

Mike Nelson at the Essex Street Market

The enormous challenge that British installation artist Mike Nelson takes on is to transcend the ponderous, labor-intensive mechanics of his work, to give

the spectator a direct, emotionally compelling experience beyond the (admittedly impressive) logistics of construction and unfamiliar terrain. The approach resembles a novelist's weaving together of countless details to create a world, and in fact *A Psychic Vacuum*, Nelson's rambling installation/environment that recently occupied much of the old Essex Street Market on the Lower East Side, momentarily inspired such an illusion. Nelson transformed a staggering amount of raw material—some of it found on-site in this long-disused structure, but most carted in from salvage yards and junk shops—into a warren of 15 bizarrely appointed rooms and five hallways, a labyrinth in which the visitor briefly but literally became lost.

The work was entered via a filthy, derelict Chinese takeout spot on Delancey Street, immediately raising the issue of what and where the "art" was. (A funny rumor had it that the artist's intervention in this part of the piece consisted of tidying it a bit.) Past shadowy walk-in refrigerators that may or may not have been readymades, down a corridor piled with construction debris, the visitor entered a spartan waiting room with a single grubby bench and two more doors, presenting the first of many decisions to be made in transiting the work.

Many of the spaces resembled front rooms in the neighborhood's cramped and quirky storefront culture of tattoo parlors, lunch counters, psychic readers' chambers and candy stores. Devotional objects and make-

shift shrines blending Catholic and astrological symbolism with references far more recondite recurred throughout, along with all manner of memorabilia. More compelling than the decor, though, was the carved-up space itself, which seemed to refer to the area's history of tenements and sweatshops. The occasional locked door thwarted egress. Touches of humor, such as entering that first waiting room's doppelganger, relieved the incipient claustrophobia.

One of the simpler rooms contained a rickety, whirring ceiling fan, a filthy, rumpled American flag and a few moderately large bones with bits of ligament still attached. Blunter still was a tight, high-ceilinged chamber at the end of a narrow corridor, appointed with three banged-up baseball bats, which dangled from a rack on the wall. On the floor below lay a crumpled strait-jacket. Though they were minor components in the enormous, 14,000-square-foot work, a few such David-Lynch-meets-Hannibal-Lecter touches threatened to burst the fragile bubble of real-life references.

But in the latter part of the program, Nelson proved himself master of the grand gesture. At a turning point within the piece, the visitor passed a barren, dusty bar sporting a rotary phone, a buzzing neon beer sign and a page-a-day calendar abandoned at May 4, 1971. Next, a dingy darkroom outfitted with an ancient enlarger and

long-ago-evaporated chemical baths underscored the themes of memory, transience and the futility of any attempt to document the bodily sensations that accompany the experience of space. Finally, defying the visitor's expectation that a red women's-room door at the end of a 40-foot-long corridor would prove to be locked, beyond that threshold was a vast room piled high with fine sand. Under exfoliating greenish paint and



dangling, dormant hot-air blowers, the sand piled like a snowdrift against the side walls almost to the ceiling, washed with softly filtered light from grimy skylights. Reflecting the shifting sands of the neighborhood's socioeconomic fortunes, the building, owned by New York City, is being eyed by developers. Kudos to Creative Time, this exhibition's nonprofit sponsor, for allowing a major artist to have the run of the place while time allowed.

—Stephen Maine

A sand-filled space in Mike Nelson's 15-room installation *A Psychic Vacuum*, 2007; at the Essex Street Market.



Timothy Hutchings at I-20

In the slim but influential 1913 volume *Little Wars*, H.G. Wells set out a body of rules for war games to be conducted with tin soldiers in playrooms or "on closely mown grass." Inspired by Wells's book and its progeny of the Warhammer ilk, young New York artist Timothy Hutchings offered *The World's Largest Wargaming Table* (2006). Made of MDF, wood and carved Styrofoam, the single sculpture comically domi-