something out of the fevered minds of the authors Mr. Nelson favors: Edgar Allan Poe, Jorge Luis Borges, William S. Burroughs, H. P. Lovecraft.

In the hulking old Essex Street building, for example, Mr. Nelson has put together expanses of creaking wood floors from salvaged wood. The battered floors appear as if they have been in the market since its construction during the La Guardia administration, but they, and the heavy metal doors that open onto mazelike corridors, have been there only a few weeks.

"A lot of the architectural elements that will be in this show people won't even notice consciously, but they will notice them

subconsciously," Mr. Thompson said. He added, though, that such a specific stratum of junk was not easy to come by. "A lot of the stuff is too old to be considered something you'd want to sell on eBay, but not old enough to be considered vintage."

Or, as Mr. Nelson says: "It takes a lot of effort to make something look as if it's been there forever, as if it's old. It's really kind



RUTH FREMSON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

of perverse."

On a recent afternoon inside the market Mr. Nelson and four workers were hammering and sawing, sweating profusely with no air-conditioning. Walls and hallways were beginning to take shape. In a back area Mr. Nelson had begun to stockpile the smaller things he would use to detail the individual rooms. Against one wall were piles of old magazines and posters and dusty lights and

bar stools.

On a worktable next to a pack of cigarillos sat Mr. Nelson's current reading, a book about werewolves by Montague Summers, an eccentric British author known for his translation of a medieval witch-hunter's manual.

Mr. Nelson, whose shaggy black beard climbs his cheeks, warned, leering, "It's probably best to avoid me on the full moon."

Above, Mike Nelson at the Essex Street Market; left, remnants of a Chinese restaurant in the market, which he is transforming; right, his 2006 installation "Amnesiac Shrine or Double Coop Displacement," at Matt's Gallery in London.



MIKE NELSON

He dearly wishes, however, that the debris dealers of New York would not. After several hours of scavenging through Bedford-Stuyvesant that day, he returned in the afternoon with no more than a ceramic light socket and a circular fluorescent fixture with fake wood grain.

"Quite lovely pieces, those," he said sarcastically, adding, "Just another normal day for me — and an empty truck."