

**MIKE NELSON**

**Extinction Beckons**

**‘My intent has always been to make immersive works. They should have a narrative, a spatial aspect, but also a psychological effect on the senses: you’re seeing and feeling one thing whilst your brain is trying to override this and tell you something else.’**

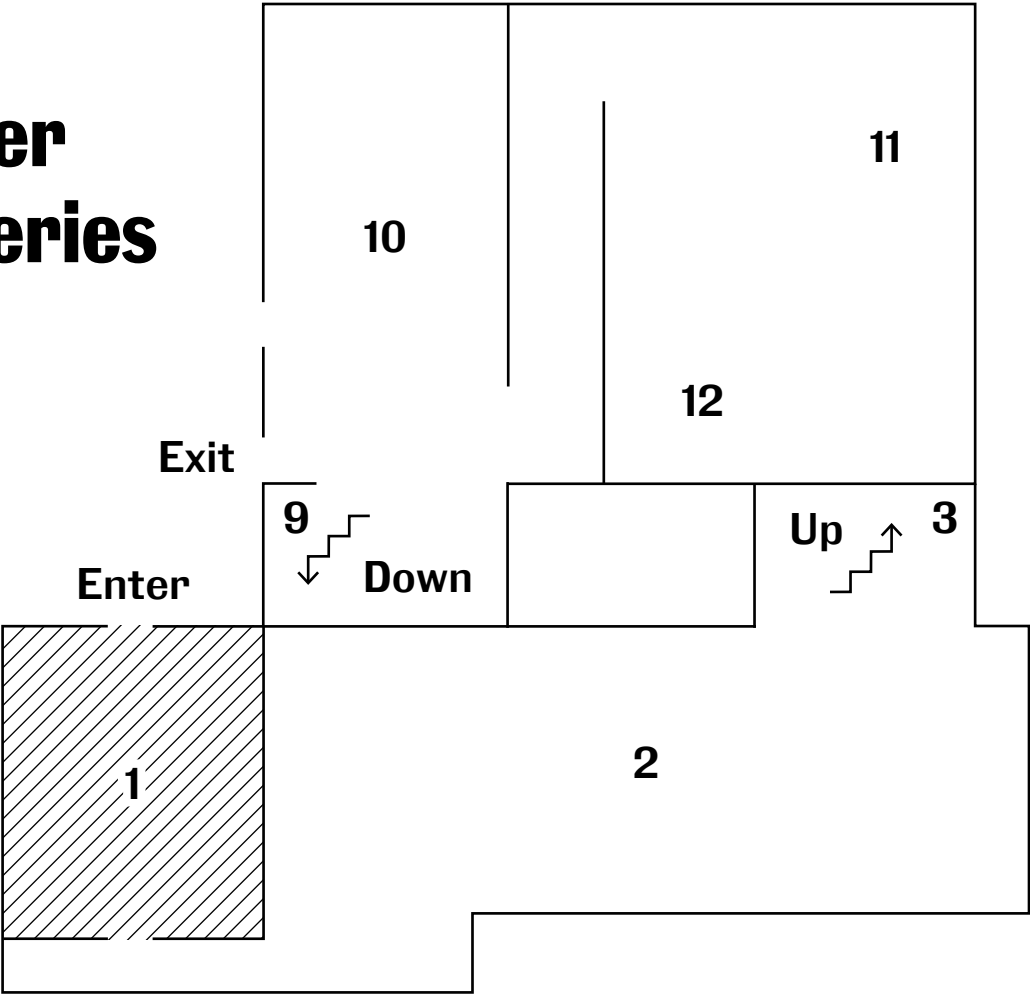
**Mike Nelson**

**Throughout his career, Mike Nelson has scavenged materials and objects from reclamation yards, car boot sales and charity shops to build expansive, atmospheric installations that transport us. He has transformed decommissioned relics of industry into large, striking sculptures and made memorial-like works from sleeping bags and rubble. This exhibition brings together a selection of these works from the past three decades, reimagined and reconfigured for the spaces of the Hayward Gallery.**

**The highly detailed installations that Nelson builds are uncanny – speculative representations straddle the line between real and fictional worlds. The various objects and built elements in these works convey a lively sense of disorderliness, enveloping and haunting us with intimations of absent characters. In the ruggedness of their materiality as well as in their range of references, they suggest the possibility of violence, disaster and societal decay.**

