

Mine the Mountain: Nicholas Hedges The North Wall

Four years ago Oxford artist Nicholas Hedges walked out of Auschwitz concentration camp, having visited as a tourist. As he left, he realised that while he was free to walk away from this site of trauma, most of the prisoners incarcerated there during the war were never free to leave. That realisation and the mass slaughter that had taken place behind the camp's walls affected him deeply.

His mixed-media exhibition *Mine the Mountain*, on show at the North Wall Gallery, Summertown, until June 26, draws on his experiences of places such as Auschwitz – Birkenau, Belzec, Majdanek, Ypres and Verdun and explores the notion of both the “dark tourist” and a tourism of the self.

Because he was confronted by mountains of shoes and piles of ash, rather than individuals, during his travels, Nicholas took one more trip. This time he visited the site of a Welsh mine that had once employed members of the Hedges family, but all he found in this attempt to conduct a dialogue with his ancestors was a list of names.

What you will see on entering the gallery are several collections of photography and postcards linking back to the First and Second World Wars, and a list of the miners' names mounted on postcards. You will also notice worn old deckchairs hanging on the gallery wall, which would have once offered people a comfortable seat but are now both broken and empty. Group photographs that

include empty deckchairs are also included in the exhibition.

One series of photographs displays enlargements of the individual faces captured in the group shots — this is Nicholas's attempt to overcome the facelessness of mass slaughter.

He sums up his exhibition by saying: “Having stood upon the ramp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, and having walked away, I wanted to explore my relationship, as an individual, with the past, with history itself, and so began to mine my own past, the mountain of anonymous people I call my ancestors.”

Helen Peacocke