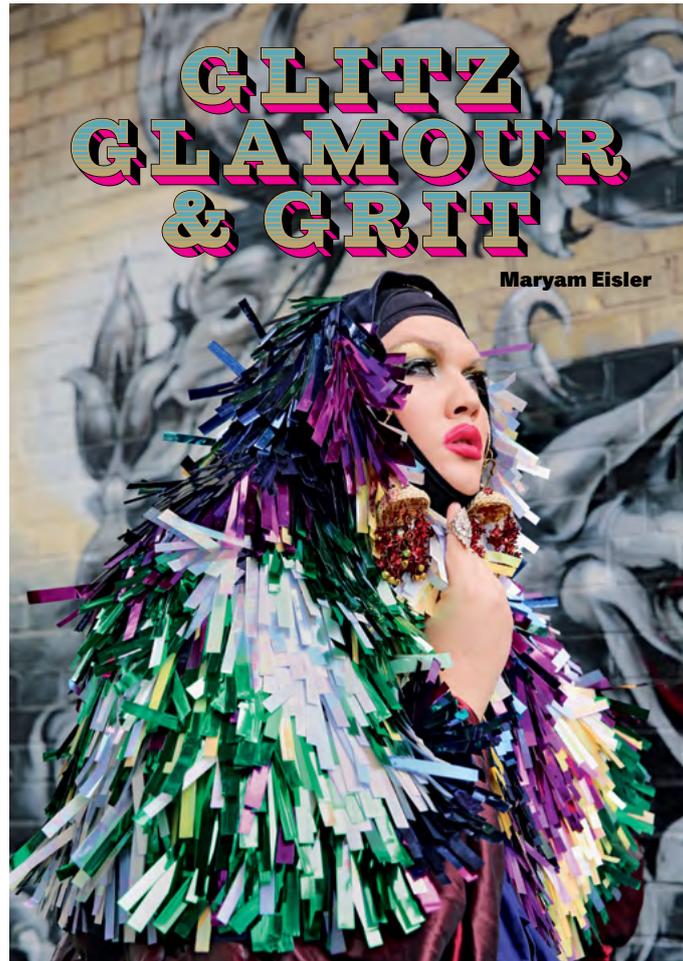


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My first encounters with London's East End date back to the early 2000s. I had just moved to London from New York and thought venturing 'out east' every now and again – out of our corporate, sanitised lives in West London – would be an adventure. Like travelling to another city, you might say, with its unexpected mores and norms and purposeful differentiation of lifestyles.

It was not quite the Wild East, but different perspectives from a centralised London viewpoint were somewhat challenging. Certainly raw and in your face in many regards. There are lingering memories of wild nights at Les Trois Garçons in particular, where I vividly recall the dark-wood-panelled, candlelit room resplendent with bijoux objets. My personal favourite was the venue's penchant for Victorian taxidermy – a tiger if I recall correctly. If you were lucky, you'd be invited upstairs to the apartment to be greeted by colourful personalities like Hassan, one of the three garçons; they all seemed to be living a fairy-tale existence surrounded by oh-so-antique furniture and vintage gowns, all of which was for sale if you were inclined to buy.

Fast-forward a decade, to 2012, when work took me back to the East End after a long absence, in the context of chronicling the studios of British artists. This time things were on a more serious level as part of my editorial duties for *Sanctuary: Britain's Artists and their Studios*, an unimaginably creative adventure that led to the publication of a seminal volume that was greeted with enthusiasm. My book-work efforts landed

me back in the East End in 2015 for yet another blockbuster, *London Burning: Portraits from a Creative City*. These investigative art-based and creativity-centred forays opened up multiple channels, penetrating social layers, particularly of the area's creative psyche. Renewed exposure enhanced my understanding of the East End's intricate and often quirky social, cultural and architectural layering.

But times were a-changin': there were telling differences between my 2012 and 2015 experiences. And in such a short time! These complexities reaffirmed my initial instinct about East London's distinctive character: a community (I consciously place great emphasis on this word) unlike any other in London, tight-knit and self-supporting, comprised of unique, hard-working and out-of-the-box thinkers, all inflected by a stellar spirit of initiative and enterprise – a common thread held tight throughout its history. As the iconic artist duo (and gracious contributors to this book) Gilbert & George once said to me, 'When you live in East London, you don't need to go on holiday. Here, the world comes to us!'

From the Huguenots in the seventeenth century, to Irish silk weavers in the late 1700s, to East European Jews at the turn of the twentieth century, through to recent immigrants from South-east Asia, East London has, over time, been shaped by a multicultural reality closely linked to its unique spirit of creativity. Over the last thirty years in particular, the area has been transformed from a crumbling no-go area on the fringe of the nation's capital into an active melting pot buzzing with creative energy. I would even argue that East London's vibrancy is at the forefront of Greater London's evolving persona, a lynchpin reinforcing the city's international reputation for imagination, individuality, diversity and innovation.

Voices: East London reveals this thriving kaleidoscope by means of interlinked interviews and images, exploring the area's soul by encapsulating a particular moment in time, place and space, highlighted by economic uncertainty, gentrification, cultural evolution and political mayhem. My fifteen-month journey has taken me from Shoreditch to Bethnal Green, Hackney to Clapton, Hoxton to Haggerston, Stoke Newington to Dalston, Whitechapel to Aldgate, Mile End to Limehouse, Hackney Wick to Bow, and even to Dagenham. All are distinctive and colourful landscapes, quirky and memorable, layered with convoluted history and colourful storytelling. In walking this Yellow Brick Road, I had the pleasure of meeting effervescent personalities encompassing high-spirited pioneers, fertile creators, dynamic cultural trailblazers and style originators, across genders, cultures and generations, many of whom I am proud to now call friends and all of whom I hold in the utmost respect.

As to its physical landscape, East London is far more sensorial than the rest of the city: more scents (both good and bad, living side by side), more sky and therefore more light (lower buildings), more flavour (organic produce, delicious no-nonsense cuisine), more water (canals and other waterways), more colour (markets and people), more texture (bricks, cobblestones, rusty arches), more space (architectural wonders, depots old and new, industrial or not), more glitz (at times, for sure) but also, and most definitely, more grit.

It would be fair to say that East London is a chameleon that has always embraced change and instigated hope. Big-development blocks may be going up, inducing fears of community destruction and the creation of a spiritual vacuum, but the inhabitants of East London are masters of reinvention, magicians who have always managed to stay in the mix while using the moment creatively and making it work to their own advantage. Here today and most certainly still here tomorrow!

I hope that this book will help reinforce the idea that East London deserves a place among Europe's pre-eminent creative ghettos, with a future that may well determine the capital's cultural direction. This is not a tome that laments the area's past. Rather it offers an ode to its history, its now and its tomorrow, encompassing the good, the bad, the great and the ugly!

Maryam Eisler