**Together, these characteristics encourage us to actively look for clues and to seek connections between the many details that we encounter and explore. They also invite – indeed compel – us to experience feelings of ambiguity, eeriness, suspense and disorientation. In Nelson’s constructed realities, time is an otherworldly concept and truth is an unreliable beast.**

# Lower Galleries



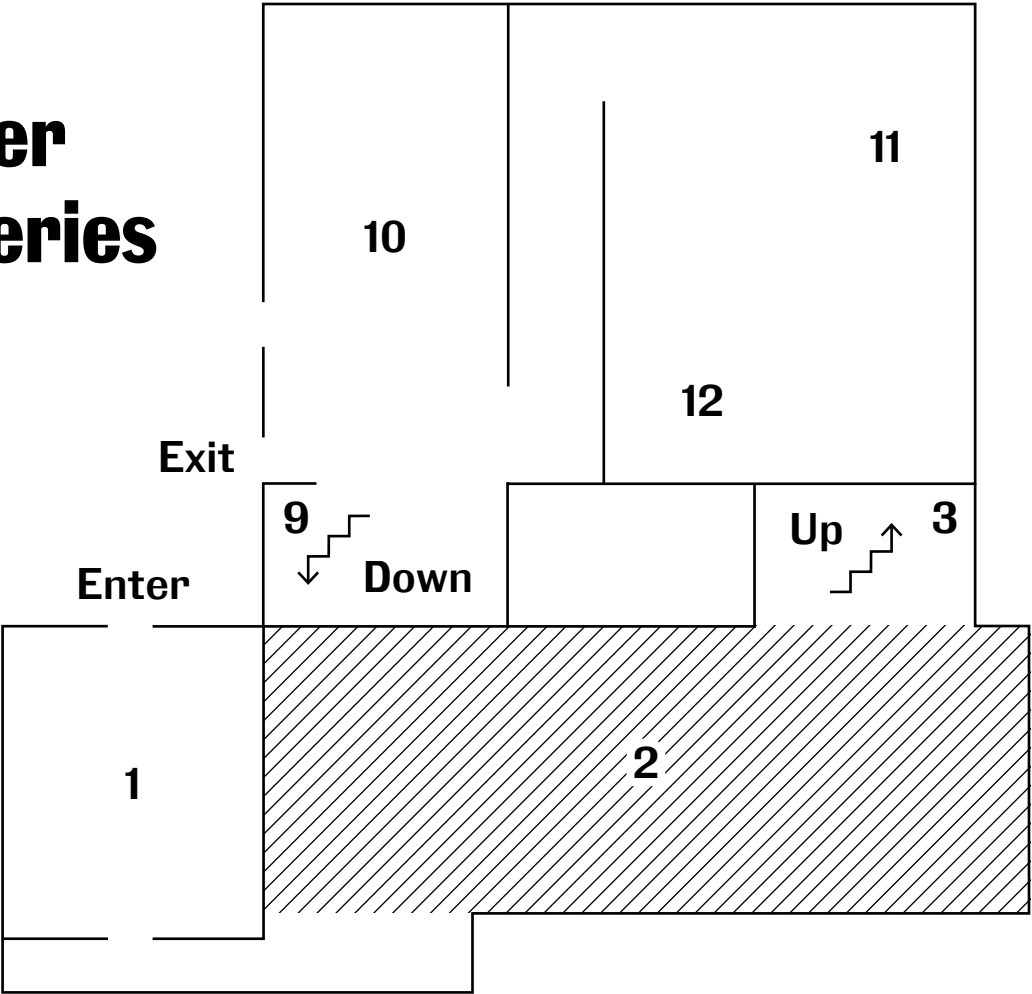
# **1 I, IMPOSTOR**

**2011, Various materials**

**Stacked on shelves in this room are furniture, materials and fixtures: the disassembled contents of one of Nelson's largest installations. Exhibited here as if in storage, the materials prompt us to wonder about their history and prior use. They also serve as a reminder of the temporary nature of the alternate realities that Nelson creates through his immersive installations.**

**Two windows cast a red light, recalling the photographic darkroom within the original installation. The monochrome effect is reminiscent of a black and white photographic print or negative, as if the whole room represents another time and place. Like photographs created by exposing film to light, old things retain traces of their use and the accumulation of time. Nelson uses worn-out objects to evoke the specific qualities of memories while retaining a palpable sense of mystery about their previous life.**

