



Voyage into the art

An all-enveloping, six-screen film installation plunges viewers into the life of London. **Joanna Pitman** meets its maker

Gerry Fox is an enthusiast. We meet at his house off Ladbroke Grove, West London, and we talk, or rather he talks, fast and with great focus, cracking jokes, clarifying points, performing for all he's worth. It's a good five minutes before I have a chance to ask my second question, and I begin to wonder whether I should just have sent my tape recorder in a taxi; but then I would have missed the show, and the show is so good, Fox could sell tickets for it.

For 20 years the film-maker has probed the motivational and spiritual depths of scores of artists, from Gerhard Richter to Tracey Emin, in more than 50 arts documentaries. His *South Bank Show* films on Gilbert

and George (1997) and the great American photographer and filmmaker Robert Frank (2005) have scooped up the top industry awards.

Now, however, for the first time Fox himself is becoming an artist with his own show. *Living London* is a series of synchronised multiscreen film installations just opened at I76 gallery in North London.

"You know, I ended up doing this show partly because of the experience I had with Robert Frank. It's amazing how good things actually do sometimes come out of bad. And the film was going very badly, at times disastrously. He was very difficult." Fox is being quite charitable. At one point during filming the notoriously irascible Frank suddenly gets up and

shouts at the camera "Well look! Forget it! I'm not an actor. I can't go through with this shit, you know... this shit! I can't do it!"

"Things were going badly and Robert had retreated into another room when his wife came up to me and said, 'Robert's really worried because he thinks you're scared of him.' 'I'm not scared of him,' I said. 'Oh, you're not?' she said. 'Well, you bloody well should be. Everyone's scared of him.'" Fox laughs loudly.

The situation soon became more serious when Frank called in his lawyers and refused to allow the film a cinema release. "I think he felt he'd revealed too much about himself. I'd been thinking a lot about the textures of this character and of his wife, and I



and soul of the city

thought that I'll never find another subject as rich as this, and I was thinking about what I could do next, and began to think maybe I should do my own thing.

"I decided I wanted to portray my own vision of the world and not someone else's."

The film installations describe a journey through London as a kind of metaphor for life. The footage is taken from the point of view of someone walking, and the films are shown on six screens in the room: one on each of the four walls, the ceiling and the floor, so that the viewer, although standing still, has the sense of walking or floating through time. It can be dizzying. Sometimes his films hurtle forward at double speed, sometimes they are superimposed with other images, but in accepting and giving in to them, the viewer experiences a strange spatial sensation. You're awake but you're dreaming; it's like a

lucid hallucination. You wander through a cemetery; you watch the chaos and colour of a street market while on another screen a mountain of rubbish is being churned over in a dump. The most tender of all is Fox's elegant, bewitching film shot as if flying around the Peter Pan statue in Kensington Gardens.

"I decided I wanted to portray my own vision of the world and not someone else's"

Fox would like to make more of his own films based on other cities, but he doesn't plan to stop making *South Bank Show* films. "Melvyn [Bragg] has been very supportive over the years, and has allowed me to take a sabbatical to make these films."

The South Bank Show on Gilbert and George is probably Fox's best-known work. "They were very guarded when we first met," Fox recalls.

"For several days they were just not opening up and I can only think they were worried about being made fun of. People had been making fun of them in the media and I think, understandably, they were nervous. And then I remembered that my mother had once met them at the Turner Prize party, the year they'd won.

"I decided I wanted to portray my own vision of the world and not someone else's"

They'd been standing on their own, nobody talking to them, and she'd gone up to them and started to chat, and they ended up going off clubbing together. My father was furious when my mother got home the next morning, you know ...

"I reminded them of this and it broke the ice. After that they were very much more relaxed. They painted their faces for me, took me to their

Gerry Fox puts London life in focus. Photograph by David Bebbler

tailors, to their local café, they did their living sculpture for me, they showed me their creative techniques which I think they hadn't really shown to anyone before. It was a film about them and about life on the streets of East London at a particular time before the streets smartened up.

"I've tended to go beyond what was expected for *The South Bank Show*, but I was also lucky enough to be able to go round the world making crazy films with soap bubbles, making dream sequences, weird experimental films. *The Living London* work is the result of what I thought about and learnt over all those years."

Living London; Gerry Fox is at 176, 176 Prince of Wales Road, London NW5 (info@projectspace176.com 020-7428 8940), until Apr 20