

GROWING SCENES FOR LONDON ARTISTS: TOWNS AND SUBURBS

The pandemic has accelerated a creative exodus.

Scott Reyburn, *The New York Times*, 21 October 2020



A mural by the artist Mark Titchner in Luton, England, about 30 miles north of London. Credit: Tom Jamieson for The New York Times

“People shooting up in the alleyway here. Lovely. Welcome to Luton,” the artist Dominic Allan said on a recent afternoon as he passed two drug users in the town’s rundown former hat-making district.

Luton, about 30 miles north of London, was once famed for its hat industry, but those factories closed long ago. Its current most prominent businesses, an auto plant and an airport, have both been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic. And in 2004, it was voted the worst place to live in Britain, according to an unscientific but much-publicized survey.

Yet such towns are exactly the sort of places where hard-up contemporary artists have been gravitating in recent years as unaffordable rents have forced them out of London.

Now, the pandemic is prompting a wider exodus from the British capital, pushing up real estate values in outlying regions. Months of remote working have made city dwellers reassess their housing priorities. And like many office workers, contemporary artists such as Mr. Allan — who makes art under the moniker “Dominic from Luton” — are also finding that they no longer need to be in a big city.



The beach at Hastings, a town 70 miles from London that is popular with artists. Credit: Tom Jamieson for The New York Times

Mr. Allan is not represented by a London gallery, but his website has helped him attract publicly funded commissions. He is also among the many thousands of artists who have sold their work online via Instagram.

“Almost everything can be achieved online,” he said. “All you need is a laptop and a half-decent smartphone.”

What he terms “displacement” has resulted, paradoxically, in contemporary art imbued with a new sense of place.

In 2016, Mr. Allan returned from London for six months to his parents’ suburban home in Luton, turning it into a project space for artists’ workshops, talks and commissions. A minimalist sculpture by the Turner Prize-winning artist Martin Creed (made of bricks chosen by Mr. Allan’s mother) still stands in the paved front garden, beside some gnomes.

Mr. Allan, who now divides his time between London and Luton, said he had recently been trying to rent a studio in the town but could not afford the monthly rent of almost 700 pounds, or about \$900, for a space in a refurbished hat factory. “I’ve been priced out,” he said, adding that he would seek government funding to repurpose his parents’ garage.

All around the world, travel restrictions have put a stop to international fairs and biennials. Revenues at commercial galleries and auction houses in major cities have slumped. But artists in more low-key locations are quietly carrying on with their work.



Dominic Allan, who makes art under the moniker “Dominic from Luton,” with his dog outside his parents’ home in the town. Credit: Tom Jamieson for The New York Times



A minimalist sculpture by the Turner Prize-winning artist Martin Creed in Mr. Allan’s parents’ garden. Credit: Tom Jamieson for The New York Times

“In London, you’re so worried about paying your rent, you can’t afford a Chinese takeaway,” Sophie Barber, a 24-year-old painter, said in an interview in the spacious studio she rents for £560 a month in an industrial area on the edge of the seaside town of Hastings, 70 miles southeast of London.

Currently the subject of a solo show at the Goldsmiths Center for Contemporary Art in London, Ms. Barber makes monumental, thickly worked paintings on coarse unstretched canvas, depicting circus tents, and cabins used by bird watchers. These enigmatic hangings have been selling steadily to private collectors through her London-based representative, Laura Bartlett, for £8,000 to £16,000.

So now that Ms. Barber can afford Chinese takeout, isn’t she interested in moving to London to immerse herself in the city’s more cosmopolitan art scene?

“Nah, I like being at home,” said Ms. Barber, who had brought her pet chickens, Clemmie and Clover, into the studio for company. “You can go swimming in your lunch break.”

“Hastings is very different from London. The conversations are intergenerational,” she added, referring to the positive influence of older artists in the area, as she tried with limited success to stop the chickens from running across her canvases.

Hastings, with its scrappy mix of stately but unkempt 19th-century houses, 1970s seafront amusements, poor transportation links and limited employment opportunities, was recently ranked as the most deprived town in southern England by Britain’s housing ministry. But its distinctness and affordability have long been valued by artists.