# Lower Galleries



## **2 The Deliverance and The Patience**

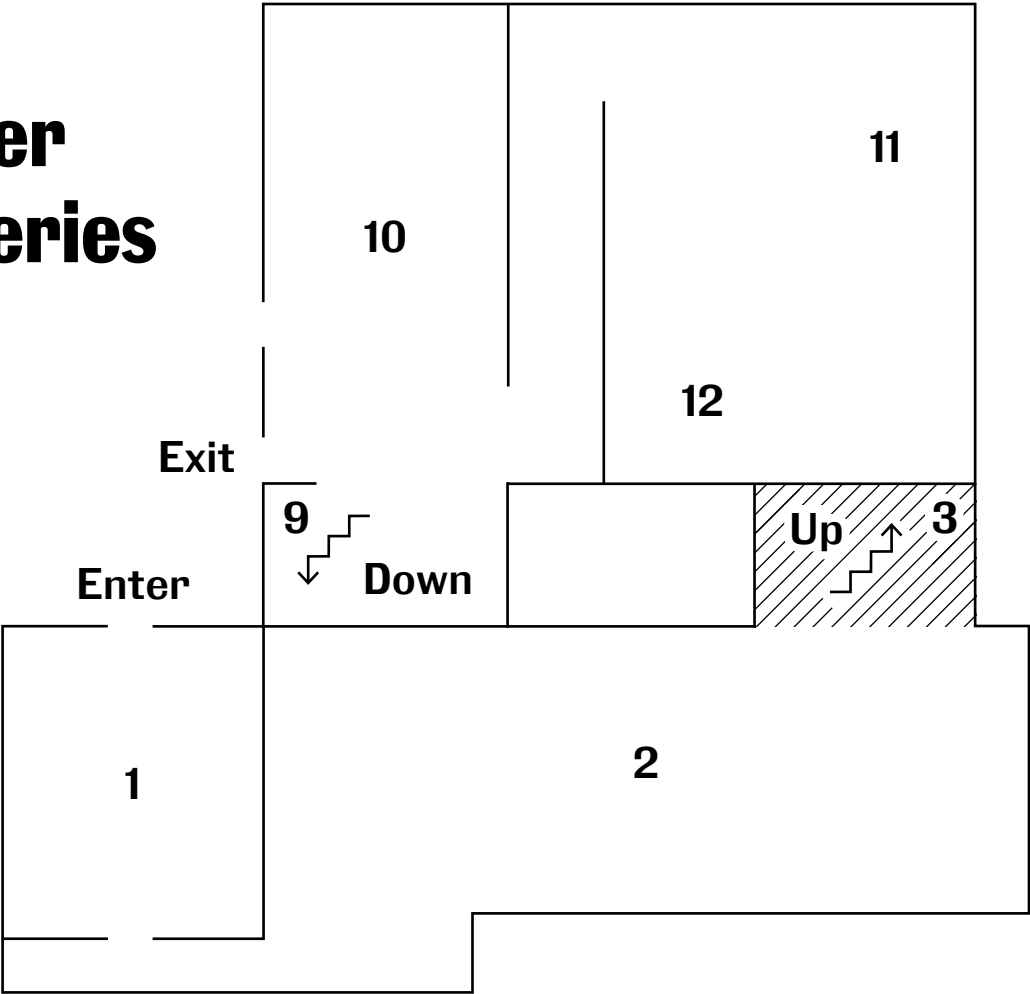
**2001, Various materials**

**This labyrinth of interconnected rooms and corridors includes a gambling den, a captain's bar and a travel agent's office. Encountering such disparate interiors in close succession has more in common with the shifts in space and time experienced whilst reading a novel or watching a film, than with the way we usually move through architectural space.**

**The rooms are deserted but convey a feeling of unease, as if they have only recently been vacated. Hinting at a discordant range of values and beliefs, Nelson builds a kaleidoscopic portrait of a diverse society characterised by impermanence and ambiguity.**

**The title refers to a 17th-century shipwreck, the survivors of which (many of them prisoners or indentured labourers) attempted to create a free society in Bermuda before they were forced to build new ships – The Deliverance and The Patience – to continue their journey to Virginia.**

