

Objects with presence
that talk about absence

Mike Nelson interviewed by Gavin Wade

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Mike Nelson is one of the most significant artists working today and his sculptural visions of complex parallel worlds continue to invoke the shifting economies and rituals of a stalling post-industrial world. Nelson's recent major work 'M6' is titled after the motorway that leads to and through Birmingham, the UK's 'motor city', and continues his singular investigation of political histories through the raw materials of our world with 'blown-out' exploded tyres and 'shot-blasted' concrete. Within the old industrial heart of Birmingham Nelson's discarded tyres have been collected as if they were trophies or dark, abject monuments. The artist talks about looking at sculpture, his home region The Midlands, hells angels, objects and absence with Eastside Projects Director Gavin Wade.

Gavin Wade: We've been talking about making this show for three or four years now.

Mike Nelson: Yes. I've been beating you back for a while!

GW: Eastside Projects' approach to thinking about context, to thinking about what the gallery should be and how it presents itself, meant that I always wanted to invite you to make a work here. **I was interested in the fact that you already alter spaces as part of your thinking, so while I never expected that you would be changed by the space,** I always wondered 'how would you alter Eastside Projects when the gallery is already focussed on being altered, about setting up new conditions?'

MN: In a way I suppose it was that, because you'd been asking me for a long time, but I've had a lengthy list of shows to do so it's been quite difficult finding a block of time. And of course it had to be something that I wanted to do here in Birmingham. I think we'd been talking for so long that it had to happen, and when I came back from Venice a dose of Birmingham seemed the perfect thing.....Hasn't it got more canals than Venice?

GW: Supposedly, yes.

MN: I'm not actually from Birmingham but Loughborough/Leicester so, to some degree, it is actually nice coming back here. Even though this isn't somewhere I would have come to when I was younger - when you live in Leicester, the last place you come to is Birmingham, you want to get out and go somewhere else. At the same time it's got that feel of the Midlands, of where I grew up and I have an affection for that. But also I had a work which I thought could potentially make sense here. It is something I have been thinking about since the mid to late 90's when I did a residency in Berwick-on-Tweed. I was driving along in my old pick-up up the A1 continually, and I'd see these objects at the side of the road and find them quite fascinating somehow, not just in a formal sense, but also what they implied, a kind of moment of alchemy.

So when I got some time I came back and suggested this as a potential project. I see this as an on-going work that could exist in any city in the world. Each invocation of it would be just the code number of the road that runs through the city, whether it be an Auto-bahn or a freeway, whether it be South America or North America, or in Europe or Asia. The same logic could follow and the tyres exist, but the alchemy of the object is always different, the way it explodes and is discarded by the side of the road; in a way this idea of a series seemed really interesting to me. Of course as the first place to do it Birmingham seemed perfect, because of its status as the 'Detroit of Britain', the 'Motor City', with its history of car and tyre production and its elaborate road system.

GW: I wasn't sure how you would approach this, because the first time you came you were maybe even holding back with that idea and you were just looking at the space and trying to work out how to 'fix' it. To start with you were thinking about quite practical things like maybe the entrance would be problematic and a wall would need to be changed.

MN: Obviously this 'M6' work isn't what the majority of people know me for. Predominantly the work I am known for has occupied the most visible spaces, the big biennales and larger museums. Those projects will have larger budgets but also huge press departments to generate articles in the magazines and newspapers. There are a lot of other projects and works which have been far more sculptural and used different approaches but just don't get covered. In a way this is an aspect of my working practice that goes back to my BA or MA in the late 80's and early 90's, and that has always been there, residual within my practise.

I like the way that you are forced to look at one object, obviously there are a multitude of objects here, but, as an entity all you are looking at is concrete and discarded tyres. There is a rigour to that. In the very beginning, with the first architectural works at Matt's Gallery, 'The Coral Reef', and around that time, there was such a strong reaction. Now there is a sense of acceptance, creating a situation where they are often taken for granted – a sense that I'm fulfilling an expectation in the art world that these things just appear, and huge amounts of money are used to create them.

In the work in Venice there were tens of thousands of objects, which I had found, sourced, chosen myself, and then articulated as part of the architecture that we built. A fascination with building something that didn't exist before, and the idea that this space was built purely for you, the viewer, to walk into and to occupy. After its duration it would disappear, it would only reside within the memories of all the people it had affected.

