

A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Gallery

Where to see art in Birmingham and the West Midlands

If you're interested in visual art, there's no better time to be living in or visiting the West Midlands region. What was once, in the dim and distant past, considered by some as a bit of a cultural desert, is now a hive of local, national and international activity with an energetic and growing community of artists at its heart. That's if you can catch them – many of them are out and about, working on exhibitions and projects in cities all around the world, whether shows at commercial galleries in New York, London, Milan and Geneva or in major public art biennales such as Venice or Shanghai. And if you're quick off the mark, you can usually get to see their work in the West Midlands before they achieve national and international success – the trick is knowing where to look.

The West Midlands has a rich history of civic museums and galleries, generated by industrial wealth in the 19th Century. The region is fortunate to still have them, and many of them are thriving. Wolverhampton Art Gallery, for example, home to one of the country's most respected collections of Pop Art as well as gems from many periods of art history, recently opened a major new wing. Similarly, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery's Gas Hall and Waterhall expansions in the past two decades have significantly increased the number of large-scale temporary exhibitions on view to the public, whether playing host to the British Art Show and the Arts Council's contemporary art collection or historical shows from Canaletto and Burne-Jones to the German Symbolists and Equiano, the recent show forming part of the national celebrations for the anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade. With other civic museums and galleries in cities and towns including Worcester, Wednesbury, Rugby, Dudley and Shrewsbury, the region has a solid foundation for developing both its permanent collections and temporary exhibitions programmes.

One of my favourite collections is at the Royal Pump Rooms in Leamington Spa. With its heritage as a destination for those with health problems, the Pump Rooms' contemporary collection particularly reflects this role, with many pieces connecting in some way to medical themes, such as a series of prints by Damien Hirst relating to pharmaceutical products, food and religious belief. While it keeps a relatively low profile, the Royal Pump Rooms has consistently put on ambitious and stimulating temporary exhibitions, including one of the most arresting exhibition experiences I've ever had, witnessing Jordan Baseman's film of a man having open heart surgery accompanied by the foreboding evangelical doctrine of an American minister.

Any consideration of more modern venues for art in the region must begin with the Midlands Arts Centre – a 60s building currently closed for major refurbishment. One of the nicest things about the MAC is that it is used by almost every age group from every community in Birmingham and beyond – everyone feels at home there. And the variety of the programming is startling – you can be watching a cult classic film, contemporary theatre or world music concert and step out into an exhibition of photographs of the M6 toll road, exotic eunuchs or Brits who dress up as famous Americans. It's also one of the best venues for seeing temporary exhibitions of art produced in the West Midlands, whether painting, sculpture, photography, new media or craft. Another major arts venue in the region is Warwick Arts Centre, which in

addition to a concert hall, theatres and cinema, is home to the Mead Gallery with an exceptional programme of temporary historical and contemporary exhibitions.

The 1990s was an important decade for contemporary art in the region, symbolised by the relocation and development of Ikon Gallery in Brindleyplace. Ikon is perhaps the region's jewel in the crown in terms of contemporary art, internationally acknowledged for its dynamic programme of exhibitions, projects and events. The list of artists to have had major exhibitions there includes internationally acclaimed figures such as On Kawara, Marcel Dzama, Olafur Eliasson, Richard Deacon and Gillian Wearing. Ikon also supports emerging stars from the region, such as Ruth Claxton and Juneau Projects. And of course, the small but well-stocked shop and tapas restaurant and bar only add to the pleasure of visiting Ikon...

Hot on the heels of Ikon's redevelopment, the New Art Gallery Walsall also sprang up in the 1990s in an exceptional building designed by award-winning architects Caruso St. John, bringing new life to the excellent Garman Ryan Collection as well as helping to cement the region's reputation as a place presenting work by leading contemporary artists from around the world. Recent solo exhibitions include Jane and Louise Wilson, Christopher Le Brun, Conrad Shawcross, Hew Locke and Kerry James Marshall as well as a variety of intriguing thematic group shows such as *Cult Fiction*, *Back to Black*, *Out of Place*, and *You'll Never Know*. The New Art Gallery Walsall also supports emerging talent from the region, either through its residency programme or by means of exhibitions, such as Stuart Whipps's show of exquisite photographs documenting the decline of the motor industry in Longbridge and the rise of car manufacturing in Nanjing, China.

