

[Home](#) » [Life](#)

Out on 'the cusp' in London

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Born in Hamilton and raised in Toronto, Mark Lewis was recently tapped as Canada's representative at the 2009 Venice Biennale (which the artist points out has been funded by PromArt, recently cancelled by the federal government).

Lewis has spent the last decade in London, and many of his experimental films have been shot there. Best known for his use of rear projection - once Hollywood's preferred method for moving scenery behind stage-filmed actors- Lewis has had solo exhibits across Europe and Canada.

This interview is part of an ongoing series on people inspired by place, and their insights on where they come from.

London is huge. And from the outside, it looks pretty daunting. How would you recommend visitors explore the city?

I cycle everywhere. With a bike, it's easy to stop if I see something that grabs my attention. Most of my film locations in London have been "discovered" that way. [Although] discovering somewhere in London and understanding it can take a bit of time. And certainly to transform a location into a film can involve many visits before I understand it and know what to do with it. For instance, the film *Isosceles* - which I shot in one of my favourite neighbourhoods, Smithfield - was the result of literally hundreds of visits cycling by the triangular building that features in that film.

And where do you live?

We live in an area called Walworth - about 1½ kilometres south of the Tate Modern, but a million miles away in terms of social, economic and cultural difference.

Walworth is really the last inner London neighbourhood not to have been gentrified. It's not pretty, or quaint, or even very authentic. It's just very poor and quite ugly. And we're more or less lacking in amenities.

But Walworth is what I like to think of as a "cusp" neighbourhood and that's why I'm fascinated by it, and maybe even sort of like it. By cusp neighbourhood, I mean that it's almost something, but

never quite.

For instance, it's right on the edge of the City of London - literally on the edge of prosperity, yet marked by a complete absence of it. While I'm sure that a tourist or two must have wandered into the area by mistake, in the seven years I've lived here I have never actually seen one.

It's this "cuspsness" that also gives you the impression that maybe things are about to change. And, indeed, very soon massive redevelopment will transform this forgotten area of deprivation into another area for middle-class housing. So many of the places that I have filmed have started to disappear.

My neighbourhood is intense: It's very noisy, there are people on the streets at all hours of the day and night, there are arguments and fights and sometimes even shootings. Last week, a young man was shot to death in our local convenience store. So presumably even a committed resident must like to hang out elsewhere on occasion?

So often at weekends we try to go somewhere different to get a break from all of this. My favourite place to get away is Hampstead Heath, about a 40-minute cycle north of where we live.

"The Heath" is a semi-wild park, large enough to lose yourself in and on most days quiet enough to feel that you have it more or less to yourself. It's breathtakingly beautiful, especially in the spring, and it's quite high up. From one of its many hills you can see the whole of London stretching out in front of you.

Artists such as Thomas Gainsborough and Constable used to live in Hampstead when it was still a village outside of London. You can see the Heath in their paintings, and you can also find their houses and the houses of other artists scattered throughout Hampstead village.

Also in Hampstead is one of my other favourite spots: the garden at Fenton House. It's an authentic walled English garden, with different levels, and includes a beautiful orchard and meadow, a vegetable garden, as well as a beautiful lawn where you can lie down or even have a picnic. It's a perfect city oasis.

That all sounds so far from the bustling London I picture when I think about visiting.

London today is the immigrant hub of the world, the equivalent, let's say, of New York in the early part of the 20th century. Apparently more than 30 per cent of Londoners are now not Anglo-Saxon, and that represents an extraordinary contemporary event in the heart of what we like to think of as an "old country."

This is really what sets London apart from all the other European capitals, and what gives it its dynamism and excitement. It's what makes London exceptional and perhaps in many ways it's a city that is even more representative of how the world is today than any North American city that I've spent time in. The difference, I think, is that here you actually feel the diasporas everywhere you go, and not just in precise neighbourhoods.

And all this influences the art that's getting made in London?

It's one of the main reasons London is such a great city for art: Most of my artist friends are from other countries, but they definitely feel themselves to be, and they are, Londoners. The fact that they are from other countries does not feel exceptional at all.

With so many artists moving to London, there has also been a huge increase in the number of galleries, large and small. And these are scattered everywhere. The eastern part of the city - Hoxton, Bethnal Green, Hackney - certainly has a high density of such places, but you can really find galleries and art events everywhere (except in my neighbourhood).

My wife, Janice Kerbel, has long had a studio at an artists' collective called Cubitt (8 Angel Mews; 44 207 278 8226; <http://www.cubittartists.org.uk>) in Islington. Cubitt has a gallery, too, and has a great reputation for putting on rigorous and innovative exhibitions. Their openings are always packed with the latest wave of ambitious and intelligent young

artists.

Where do you go to check out non-contemporary art?

First, there is the Wallace Collection (Hertford House; 44 207 563 9500; <http://www.wallacecollection.org>), a small, previously private collection with unbelievably magnificent paintings by Titian, Rembrandt, Poussin, Fragonard and others. Like most London galleries, it's free to enter and you can spend hours there. Recently they have tried to "re-brand" to attract more people. I am happy to report that this exercise has more or less failed.

My other favourite place is the National Gallery. Here there are usually crowds, so it's important to choose the right time - Monday or Tuesday mornings are usually good.

Of course, it's one of the great collections in the world, and there are lots of paintings there that I like to go and visit, but there is also one particularly small painting that always gives me a great amount of pleasure. It's a Dutch painting circa 1608 by the artist Hendrick Avercamp called A Winter Scene with Skaters Near a Castle. It's circular, which is a little unusual, and quite modest in many ways. But its depiction of the excitement of a winter scene never fails to move me, and I suppose in many ways it reminds me of home.

Ah, home. Toronto may not be London, but are there some things even about London that are overrated?

Three, at least: the London Eye, David Cameron (the Tory leader) and anything to do with the Royal Family.

What about local customs

visitors should be in on?

An unusual and very recent custom in London is for

establishments to add a

"discretionary service charge" automatically to most restaurant bills. Know that this will most likely not go to the waiter, but to whoever owns the establishment. If you want to be nice, ask to have this removed from your bill (this is your right) and then leave the customary 15 per cent in cash - thus guaranteeing that the poorly paid waiter will actually receive it.

Mark Lewis's

London primer

In addition to his film art - which will be shown at the Venice Biennale next year - Mark Lewis is a professor at the University of the Arts in London and the editor of the multivolume One Work series of books, each of which examines a single work of modern or contemporary art.

THE FOOD

THE TASTING ROOM At the Borough Market, Stoney Street. "Before I go to my studio in the mornings, I like to stop by this small outdoor Italian coffee and cheese shop run by a charming Venezuelan named Juan (this wonderful Italian/South American combination speaks loudly of the complexity of the international diaspora). Juan makes one of the best lattes in London and his Panini Classico is just delicious."

THE NIGHTLIFE

THE HEIGHTS 14 Langham Place, Saint Georges Hotel; 44 207 580 0111. "It has great views of London and the 1970s decor has never been touched."

THE SOUVENIR

THE NATIONAL GALLERY Trafalgar Square; 44 20 7747 2885;<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk>. Pick up a postcard of the painting *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*. "Completed when Velazquez was just 18, this beautiful little painting already begins to suggest some of the optical complexity of *Las Meninas*."