I made a very large minimal concrete cast at the Konsthall in Malmö recently, and a similarly minimal intervention in an old theatre in Berlin. This sense of somehow paring down and forcing you to look at or study a singular object or idea, that perhaps implies more complexity, is a way to reinstate an emphasis on looking that I feel has been lost with the work.

GW: The work in Venice was also interesting because it brought together a number of different aspects of projects, creating one continuous space.

MN: Well, it was a completely new project, which I think people found difficult to understand as the work took as it's starting point the re-imagining of the site of an earlier work in Istanbul that I worked within for the Istanbul Biennale of 2003. I rebuilt a semblance of that building back around and from the photographic negatives that hung within the original work, but re-sited within the British Pavilion. In a sense you were entering a space which was to all intents and purposes, an old caravanserai, which is a hotel or staging post from the old silk route in Istanbul, but inside a building in Venice. Istanbul, the eastern capital of the Byzantine Empire as opposed to the western capital Venice – one biennale within another.

It's incredibly complex in terms of reference points, both historically but also within my own work. The first work I made in Venice, back in 2001, made reference to the development of Capitalist and Imperialist systems through the structures of the seaways of the world's oceans, and played heavily on the idea of pirate utopias. It borrowed from the themes within 'Cities of the Red Night' by William Burroughs, where the development of proto-anarchist communes suggested possible structures of society that could have led to other alternatives. So in a sense, I made an allusion back to that past work by looking to a land route eastwards, as opposed to the sea routes predominantly westwards (see 'wreck of the sea Venture'). At the same time, acknowledging the status quo in regard to the economic structures we exist within, and the shifting power and political upheaval that have occurred in the intervening years.

GW: How do you see 'M6' in relation to those works? The constructed spaces place you in a complex set of rooms and you see all these different materials, and books and posters, and details and objects, so you begin to go into those references, but this piece is so stripped down.

MN: Those references within the work are still there because the work that precedes it is still within a collective memory. I suppose the irritation for me is that people might walk into the work in Venice and treat it like a funhouse, rather than a piece of art. I have a desire at the moment to make work that denies the level of reference the Venice piece had to some degree. It wants to work as its own entity sidestepping the annexation of a moment from history, or a political hook, or direct reference to a philosophy that imbues it with a power outside of itself. These tyres are nothing but themselves. I enjoy that you could make something that is potentially powerful out of something which you might ignore and pass every day on the side of the road.

GW: Is that why it has taken you so long to make? Because it has taken that curve to get to the point where you need things to be stripped back. You've been talking about it being deadpan, and maybe it has taken ten or fifteen years to get to the point. There's a weird contradiction because partly you were saying this space offers you something that other museums might not have wanted you to do.

MN: I think that the context of Eastside Projects is good for the work because firstly if it was staged in a West End gallery, then I think it could be misconstrued as a commercial exercise. The context is important in terms of what you make and where. I think to make a work like this, within the context of Digbeth is far more powerful because you walk past tyres left, right and centre, so it's absurd, almost perverse.

GW: I can't wait to get the neighbours in, the taxi and limo guys and the other people around. When you first proposed this idea of finding blown-out tyres and that they had to be from the M6, we asked how we were going to get them. At first it seemed possible we wouldn't be able to find out how to get them, but you said, 'There's a way, there's a way and you'll find it. Go and find the way.' We found, through the highway agency, the company Amey who collect all the debris from the M6. At the depots we met the people who deal with this material every day. I'm interested, with someone who knows the materials, have seen them lying around, how they can approach these works as well. Whether they can find any value in them, or if they find it almost the extreme of what they might think an artist might do?

MN: I wrote a text for the press release, which gives you an idea of why I was so interested in these objects. It was that they seem so imbued with meaning within themselves; this base material of rubber, their wear, the environmental factors and the human correlation with them – how they're driving, where they're driving..... There is a combination of all these factors that results in an existential moment when the tyre blows, and this alchemy happens where the forms are produced. They appear like primal objects, they look almost tribal or anthropological, like something you might see in the Pitt Rivers or the Ashmolean museum, a remnant of what we might call a primitive society. And yet, they also seem to correlate with the rituals that we constantly carry out in our own 'modern' lives, but don't really acknowledge. What I'm trying to do, or have been trying to do through the arrangement of them, is to suggest an ambiguity through ordering and movement between that more sculptural, formal reference and it's ritualised process.