As with Ikon and the New Art Gallery Walsall, the Public Gallery, opening in summer 2008 in West Bromwich, is also part of a wider urban regeneration scheme. This vast complex, designed by the inimitable architect Will Alsop, is part of a £500 million development project in the Sandwell area, and comes with a theatre, recording studios and conference spaces. Proudly boasting no vertical walls, this promises to be no ordinary arts centre experience and a haven for those with a particular interest in digital technology and interactive arts.

Indeed, significant new venues just keep on appearing, such as the privately owned Compton Verney and Initial Access. Located in a stunning Grade 1 listed mansion in Warwickshire, Compton Verney puts on an impressive programme of historical and contemporary exhibitions ranging from Van Gogh and Giacometti to Luc Tuymans and Susan Hiller. As with many of the aforementioned institutions, Compton Verney has lots of activities and events for visitors of all ages, and has the makings of an excellent family day out. Initial Access is home to Frank Cohen's extensive international collection of contemporary art. With temporary exhibitions from the collection curated by David Thorp, Initial Access turns two large industrial units in the Wolverhampton countryside into international-quality gallery spaces.

While there is clearly lots going on all round the region, Birmingham has become a real focal point for contemporary art with venues and organisations almost everywhere you look, from The Drum in Newtown to the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists in the Jewellery Quarter, from the Barber Institute in Edgbaston to the International Project Space in Bournville. It's also increasingly clear how important

the regeneration district Eastside is becoming to the city, home not just to VIVID with its ambitious media arts programmes, but also to the photography development agency Rhubarb Rhubarb, sonic arts agency Modulate, Friction Arts, *Fused* magazine, Capsule, the Custard Factory and Ikon Eastside, a second space for Ikon Gallery. The latest addition to the ever-growing cultural scene in the area is Eastside Projects, a new venue that seems to have got everybody talking.

The Eastside district has also played host to some of the city and region's many festivals and fairs, including New Art Birmingham, Supersonic, New Generation Arts, the Rhubarb Festival, Gigbeth, the 7-Inch Cinema festival, and The Event – a festival devoted to the region's artist-led community. This community is really active and accounts for much of the energy in the region's contemporary art scene. Again, these can be found all over the place, from Crowd6 in Smethwick to Airspace in Stoke-on-Trent. There are also groups and initiatives that spring up in different locations, creating temporary and site-specific projects, such as AAS, [insertspace], COLONY, Pub Conversations and Capital Art Projects. The art community is very much interwoven with Birmingham's music scene, so there are events, film screenings, talks, performances and happenings taking place every week, both in the region's centres and out in the suburbs – Birmingham's villages of Balsall Heath, Moseley and Kings Heath are positively brimming with artists, musicians, writers and curators.

Artists in or from the region achieving national and international success at different stages of their careers include Richard Billingham, Simon and Tom Bloor, Ruth Claxton, Ravi Deepres, Tessa Farmer, Matt Golden, Roger Hiorns, Juneau Projects, Idris Khan, Karin Kihlberg and Reuben Henry, Heather and Ivan Morison, Kate Pemberton, George Shaw and Stuart Whipps. Together with the amount and quality of international contemporary art on display in the region today and so much happening from artist-led to major institutional levels, it would not be exaggerating to assert that a contemporary art renaissance is quietly taking place here at the moment. For the time being there seems to be little awareness beyond the region that this explosive transformation has been taking place. Maybe it's time we started making a bit more noise.

Matt Price

Matt Price is a writer and editor based in Birmingham and London. Following a degree in art history from the University of Nottingham and an MA in curating from the Royal College of Art, he started his career as an editor for Hans Ulrich Obrist before being appointed Managing Editor of *Flash Art* International, Milan. He has since worked as Deputy Editor of *ArtReview* and Publications Manager at Serpentine Gallery. In addition to *Flash Art* and *ArtReview*, he has also written for magazines including *A-n*, *Art Monthly*, *Fused* and *Frieze*. He is now working on a freelance basis producing publications for Albion, London, and is curating an exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, in autumn 2008.