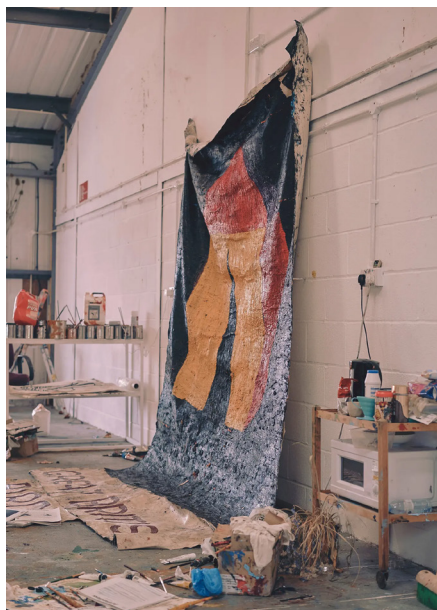
ALISON JACQUES



The Hastings building where Sophie Barber, a 24-year-old painter, has her studio. Credit: Tom Jamieson for The New York Times

Many artists are based in the area, including internationally known names such as John Stezaker and Becky Beasley (who mentored Ms. Barber). So, too, is the respected public gallery Hastings Contemporary.

That artistic bent has predictably attracted migratory Londoners, and average house prices in the town have increased nearly 30 percent since 2015. Now, the process of gentrification has been accelerated by the pandemic, said Tina Morris, the director of the local Coastal Currents arts festival.



Inside Ms. Barber's studio. Credit: Tom Jamieson for The New York Times



Ms. Barber, with a pet chicken, in her studio. Credit: Tom Jamieson for The New York Times



The Hastings Contemporary art centre, which opened in 2012.
Credit: Tom Jamieson for The New York Times

“Everyone wants to sell here,” said Ms. Morris, citing as an example a house in central Hastings priced at £350,000. She pointed out a nearby mural by the local street artist Drew Copus that was featured in the real estate agent’s marketing material.

Yet the artist himself is now homeless.

Mr. Copus said in an interview that he had been unable to afford the going monthly rate of £550 rent for a one-room apartment in Hastings. “They used to be £400,” he said, adding that he had previously worked part-time as a cook to supplement his income, but that dried up because of the pandemic.

“I might be homeless, but at least my work is good enough to sell houses,” he said.

He is now thinking of moving to Carlisle in the far northwest of England. “It’s so much cheaper,” he said, though he added: “But in the end we’re going to run out of these places. And then where do you move?”

Croydon, once a town outside London but now the city’s southernmost borough, features a center dominated by huge 1960s office blocks and a freeway. It is so far proving more resistant to gentrification.

David Bowie, who was briefly an art student in Croydon, said in a 1999 interview with Q Magazine that the place “represented everything I didn’t want in my life, everything I wanted to get away from.”

But Croydon’s lingering reputation is at least allowing young artists to rent inexpensive studios on London’s outskirts.



A mural by Drew Copus on Elford Street in Hastings. Credit: Alexander Brattell

Supported by a new City Hall-funded initiative called Conditions, 27 such spaces are being offered for £138 to £230 a month in a repurposed bicycle factory and office building. Katie Sheppard, one of the artists based in the complex, makes digitally embroidered portraits based on selfies; another, Felix Riemann, makes sound sculptures for performances.

Conditions was founded in 2018 by the artist David Panos and the artist and educator Matthew Noel-Tod, both of whom were concerned that artists were being priced out of London.



Inside one of the 27 studios in Conditions, an arts centre in a repurposed bicycle factory in Croydon. Credit: Tom Jamieson for The New York Times

ALISON JACQUES



Works by Felicity Hammond on display at Turf Projects, a nonprofit space run by Croydon artists in a shopping mall. Credit: Tom Jamieson for The New York Times

For the founders, the name Conditions sums up the ethos of the enterprise. They are hoping to “create the conditions” for creativity “but not mandate it,” Mr. Panos said, adding, “Art has been asphyxiated by funding applications and curators.”

Nurturing conditions also prevail at Turf Projects, another nonprofit Croydon space, based in a 1970s shopping mall, where studios cost £120 a month.



“It’s good to be located in a shopping centre,” said one of Turf Projects’ founders. “It changes the kind of people who drop in.” Credit: Tom Jamieson for The New York Times

Since its foundation by local artists in 2013, Turf has supported more than 400 fellow creatives through a busy program of free public exhibitions, events and workshops in the community.

“It’s good to be located in a shopping center. It changes the kind of people who drop in.” said Becky Atherton, one of the project’s founders. “Our vision is an art world that doesn’t run alongside society but is interwoven with it.”

This vision of an accessible, locally grounded art scene is very different from the elitist flying circus of blockbuster exhibitions, auctions, fairs and biennials in destination cities that has dominated the art world in recent years.

With the upscale galleries of Manhattan and Mayfair all but deserted, the pandemic and the internet could foster a new spirit of regionalism, and new kinds of art.

Over the next year or two, as always, interesting art is going to be made. But it might not be made in the places the art world is used to.