GW: We were talking about not being able to pin it down as produced by one type of activity. Whether it is sorting or archiving, identifying, reconfiguring, or some eccentric activity of moving objects around that you cannot quite decipher, or that idea of the absence of the person who moved them around.

MN: For me, the meaning is in the object itself. Thinking about it being a repeated gesture in different cities, it becomes even more ritualised. It is also a mechanical gesture, imbued in the title being just a code.

GW: For us as the gallery, and for people who have been here before, your work has impacted on the ritual of the gallery, how we are going to be able to use the space and how people enter into the gallery. The sculptural process of making the show has altered the space over time, by stripping out many elements from artworks to the front desk and lighting. We want to be provoked and pushed into taking actions in the gallery, because of what other artists do and how they approach the space.

MN: In terms of the installation it didn't need any other objects around it, because the whole point of it is to focus on the thing itself without being distracted.

GW: Can you talk through the making of the concrete plinth? There were a number of moments that made me realise **how much every aspect is, for you, working through a process**, and that depending on what happens at each stage the artwork will become something else. It's not a predetermined image that you have. There has been a big operation involved in pouring 35 tonnes of concrete to make the plinth. Sitting there, it looks light and elegant and simple, but the amount of work that's gone into it and the number of decisions that you have had to make, has been really fascinating.

MN: It always sounds straightforward and it never is.

GW: It was the point after the first bit of concrete was down and you weren't happy with the finish, which opened up: how do we alter it to make a new thing, or get it back to what we wanted it to be?

MN: And ultimately we used the shot-blaster to try to get it back to the initial intention.

GW: But there were options in that moment, and you actually said, 'Right we've got to work through this material. It's a sculptural process and I'm treating it like sculpture. If we've got to smash up the concrete, that's what needs to happen to make the artwork.'

MN: It was a possibility. Originally I had the idea of the tyres, and we talked about building individual plinths that would fit each one. As soon as we had the first tyre and we put it on a trolley on wheels, which was a bit like a plinth, it was just so trite. The sculptural nature of these objects is so immediately apparent, that to stick it on such an obvious plinth seemed ridiculous.

There was a legacy of plinth making from a show in Nice at the Villa Arson. So I had an aesthetic that had been imprinted upon my memory to return to, but it seemed immediately wrong as soon as we had the objects. And then I thought back to two early Robert Morris installations of felt and then in copper, 'Scatter', in the mid to late 60's, I was thinking about this work in relation to those, and it seemed a far better way of dealing with them.

GW: I still remember a moment when you were toying with the idea by saying that maybe the plinths should be pink.

MN: I wouldn't say 'pink' it was more sort of a prosthetic colour. But that was a reference to its British location, and there being a literary grounding which would have been hard to deny, which is Ballard; 'Concrete Island' and 'Crash', and the prosthetic idea was a way to take it towards that. But that seemed too prescriptive, and this was about looking at the object and in a sense, trying to deny these types of overt reference.

GW: Is there anything about J G Ballard's 'Concrete Island' that is worth saying?

MN: Well, I don't think it's a strong reference for me. It's just part of that genre: concrete and islands, Birmingham and 'Crash' and Ballard. In 'Concrete Island' a man has a crash and gets caught on a concrete island on a motorway, rather than a desert island, and can't escape. Its relationship is obvious really.

GW: And what about the end of that, the death throes and the slightly darker side of these tyres as violent forms? In relation to other works that you have made that have this cycle, this looping of life, death, reflecting back on yourself, the viewer is forced into this position of being an active person walking through these things.

MN: I don't think that is something I can openly talk about. Of course it is dark, and in relation to other works also there is a continuity in this idea of absence, even though at the moment, I am more interested in presence. These are objects with presence that talk about absence, because the absence they describe is a moment in time, where base material - reacting with humanity and the climate - explodes and the object is made. It's very simple.

GW: But that's because in the other works, there are rooms and buildings where there are no people that are part of the artwork except the spectator, and the absence of the person that might have been working or living within that situation. In 'M6' the tyres might replace that person.

MN: I never imagine people in the exhibitions, I only ever imagine the spaces. I think it is a miscomprehension that I am imagining the inhabitants. 'The Amnesiacs', which I worked on during the 90's, is more descriptive of an absent person, whereas the big built architectural works are spaces built for people to occupy, even though they talk of absence.

