

Dover Dérive

— Christopher Burke —

Art31 Gallery is situated in the Big Local Hub/Community Centre at the Charlton Centre. It is funded by the Big Local and curated by Sam Capell. Every month there is a new exhibition of local artists' work, and as there was a slot in April I was invited by Sam to show some of my work. A couple of years back I was invited by Joanna Jones, Dover Arts Development, to take some photos of Dover to display at an event for promoting The Big Local, which took place in the Maison Dieu. It is these, plus other digital images, that I had printed in a larger format for the show at the Art31 Gallery.

The Centre for Urban and Community Research at Goldsmiths' College, University of London, runs short intensive Summer School courses in Urban Photography; I enrolled on a course a few years ago. Many things were introduced and discussed – including the literary, visual and ideological background to urban photography, and also Baudelaire's *flâneur* – usually a poet or an artist – who strolls through the city, observing and engaging with people and the environment of the urban cityscape. The French word for this is '*dérive*'. Anyone who practises this is now known as a '*psychogeographer*' – for example, writers such as Iain Sinclair and the filmmaker Patrick Keiller.

I call myself an 'Urban Observer', and for a number of years now I have been strolling through urban and suburban landscapes, recording and documenting with my camera and notebooks what engages my

interest. I do not seek out the picturesque – instead, I look for the quotidian: visual images of what we see but don't observe – for example, the surface of a wall or a pavement, reflections in shop windows, etc. (It may be remembered that John Constable admired old things, stressed and rotting.) I photograph people in the street: going about their daily business, casual unposed scenes of contemporary life in the city, dressing a shop window, doing the daily shopping, moving furniture, etc. – all small-scale events but not insignificant to the daily drama of life in an urban environment.

The images I chose for this exhibition were representative of what interested me as I made a series of walks in and around Dover. There is indeed much interest and diversity in the townscape that is Dover – for example, from the old London Road, with its run-down and semi-closed shops (reflecting upon the social and economic decline of Dover), one can within minutes be up on the Downs, enjoying views of the castle, the port and the sea (and on clear days the coastline of France). From the old Buckland paper mill (once famous worldwide for the quality of its paper but now boarded up and in semi-ruin) one can follow the course of the River Dour almost all the way to where it flows into the

English Channel. The pier, with its unique café, has been closed since I took some photos there – and the ambitious scheme for the Western Docks is now underway. I am sure we are all watching this new development with the greatest of interest.



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