# Lower Galleries



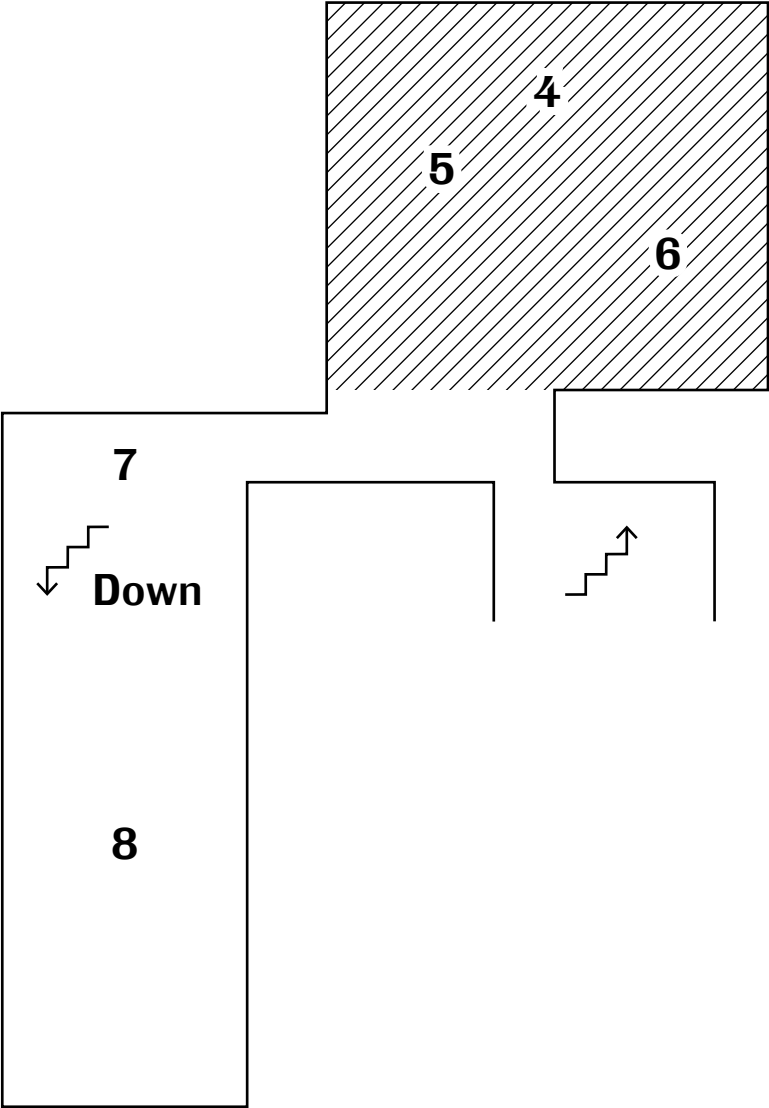
### **3 Untitled (Public Sculpture for a Redundant Space)**

**2016, Sleeping bag, rubble, concrete  
Lent by the Royal Academy of Arts, London**

**This sculpture consists of a sleeping bag filled with rubble and concrete taken from a building site close to Nelson's South London studio. Typically an important piece of survival kit providing vital warmth and comfort, this sleeping bag is placed in a 'redundant' space in the gallery where it suggests a body – an unsettling reminder of the precariousness of everyday survival in a society where real estate development is often prioritised over social welfare.**



# Upper Galleries



## 4 **Triple Bluff Canyon (the woodshed)**

2004, Various materials

Nelson's vision of an abandoned woodshed 'drowned in a desert' combines the reimagining of an iconic earthwork by American artist Robert Smithson with hints of sci-fi portrayals of a post-apocalyptic world. Smithson's **Partially Buried Woodshed**, a building engulfed by 20 lorry loads of earth, was created onsite at Kent State University, Ohio, in January 1970. It acquired political significance when, a few months later, four students were killed on campus by the National Guard during an anti-Vietnam War peace protest.

Nelson's woodshed is partially buried in sand, conjuring the imagery of desert landscapes of the Middle East (an impression reinforced by the oil barrels). Created during the Iraq War, it has since assumed overtones of other conflicts as well as the environmental crisis. Like Smithson, Nelson is interested in the idea of entropy: the eventual exhaustion and collapse of any given system over time.