GW: 'The Amnesiacs' is a group of Hell's Angels style motorcycle gang.

MN: Yes, it was a body of work from the 90's which made objects through flash-back.

GW: They sometimes included crude figures made out of helmets and various other bits of materials.

MN: They were quite purposefully crass. In the 1980's environment of art school it was very theoretical. If you did anything that was deemed intuitive that was scorned. So 'The Amnesiacs' was a slightly – I wouldn't say jokey but definitely tongue in cheek - conceptual mechanism that I was able to work within – a disclaimer structure of sorts. In a way I think Keith Tyson's 'Art Machine' was a similar reaction to that, as well as Simon Starling's device of unfolding cultural references. These structures allowed you, or even dictated to you, to make things.

GW: So 'The Amnesiacs' is the structure, the narrative structure that you used.

MN: Yes, I used narrative to give meaning, but also to allow me the space within that structure to actually make things.

GW: But I've seen you really connect with people through quite delicate subject matter. The first time that I worked with you was when I curated 'Kling Klang', on a naval frigate in Birkenhead in 1998. The frigate had been used in the Falkland's war and then had become a type of museum, and you used one of the existing vitrines to show memorabilia from 'The Amnesiacs'. I remember you talking to some of the navy guys because they were asking questions about the insignia on some of the objects.

MN: I used to make these, and I still do sometimes, animal heads - like trophy heads but out of baseball caps. For part of that show I made them out of US naval caps, which had the names of the gulf war serving ships on them, and these were shown in the vitrine of the museum dedicated to the veterans of the frigate.

GW: It really got through to them. They were interested immediately, and you were able to talk to them about where they came from and what you were doing with the work. I saw these guys really connect and think that this was serious.

MN: The Hell's Angels were born out of the Second World War, and the Banditos were born out of the Vietnam War. The gangs were often a grouping of veterans that came back from war and couldn't adjust to society. That was in my mind with 'The Amnesiacs', they came out of the first gulf war, and so it tapped into what those men on the frigate were interested in.

GW: Could you say something about the Hell's Angels biker gang and the link to the tyre works that you have made, like 'After Kerouac', because when you first explained the idea for the work I could see how that idea emerged.

MN: I made 'After Kerouac' in 2006, for a museum in Barcelona. It was 30 feet in diameter, it spiralled into itself, to a circular room at the centre. When you approached it, there was a doorway and then all these black marks along the curved wall. You entered the long corridor where every four metres, there was a light which was made out of old hub caps - only because I couldn't get a circular light! So I got a circular neon and made them out of hub caps. As you walked down - and it took quite a long time to walk the 150 feet of corridor - the curve became tighter until there was a door at the end. Behind you found 300 to 400 tyres, which had been rolled through the space, all the black marks along the corridors had been made that way. 'After Kerouac' was probably one of the most simple distillations of what I have become known for.

I suppose you could say that it was a transferral of a literary structure to a spatial structure, in a similar way that "The Coral Reef" referred to 'A Perfect Vacuum' by Lem. 'After Kerouac' was incredibly simple in comparison, in that by leading the viewer through the long corridor to the room of tyres at the end, the reference to Kerouac was quite clear. The black markings on the wall almost emulated how Kerouac's 'On the Road' was written on a single piece of paper, typed out on one continuous roll. The black marks were almost like the typeset, but also spoke of the abstract expressionism of the time emulating the gestural paint marks of that era. So in a way it was very simplistic.

GW: So is that partly why in the text you have written for 'M6', you mentioned that you liked the fact that once it was printed the code looked a bit like tyre tread?

MN: Yes, and that's why I wanted to shift the text so it ran down the page rather than across, because the whole block looks like a tyre tread. And actually the codes came from 'After Kerouac', because for that work we photographed and catalogued every type of tyre, there were probably about 120 different types, for the catalogue.

GW: You were also interested in photographing the 'M6' tyres from above, so we set up a scaffold structure so that you could photograph directly looking down on them and you've selected eight images.

MN: And they will be printed on newspaper print, which will be about one metre wide. I like the idea that it is a newspaper but there is no text, just black and white, with incredibly dense black images of blown-out tyres produced through silkscreen prints of these objects. Hopefully the ink will be almost as thick as the paper.