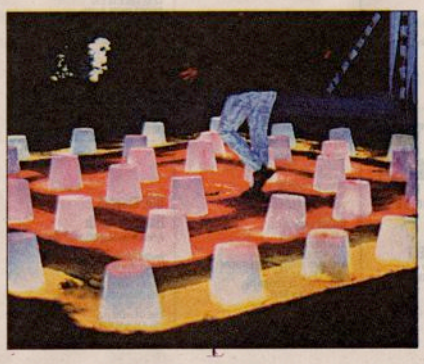
Visions of the past come to light



Sarah Greenberg meets an illuminating artist

THE season of fairy lights is upon us, and artist Martin Richman is celebrating by wrapping light around huge whirligigs in the East End and King's Road. He's switching on a light trail between two East End galleries: at Rhodes and Mann, the whirligig glitters alongside a Perspex stairway illuminated from within by violet light; a few blocks away, Dominic Berning's gallery in the Victorian dome above the Electricity Showrooms returns to its roots with light sculptures beaming from the roof terrace, and windows turned into coloured beacons.

"Light changes your sense of a space," says Richman. "I used to live in an East End warehouse where I looked out on tower blocks. By day they are ugly and flat, but at night they transform into deep spaces with imaginative possibilities. There's a rhythm of presence and absence, light and dark, like a ladder connecting earth to heaven."

Richman, 52, has always been fascinated by light. After being thrown out of art school, he began designing light shows, working for acts such as Pink Floyd, Jimi Hendrix and The Ramones.

Then, in the early 1980s, he started painting again. He would spend six months touring with the bands then three months painting, until in 1984 he moved to the East End, where he turned a warehouse into the first live/work studio space in the neighbourhood.

"My music friends thought I was crazy to leave a well-paid job and take time out to paint," he says. Since then, Richman's career has spanned art, architecture and design. He has "painted" with coloured light to enhance buildings such as Abingdon Police Station, and most recently has created a light sculpture of books in the Fawcett Library of Women's Literature in Whitechapel (opening in January).

Richman has called the current show "Come to Light" partly in reference to finding family mementoes after his father's death. "I wanted to make work that remembered my father and the relatives I'd lost recently, people who worked hard to build new lives in fresh lands. I didn't want it to be mournful. I wanted a sense that life continues. Even though people are gone, qualities of lives remain like qualities of light."

●*At Rhodes and Mann, 37 Hackney Road, E2 (020 7729 4372); Dominic Berning, 1 Hoxton Street, N1 (020 7739 4222); and Habitat, King's Road, SW3 (020 7255 2545) until 21 December.*