## **5 M25**

### **2023, Found tyres**

**These blown-out tyres were collected from the M25 ring road that encircles London, though they can be found alongside roads across the world. This is the fourth work in a series; each titled after a road in the city in which it is exhibited.**

**Nelson sees the tyres as ready-made sculptures. Their torn and twisted forms are testament to the violence of their explosion. Littered across the sand dune, they lie like contemporary fossils, suggesting a legacy of destructive wars fought for control of natural resources or a dystopian future.**

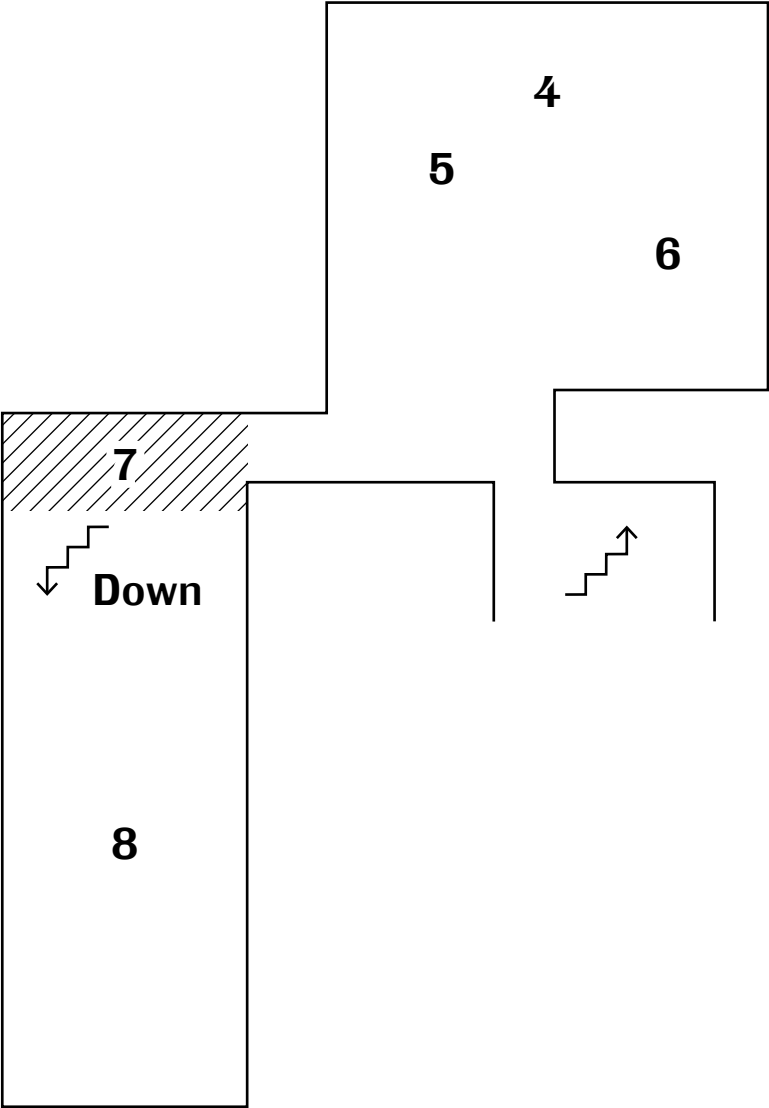
## 6 **I, IMPOSTOR (the darkroom)**

2011, Various materials

Concealed beneath a sand dune, and reached via a curved corridor and an old Turkish door, a mysterious domed space contains a photographers' dark room. Red light prevents photographic film from being exposed during the developing process. Like a photograph, this room has the feeling of another era and place that has been preserved indefinitely.

This installation revisits Nelson's work for the Venice Biennale in 2011, which was itself a reimagined version of an earlier piece made in Istanbul in 2003. The photographic prints hanging to dry show views of Nelson installing the woodshed and sand dune of **Triple Bluff Canyon** nearly twenty years ago in another art gallery. This contributes to the disorientating effect that this environment has on our understanding of time, space and memory.

