



**MIKE NELSON**  
**"The Coral Reef"**  
**Matt's Gallery, London**  
**26 January - 26 March 2000**

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Stepping through the double spring-closed doors, with handles that don't match, we enter a maze-world, yet a microcosm of our world. We drop into dream, we swim in and out of stories as we move through a seemingly endless series of small interconnected rooms, each with its own theme and style. Nelson's found materials are deliberately shabby and patched, often kitsch and comical stuff that's dropped through many jumble and car boot sales. At first glance, it seems casual - a dirty leather jacket left hanging here, an ashtray put down there - but this is meticulously constructed sculpture.

Some of the structure has been left as bare wood and plasterboard, and some is finished, often in fierce colours. It's reminiscent of film sets, but complete with ceilings and flooring: we go in this work, not just through it. There's a dominant theme of counters, and mostly we can enter the rooms containing them either through a door which brings us "behind" or one which brings us in front. Nelson is playing carefully with notions of territory, with privacy and its loss - nowhere more so than in the tiny room with a sleeping bag spread on the floor and candles as a sole source of light. Redolent of hiding, or at least homelessness, there's an implication of occupancy (it makes us a little nervous, might we be voyeurs?) Another room suggests a rather dodgy mini-cab office (or is it about surveillance?) Two small TV's hiss with white noise, their screens nothing but snow... Where are the users? We can't help wondering what we might find, as we push open doors and peer into rooms. One room has a theme of cannabis, another of crack; there's a home-made toy tommy gun in one, a smashed chair in the other. Trouble. One

room is full of car tyres and garage junk. Another room has old Soviet English-language propaganda booklets spread around, and a sentimental picture of happy smiling men in sombreros standing by a cactus. The light fitting (the piece is full of light fittings, and electric fans) reflects the shape of the sombreros - and a tall plastic cactus in one corner reflects the picture. But the cactus is "planted" in some kind of ammunition box, the glass on the picture is smashed ... there's revolution in the air.

The Coral Reef is both bleak and tender; exactly made and full of enriching detail, yet full too of a sense of dispossession and of being in transit, globally - and of waiting. Refugees and pilgrims. Think air ticket bucket shops, hostels and bars; uncertain wheels and doomed deals; Orson Welles' "Touch of Evil." As with any artist, Nelson has his themes, motifs perhaps, which re-occur in his work and mark it as his. Here they seem to come together with particular success, making this a key work: I think it captures where we're at. And there's a piece of magic in it too, which (I hope this doesn't seem perverse) I won't give away; suffice to tell that it seems, for a while, that the place where you thought you came in is different when you go out. It's as if the outside has changed while you were inside.

*Hugh Stoddart*