

East End art comes out of hiding

Jane Hughes finds treasure in some of London's grimmest locations

YOU will find Ella Doran's tableware in Liberty and Heal's, but the designer is more difficult to track down. Her studio is tucked away in a down-at-heel street in London's East End, behind the façade of a light industrial building.

It's here that 29-year-old Doran and her assistants hand-craft her distinctive tablemats and porcelain, emblazoned with photographic images of flowers, leaves, stones and water. Upstairs, Zoë Hope, a textile designer who sells to the Conran Shop, toils over her delicate, decorative wallhangings and screens.

East London has a thriving population of artists and designers in workshops often concealed in pockets of once-cheap accommodation. Though informal communities have sprung up in old factories, warehouses and markets, unless you know where to look, you could walk right past them. However, this weekend and next, more than 250 artists and designers will be advertising their whereabouts in Hidden Art, one of the country's biggest open-studio events.

Six clusters of businesses across Hackney, Clerkenwell and Tower Hamlets — specialising in anything from ceramics to fashion and accessories, furniture, furnishings and glassware — will invite the public to discover their work.

Traditional narrow boats will ferry visitors along the Regent's Canal between two venues, taking in studios converted from old shops at Broadway Market in London Fields and the likes of Tea for Two, a furniture business set up in a front room at Mile End Park, as well as an exhibition under the Green Bridge.

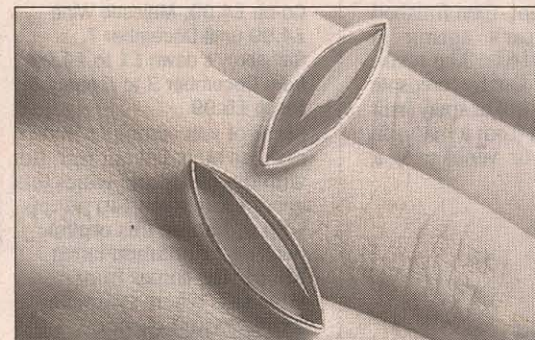
Hidden Art is a chance to buy original work without paying a high street mark-up. Buying or



Above, a seated bull terrier by Kerry Jameson, of Mazorca Projects. Below, jewellery from Tamara Gomez



Above, a Hammerhead desk by Crispin and Gemma Furniture Design. Left, the Paperbag Range from Columbia Glassworks



commissioning directly from a maker, while munching a mince pie and warming your hands on a glass of mulled wine, might also appeal to those who prefer to avoid the crush of Oxford Street.

For the artists, Hidden Art provides a break from the frantic pace of work in the lead-up to Christmas. It is a chance to let their hair down and nose around each other's studios. "At this time of year, all I seem to do is eat, sleep and live lamps," says Helen Rawlinson, 32, who has one of the 11 studios in a converted Victorian chocolate factory in Stoke Newington. "So it's really nice to have a bit of time to relax and look at each other's work."

Rawlinson crafts her screen-printed lampshades with turned wooden bases for several interior stores, while her neighbours specialise in ceramics and fashion. "It's a little hideaway," she says, "but there are always people around if you want to talk and go over ideas."

At Columbia Road, Richard Ward, of WAWA, which makes contemporary sofas and hand-tufted rugs, is a convert to face-to-face contact with customers. "We used to sell to the department stores but dealing directly with customers is much better because we don't have to negotiate over fees and mark-ups with the accounts department."

When Hidden Art started in 1994, it included just 43 designers and attracted 1,500 people. As the event grew, so did the number of visitors. Last year, more than 30,000 showed up.

Artists' groups across Britain have also seized on the vogue for open-studio events as a way of promoting their work.

In Brighton, the members of the highly successful Fiveways Artists group open their homes to display their work during the Brighton Festival in May. The Cotswolds town of Stroud has a growing artists' community which includes Damien Hirst and Dan Chadwick and holds a week-long open-

studio festival during the summer.

This weekend also sees Cockpit Arts, a group of workshops in Clerkenwell, celebrating its eighth year of open studios. About 4,000 people are expected to turn up to see work such as Kate Schuricht's raku and stoneware containers and Caroline Bromilow's coloured polypropylene and plywood table and pendant lights.

● www.hiddenart.com (020-7729 3301; e-mail: info@hiddenart.co.uk). Map and guide available. Travel by narrow boat is free but needs to be booked. Cockpit Arts, Northington Street, London WC1 2NP (020-7419 1599; cockpit@easynet.co.uk)