# Upper Galleries



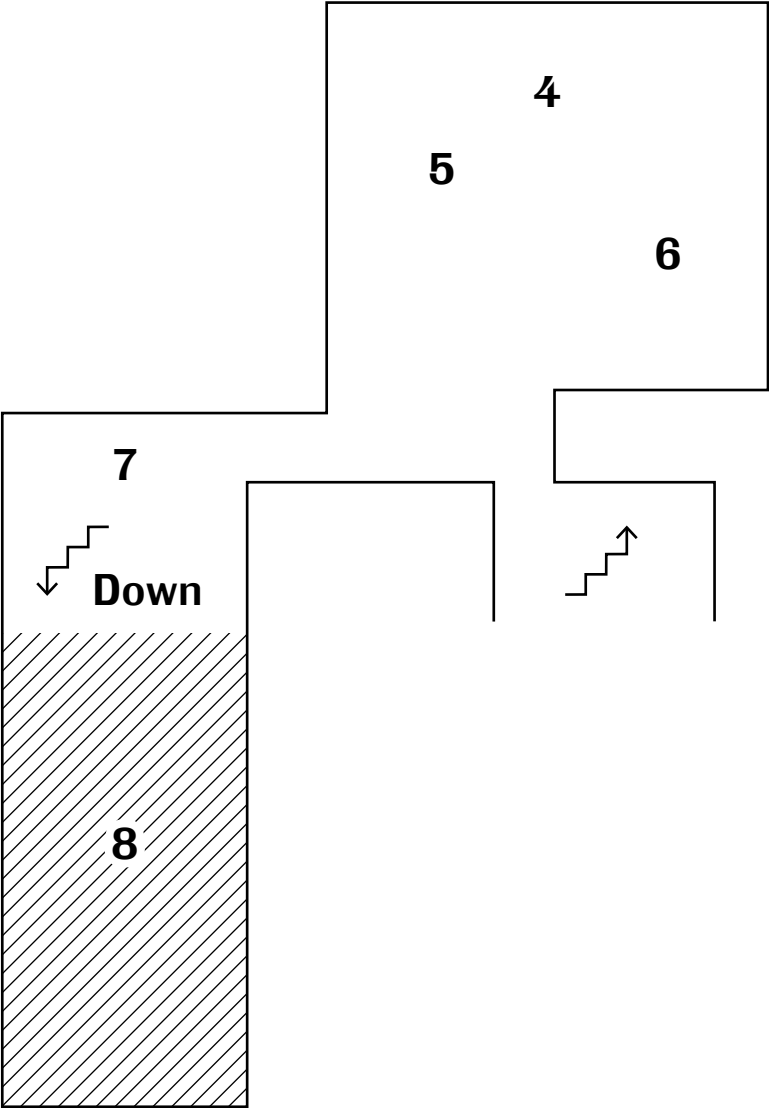
## **7 tools that see (the possessions of a thief), 1986-2005**

**2016–ongoing, Various materials**

**This is the latest in a series of works featuring Nelson's own tools and those that he has acquired. He draws attention to the formal qualities of the tools and the familiar patina that comes with age and use. If tools like these could see they would bear witness to things that no longer exist, including the people who used them and the things that they made.**

**These are not the traditional tools of an artist as Nelson's work often requires skills closer to those of a construction worker or carpenter. The thief in the title may be the artist himself (has he stolen some of these items?), or may be implied by the very idea of ownership. In either case we are prompted to reflect on the labour and creation of value involved in making art. With this modest sculpture, Nelson conflates the means of production and the product – the work of art – itself.**

# Upper Galleries



## 8 **The Asset Strippers**

### **The Asset Strippers (Lamassus)**

2019, Steel lorry ramp, paint sprayer,  
chains, timber block, cast concrete slabs

### **The Asset Strippers (from antiquity)**

2019, Steel cabinets, bobbin sander,  
cast concrete slabs

### **The Asset Strippers (solstice)**

2019, Hay rake, steel trestles, steel girders,  
sheet of steel, cast concrete slabs

