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THE INDEPENDENT

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Nothing Is Forever, South London Gallery, London

Reviewed by Laura McLean-Ferris

A first-class contemporary art gallery and communitarian institution in south London became a great and major space this week.

The South London Gallery, on Peckham Road, was built in 1891 as a "gallery for the people of South London open to the public free, and on Sundays". It has always been an elegant space with a gorgeously high ceiling. It has a remarkable recent history of exhibitions, including shows from lauded British and international artists such as Rivane Neuenschwander, Claire Fontaine, Ryan Gander and Omer Fast - it also commissioned Tracey Emin's famous tent. Now, it has a café, garden, bookshop, education space, artist's flat and an extension with pleasing, domestic-scale rooms that contrast with the wide-open main gallery.

It seems rather unfair to review this celebratory opening exhibition, as it has been choreographed to accentuate the star attraction: the beautiful extensions to the building by the architectural practice 6a (also responsible for the Raven Row gallery, opened in Spitalfields last year). Entitled Nothing Is Forever, this is a group show of works applied directly to the gallery's walls, all of which will be painted over in time for the next exhibition.

A large part of the new dining room, for example, has been bathed in a beautiful gold mural by Paul Morrison. In the garden's new space for talks and education are cartoonish murals by David Shrigley, Lily van der Stokker and Dan Perjovschi. Several artists have been invited to make site-specific work for the flat that will host artists in residence. There is a tiny, sleepy drawing above the bed, by Penny McCarthy, and in the bathroom a comic strip, by Sam Dargan, inspired by a French commune.

Nearby, Yinka Shonibare has covered the immense side walls of a 13-storey tower block with a swirling, peacock-like mural which can be seen from the gallery's garden.

The extension to the gallery space has been made by knocking through to a house next-door and the new, small spaces feel very domestic. Fireplaces remain and ceilings have been removed to reveal slender, bone-like rafters that heighten the atmosphere of fragility. Ernst Caramelle's colourful painted blocks of colour on the warm, pinky plaster walls glance across corners and behind doorways like bright, dancing sun-shadows. They are stunning.

If you want to see an artist really go for it in the new gallery, I suspect that arch manipulator of space Tatiana Trouvé, whose exhibition will open here in September, will be the one to do it. For now, however come and enjoy the new gallery and its sensitive artistic interventions. The space is exquisite yet friendly. It is calm, if sometimes a little eerie. Are there ghosts in that old house, in the fireplaces or the rafters?

In other words, it is nigh on perfect. Equally important, however, is that the South London Gallery is now the

kind of place for spending long hours, for a browse or a coffee, an elegant beacon of art and ideas that is still very much for the people.

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