

The beautiful south: a walking tour around Peckham's art scene

Laura Barnett takes a whistlestop trip around a set of London galleries thriving away from the spotlight



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Taking a fresh look at London art ... The art tour visits Peckham Space. Photograph: Mariona Otero

What do you know about **Peckham**, south London? Maybe you remember it as the setting for Del Boy Trotter's wheeler-dealing in *Only Fools and Horses*: all high-rise tower blocks and shouting market traders. Perhaps you're aware that it was here, in 1767, that William Blake reported seeing an angel in a tree. Or you may recall that it was once the home of the North Peckham Estate, for almost 40 years a sprawling symbol of urban degradation.

What you might not know about this unfairly maligned corner of south-east London is that it's also home to an increasing number of galleries and artist-run workspaces, where you can see some of the city's most interesting under-the-radar art. This, I'll admit, was news to me – until, one rain-sodden Friday evening, I found myself trudging the streets of Peckham on a guided "art tour", taking in six of the area's galleries and studios in just under three hours, and learning a great deal more about the area on the way.

Leading the tour was **Holly Willats**, the editor of the contemporary art magazine and listings site **Art Licks**. She's been running tours of not-for-profit art spaces in various lesser-known parts of London about once a fortnight since 2010. For this tour, she teamed up with the web arts magazine **Spoonfed**, which also puts together similar monthly expeditions under the moniker **Art On The Outskirts**. "Most people think of art as only happening in big galleries like Tate Modern and the Hayward, or in places like Cork Street [London's main centre for commercial art] and Hackney [in east London]. These tours are about taking people to places that otherwise, they probably wouldn't know about: places that generally only artists know," she tells me as my fellow tour-followers gather inside **the New Gallery**, a small cafe and art-space on Peckham Road. The New Gallery is actually only a stone's throw from the long-established South London Gallery, but one wonders how many visitors there are aware of its neighbour.

This seems an excellent idea, though not a new one: an organisation called ArtFeelers runs "secret tours" of east London's art scene, while Street Art London takes groups to view works by Banksy and other street artists in situ. Tours like these aren't restricted to London, either. Earlier this month, the cycle-hire company **Pedal Walla** ran the first official tour of Bristol's own street art scene; while, last summer, the Manchester Art Gallery piloted a project called **Decoding Art**, allowing anyone with a smartphone to find out more about 20 public artworks by scanning their phones over them. Plans are afoot to expand the project.

What all these tours have in common is that they're not aimed primarily at camera-wielding day trippers: they're a chance for people who know a city, or at least think they do, to see another side to it: a side generally only familiar to artists or art students. Of these, Peckham has many: two of London's biggest art schools, Camberwell and Goldsmith's, are nearby; this, together with relatively cheap rents, may explain the recent influx of artists to the area.

Peckham High Street, with its discount stores, blaring Middle Eastern pop music and halal butchers, does not initially single the area out as a hotbed of contemporary art. In fact, were it not for Willats, I'd be hard-pushed to find most of the galleries and spaces we visit: they're tucked away down back-streets, on industrial estates or under railway arches; and, in one case, in the back-room of a pub.

Willats leads us to each gallery, gives us a quick introduction, and then leaves us free to explore the exhibits. I spend a good while inside **the Peckham Space**, housed in a brand-new, lurid-green cube opposite Peckham Library. The gallery commissions artists to work with local community groups; the current project, *Slipstream*, a video installation by artist David Cotterrell, is fascinating. Projected on one wall is a bird's-eye view of Peckham rooftops, filmed using a camera strapped to a remote-control helicopter, then flown at the height of the old walkways on the now-demolished North Peckham estate. On another wall, a street-map of the old estate plots the helicopter's journey; here, too, local people are invited to record their memories of the estate, with the recordings then matched to the relevant place on the map. It's a chance to see beyond the estate's notorious reputation, and I find it rather moving.

Over the road, at **the Bun House** pub, the regulars at the bar look up from their pints of Guinness to tell us that the art's out the back. The "art" turns out to be a three-dimensional representation of the inside of the human stomach, by the food-art collective **The Gut Club**; it doesn't do much for me other than induce a pang of hunger, but it's still good to see a tiny, undistinguished pub room turned into such an unlikely exhibition space.

A few streets away are the bleak, brick-and-concrete units of the Copeland Industrial Yard. Here, opposite the headquarters of the Holy Pentecostal Church of Peckham, we shelter from the driving rain inside another small gem: **the SON Gallery**, a white-walled space specialising in photography. The images in the current exhibition, by artist Tom Lovelace, are monochrome, sculptural and beautiful, and the curators have several impressively ambitious projects planned – including, this weekend, a three-day art festival featuring an **art-books market** and a pop-up rooftop café.

This, I think as the evening draws to a close, is the real value of joining a tour like this: it's a chance to see work outside the usual sterile gallery environment, and to get a sense of the real context in which artists live, work and think. And, perhaps most importantly, it's a chance to see the city differently.

• The next Art Licks tour is on 2 July: see artlicks.com. The next Spoonfed/Art on the Outskirts tour is on 8 July: see spoonfed.co.uk.

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