### **The Asset Strippers (ziggurat grinder)**

2019, Surface grinder, steel girders,  
steel cabinet, cast concrete slabs

### **The Asset Strippers (Khorsabad, shedu)**

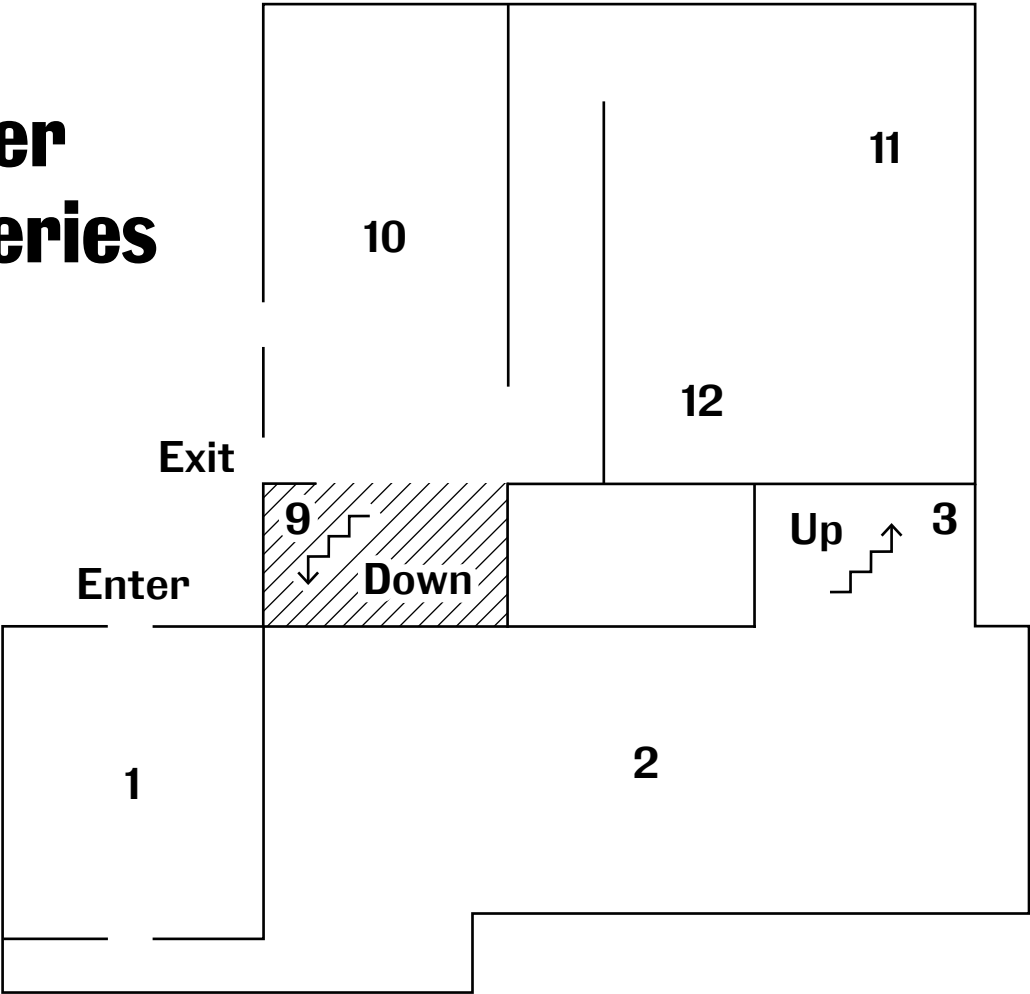
2019, Mechanical hacksaw, resin,  
wooden bench, cast concrete slabs

These sculptures are made from industrial and agricultural machinery, acquired by Nelson through the online auctions of company liquidators. These monumental sculptures reflect on the loss of British industry and the effect that this has had on society.

Standing in front of these redundant machines we are reminded of the skilled labourers who once operated them as well as the dwindling of major industries. Nelson's own family were employed in the textiles industry in the East Midlands and his interest in creating sculptures out of these objects, and raising the question of their value today, is personal as well as aesthetic and political.



