

Affordable, Secure, Permanent - Second Floor Studios

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April, 2011

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Tom Jeffreys visits one of the largest sets of artist studios in Europe, right by the Thames Barrier down in Woolwich.



The issue of gentrification is a complex one, but by and large it can be reduced to a fairly simple narrative. It happened to Montmartre in Paris; it happened to SoHo in New York; in London, Shoreditch and Hackney Wick are in various states of 'regeneration', while Peckham and Deptford are naturally next in line. Artists move to an area because it's cheap. Galleries spring up, followed by cafés and bars. Then the developers come, and the corporations and the bankers. Soon the artists are priced out, and the very people who made the area desirable in the first place are forced elsewhere in the never-ending search for affordable studio space.

And this where [Second Floor Studios and Arts](#) comes in. Based down in Woolwich, where the battered old Royal Isis is moored, right on the river by the Thames Barrier, SFSA aims to provide affordable, high-spec studio space to artists and assorted creative types. But the thing that really sets the organisation apart is the commitment to long-term security that they offer their artists.

I'm here on a glorious April morning to have a look round, chat to some of the artists, and meet Matthew Wood, the Project Director, ahead of the Open Studios here in mid-May. The immediately striking thing is the scale of this enterprise. There's already 140 artists here – including Rachael Dalzell, Daisy Delaney and Sarah Priddis as well as, entertainingly, a canoe-making firm and an indoor climbing wall – but, working in partnership with Emafyl Properties, SFSa is aiming to provide studio space for up to 300 artists. Combined with an education centre, state-of-the-art print studios and 3,000 square foot gallery space, this makes it one of the largest projects of its kind in all of Europe.

We take a whistle-stop tour round the site – both the existing, and impressively light, studios, and the areas that are still to be finished off. Matthew is a whirlwind of information and enthusiasm – this is clearly a project he's passionate about, and he needs to be. This is a massive undertaking, one that needs somebody with an exceptional vision: not just in terms of converting old warehouses and constructing new buildings, but also in terms of understanding and commitment to long-term, affordable studio space for artists.

Matthew is clearly doing something right. I chat at some length with contemporary artist Helen Pynor who, as well as taking part in the Open Studios, also has a solo show at [GV Art](#) in Marylebone opening this May. The exhibition demonstrates Helen's consistent interest in the relationship between the biological and the social body, in terms of the histories of the hundreds and thousands of people who have drowned in the Thames over the years. I first encountered Helen's work in Sydney, where Helen's from, a couple of years back, and it's a real treat to be able to visit her studio here. It's a studio she clearly cherishes too: "it's incredibly conducive to working, because the river's right there. And in terms of what I'm doing at the moment around boats – I'm seeing boats all the time."

There seems to be a sense of community here too, which must be a blessing – artists spend too much time on their own I often think. "There are the regulars who are here a lot," Helen says. "We have lunch together or chat over tea, when you want a break from things. I really appreciate that." And this sense of community is something that events like Open Studios can only help to foster. Not only does it bring the artist together in a joint enterprise, but it's an amazing opportunity for visitors too. As Helen puts it: "You can meander round with conversation, in a way that doesn't happen so much as in a gallery." And she's right – in half an hour or so, we discuss organ transplants, exchange rates, and nineteenth century shipbuilding techniques. "It's less formal," Helen explains. "Studios are much more relaxed, messier spaces, that provide an opportunity for people to see work that's still in progress."

The Open Studios here is going to be brilliant – it'll bring new people to Woolwich, and maybe it'll contribute in some small way to the regeneration of the area. But if it does happen then at least this time the artists will still have a permanent home – thanks to the vision of Second Floor Studios.

[Open Studios](#) is at Second Floor Studios and Arts from 12th to 15th May 2011.

[Helen Pynor – Breath](#) is at GV Art from 5th May to 2nd July 2011.

Image credits, left to right: 1 - SFSa; 2 - Liquid Ground 1, Helen Pynor ©2010. C-Type photographic print on glass 160x11cm. Edition of 5 +1AP. Courtesy the artist and GV Art - On exhibition at GV Art, 6 May - 2 July 2011.

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Nigel Jones

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