



FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES

Take nine young artists and a derelict East End warehouse. Add a production manager and a few favours along the way, and what do you get? **Jessica Lack** finds out. **Photography by Rob Carter**

Propped against a shuttered newsagent's on Dalston Lane is a greasy sandwich board bearing the words "Hackney for 2012 Olympics". Surrounded by vacant shop fronts and boarded-up terraces, the announcement seems incongruous, yet walk a little further down the street and the unmistakable signs of gentrification are appearing. The formerly grotty rows of Victorian dwellings have had a whitewash and the local supermarket car park is no longer the dumping ground for nicked cars.

Dalston, at the heart of the London borough of Hackney, was once considered the armpit of London, rarely mentioned in the media without the words 'gun crime' or 'poverty' attached. Yet it was also the place where graduating art students could rent affordable warehouses, rot and rats generously included. But the area is changing, and the once readily available shells are now being transformed into luxury flats. It's an all too common story – which is why Rockwell studios could be the blueprint for the way forward.

It's easy to miss Rockwell on first visit. Situated adjacent to Hackney Downs train station, the salmon-pink façade is unpromising and could be mistaken for the garage next door. A small plaque reveals that the studios are on the top floor, but already the tell-tale signs of a recent private view – large bin-bags bulging with empty beer bottles – are unmistakable. I am invited in by Reece Jones, one of the nine artists to make up Rockwell. The other members are two of his contemporaries from the Royal Academy, Christian Ward and Gavin Nolan, and their six friends from the Royal College of Art, Kiera Bennett, Chris Davies, Sigrid Holmwood, Alex Gene Morrison, Tim Parr and Isabel Young. The smell of emulsion is still faintly discernible, and Reece happily admits they were up all night before the exhibition opened trying to get the place ready in time.

The area is a vast 750 square metres, divided into seven studio spaces, a 25-metre-long gallery, five offices, a lounge, a kitchen, two bathrooms and a workshop. It is such a professional job and (at present) so new, I feel I have entered a show home. Where's all the grime and junk? Why do all the doors shut soundlessly without you having to push them? Photographs tacked onto the lounge wall reveal what the warehouse looked like before they started. A cavernous space filled with dust so fine it dispersed into the air when swept or congealed into thick black sludge when wet. Theatre production manager Brian Jones, Reece's brother, is the driving force behind the venture and quite possibly the reason why I have the surreal sensation of walking round a studio set. It was his financial backing and expertise of putting on large-scale productions for the Royal Opera House that helped bring the project to fruition.

The scheme took 10 months to complete – something of a mammoth task when you appreciate that 90 per cent of the work force were also preparing for their final MA shows. All believed it was going to be a relatively simple venture when first mooted and never imagined that, six months on, they would still be wrestling with caved-in floors and colossal water tanks too heavy to move. You get the impression they are all extremely good friends and work well together, and this – not to mention lots of freebies along the way – succeeded in making this impressive space a reality. The plans drawn up by the architect and the sofas we are sitting on were all donated free of charge, the group's only extravagance being the corrugated windows in the ceiling which they had shipped from Italy, to subtly defuse the light.

At present, the gallery is exhibiting paintings by the studio residents, but the group are quick to stress that this is not a vanity project. "We wanted the first show to reveal the interests of Rockwell, but after that we'll be showing other artists' work," explains Reece. Their next

exhibition will be Dan Coombes, who fabricates brightly coloured assemblages out of rubbish scavenged from skips. Coombes began his large-scale constructions as a way of dealing with the detritus heaped outside his studio on Minet Street in Brixton. This was the now-infamous building, since developed, where Damien Hirst *et al* worked, until its grisly demise in the mid-1990s after Marcus Harvey discovered the landlord decapitated by his own digger.

This relationship between the artwork and the studio space is obviously important to Rockwell, but will not be the only factor in choosing an exhibition. "At the moment we would like people to submit proposals and also talk to curators about how they would approach the space," says Reece, "and we will also talk to the Arts Council about funding. One of the dangers in a venture like this is that people think we are almost too self-sufficient and won't need the extra cash to put into projects."

Brian tells me a story about their plumber, who fixed them up in return for letting him use the gallery for a short film he was making. "It's these kind of favours that have made this space work," he says. "And the fact we were prepared to work 48-hour shifts when it mattered," interjects Alex. Reece agrees. "We told too many people when we were planning to open, and once the invitations had been printed we had no choice." "Yes," says Brian. "I guess you could say our motto is 'if you half-build it, they will come'."

Dan Coombes, to 27 July, Rockwell, London E8 (+44 (0)20 7923 0739)

Above: 360-degree view of Rockwell's interior, showing works by: Isabel Young, *Flood*, 2003, oil on linen; Reece Jones, *Apple of My Eye*, 2003, charcoal on paper; Alex Gene Morrison, *I See Dragons in Your Eyes*, 2003, oil on linen. **Following pages:** Gavin Nolan (top) and Christian Ward (below) in their Rockwell studio space, with works in progress