# Lower Galleries

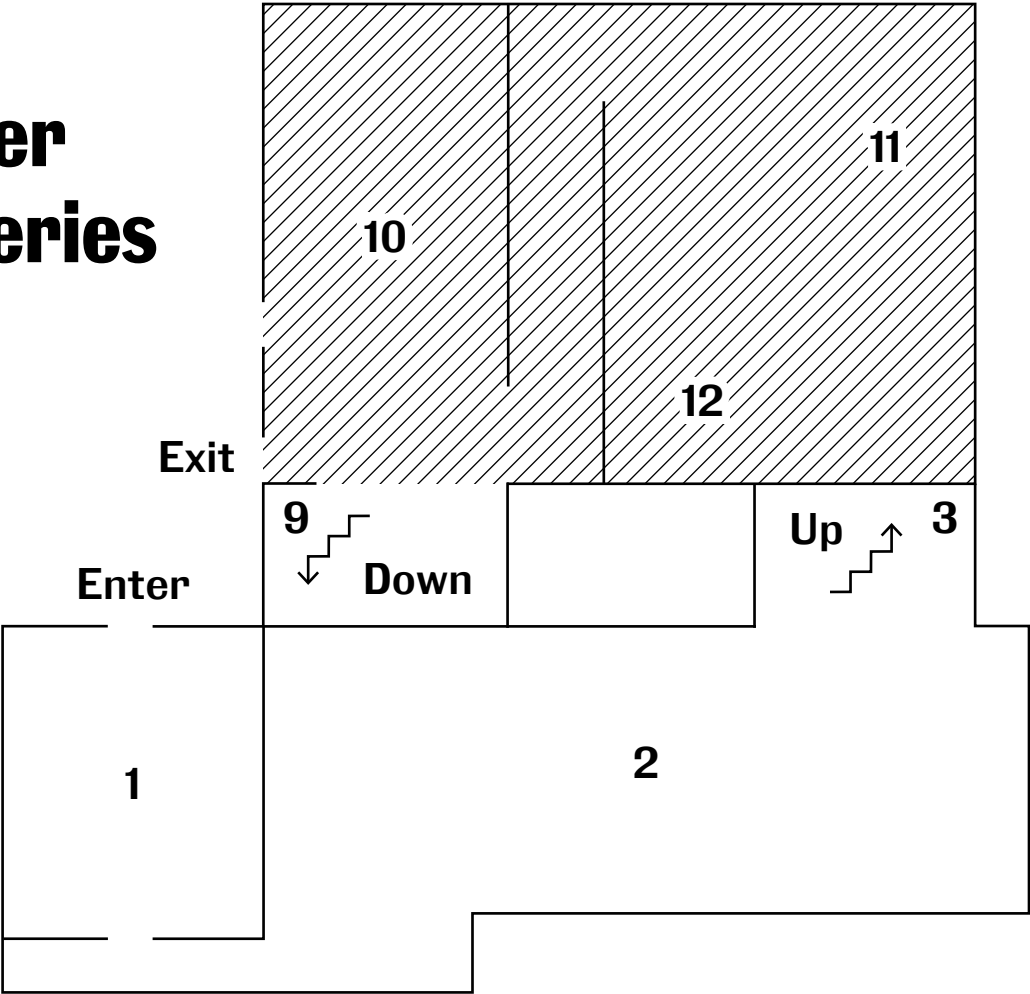


## **9 Amnesiac Beach Fire**

**1997–ongoing, Wood, metal, plastic**

**This sculpture is presented as the work of Nelson's fictional biker gang, The Amnesiacs. It is one of a series of fires assembled from found debris – charred sticks and ripped plastic containers. As one of the most ancient forms of technology, a fire assembled from simple found materials is a source of heat and light, as well as providing a communal focus – all things that are central to human existence. This fire, with its plastic flames, performs none of those functions. It is a three-dimensional image of a fire, as if re-created from memory in a future without fire.**

# Lower Galleries



10 **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;  
futurobjects (misspelt); mysterious  
island\* \*see introduction or  
Barothic shift**

2014, Various materials

With his **Studio Apparatus** series, Nelson recombines motifs and materials from existing works to make new ones, reflecting on his own site-based approach to making art and parodying the idea of the studio as a place for authentic artistic production. For Nelson, the cloud of wire mesh in this iteration represents a fluid container that can hold work from the past as well as unrealised ideas.

Science fiction is an important influence on Nelson's work. The idea of the apparatus refers to a novel by Stanislaw Lem, in which language is distorted and morphed to create new words that describe things that will exist in the future. By applying this concept to his own work, Nelson addresses the very human desire to predict and control the future, while acknowledging the fact that artists, like science fiction writers, can only work in the present.

## **11 The Amnesiacs**

**1996–ongoing, Various materials**

**The Amnesiacs are a fictional biker gang invented by Nelson in the 1990s as the co-creators of the series of sculptures that are assembled inside this wire cage. The gang is seemingly made up of military veterans from the Gulf War (1990–91) who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. This causes them to experience flashbacks: dissociative episodes in which the past is re-lived vividly as if it is occurring in the present.**

**From the perspective of this imagined collective, whose sense of past and present is troublingly distorted, Nelson works intuitively with found materials; old things that also bring their own jumbled and dislocated histories. Like the partial recollections of the past that constitute our own memories, these works don't have fully elaborated meanings but rely on the viewer to bring their own experiences and associations to interpret and complete them.**

## **12 Triple Bluff Canyon (the projection room)**

**2004, Various materials**

**This is a full-scale reconstruction of Nelson's studio from 2003, which occupied the front room of his terraced house, complete with its contents of furniture, books, objects and paraphernalia. This domestic space, which Nelson used for planning work and making drawings, has been frozen in time; preserved alongside the artefacts it helped to create.**

**Projected out from the room is an edited version of a found video showing a 1993 slide lecture by an American right-wing conspiracy theorist who connects symbols, logos and cultural and historical artefacts to a delusional myth of a New World Order. The moving image is doubled and projected at a massive scale that amplifies its monstrosity. The duplication of the image and the splitting of the screen allude to the idea of speaking with a forked tongue – an expression that describes duplicitous speech. Observed from the artist's studio, the video represents an outside world in which truth and logic fall apart and ideas can enact violence.**