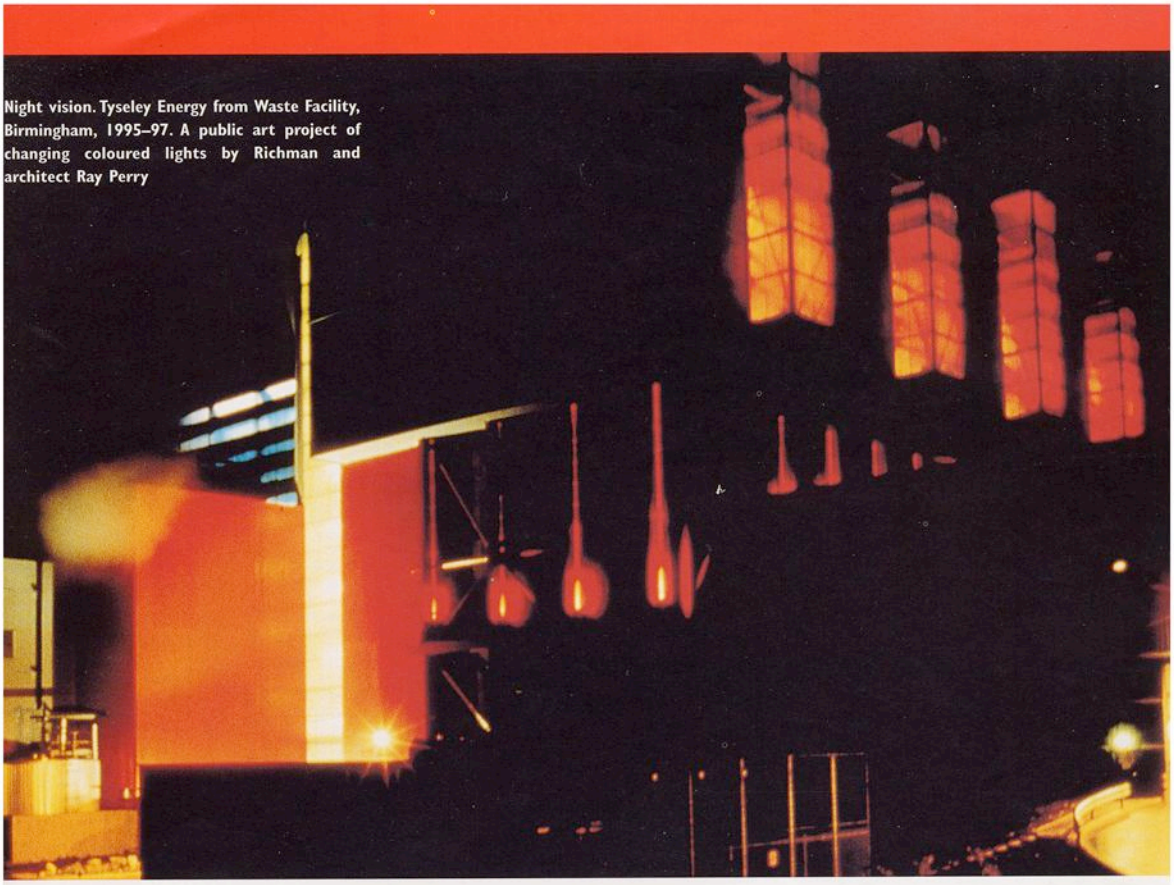

Night vision. Tyseley Energy from Waste Facility, Birmingham, 1995–97. A public art project of changing coloured lights by Richman and architect Ray Perry

making its nest on a canal in Hackney. There is something profoundly moving about the swan continuing to build under duress in the adverse conditions of an urban wasteland. It is as if life, for the living, must go on regardless, even after the death of loved ones.

Unusually for Richman he is showing a whole room of watercolours. Some of these are abstracted architectural and city spaces where the grids are disrupted to give a sense of movement and flickering light like headlamps of traffic blurred in rain or the boxes of lit windows glowing across the dark city from a tower block. Others are illustrated proposals for public art projects such as a sculpture for the side of Denby Playhouse or the South Shields Ferry Terminal. This later work, a 1999 collaboration with the architect, involved the colouring of the pontoon and bridge. The parapet was pierced with holes so the light came through and the arms or bascule were delineated with blue neon and the counterweight with orange, turning it into a modern, physical version of Van Gogh's famous bridge; a flooded beacon that acted as a landmark for South Shields.

At Swiss Cottage, his interventions around an ugly gas substation will form part of the whole refurbishment of the library, Hampstead Theatre, the sports hall and the public gardens. A screen of sandblasted and acid-etched translucent glass will be backlit, immediately changing a busy interchange into a place of dreaming and reflection.

The feeling for both architectural space and internal space is very strong in Richman's work, for physical space approximates that of the unconscious and memory. It is as if through the experience of actual tactile environments we revisit and colour our perceptions of the current spaces we inhabit, just as our past emotional experiences colour the essence of who we are and who we have become. Richman creates what Bachelard has called sites for daydreaming; art works that connect us back to our lost selves through the power of memory. His spaces glimmer, inviting us in, yet fending us off. We can, as the philosopher Herakleitos once implied, never step into the same river twice. Equally, we can never return to the exact place of our memories. Through art they are "translated", transformed and transfigured; given new life. ■

Martin Richman 'Come to light', 15 Nov–21 Dec, Rhodes + Mann, 37 Hackney Road, London E2 (020 7729 4372) and Dominic Berning, 1 Hoxton Street, London N1, by appointment only (020 7739 4222). The show then tours to the Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth and The Customs House, South Shields

Blue watch. Above: 'Bloom', 1997 installation at RIBA, London. Below: Abingdon Police Station, 1999