

# SKYLINES

## THE SKYLINES OF PETER SPENS

By Andrew Lambirth. October 2001

Peter Spens possesses a clean-eyed vision of the world, reflected through his bright optimistic even-tempered paintings. Refreshingly, his work evinces serious traditional values - one of its main strengths is the rigour and particularity of the draughtsmanship. The big ink drawings are utterly convincing, and it is the structural authority which underpins his work in other media. He can paint the portrait of a place with colouristic verve and aplomb, with a freshness which derives from dedicated observation of nature. His immediate and spontaneous studies from the motif in turn inspire further re-workings and developments of a theme, as he delves more deeply into the pictorial organisation of a landscape or a city. The new work is less obviously descriptive than hitherto: more compellingly about paint than ever: yet still wonderfully evocative of light and space.

Spens interrogates the motif with persistence and tact. He is intelligent in his visual questing, but not confrontation-al. He sees no mileage in deforming his subjects or subjecting them to an overtly autobiographical treatment, like so many of today's self-obsessed young artists. For Spens the activity of looking and recording what he sees is a celebration of the beauty of the world, not an egotistical rant. Whether it's the view from Canada House or from the second floor canteen of the London Studios, the street patterns of New York or the beach at Long Island, the artist seeks out the identity of that particular stretch of river, city or country, and offers it to us directly and unaffectedly.

Particularly emotive are the light airy street scenes of Florence, where Spens worked briefly last July. Compare them to the closely observed and intimately familiar local setting of Highbury Fields. The Florence pictures, such as the Piazza Annunziata or Night, Ponte alle Grazie have great dash, while the open textures and long shadows of the Via del Agnolo offer a more thoughtful treatment. The oils are in fact fresh first impressions, vivid scratchings of life's surface. Look at Florence Street, Morning. It is a busy picture, packed with visual incident, but with a restrained elegance of depiction that puts me in mind of the subtleties of that great painter of bicyclists and loungers, Robert Medley. It is a seductive painting, but of quite another order to the carefully researched and structured images (and notice the importance of the pointilliste dabs here) to be found in the pictures of Highbury Fields under rain, or in winter. In the Highbury paintings, the space is articulated with far greater authority and assurance, the interlacing tree boughs forming not just a relevant pattern but a perspectival device of considerable ingenuity.

If this suggests that the artist is able to penetrate more deeply into a long familiar subject, there is indeed some truth to the assertion. Yet Spens pulls off the rare achievement of pursuing his researches into a new place with equal resolve. Look, for instance, at the series of paintings he made of Greenwich Village in the autumn. The images unfold a skyline narrative of block against block, tower against window against tree, of increasing complexity and understanding. Something of the Village's soul seems to have been revealed. It is remarkable how much sensitive work can be successfully realised in a short intense period.

However, London remains Peter Spens' principal subject, not only because he finds it endlessly visually stimulating, but because he spends the greater part of his time in the capital. His prolonged study of the city in many moods throws up unusual vistas. Westminster, Afternoon Light reveals the Embankment as surprisingly leafy, while elsewhere, Admiralty Arch and environs crowd close against the sky in a roofscape of almost Parisian variety. Blackfriars Bridge appears redly brooding in thunderous overcast light, while by night it has something of the joyous vaulting presence of a funfair. Spens manages to make even the most hackneyed landmarks worthy of our renewed attention.

The millennium Wheel is, of course, a gift to the painter, rearing its podded clock-face high above the river, but not everyone could make the re-construction of Hungerford Bridge or the Trafalgar Square Christmas Tree into a memorable pictorial event.

In New York, Spens painted from two eyries, an office block mid-town and a Greenwich Village apartment. The bright zippy paintings which resulted are altogether looser and more relaxed than Spens' earlier work. His working habit is now to progress an image through various states (a development analogous to the printing process of proofing etchings) - the re-workings becoming increasingly free. Working in series in this way encourages ideas to spark off each other, and enables the artist to remain playful and not to worry too much about whether any particular painting is "finished" or not. This method also leaves room for ideas to develop yet further, back in the studio, often in the form of monotypes.

The monotypes - one of the most impressive aspects of the Spens oeuvre - are not of course done on the spot (the process precludes this), but are a secondary studio activity inspired by the oils and the large drawings. As a series of variations or second thoughts, they occupy a key place in Spens' working practice, offering a richness of imaginative interpretation that is rarely allowed to infiltrate the pictures made directly in front of the subject. One of the monotypes which grew out of this American visit began as a black and white image, and was subsequently over-printed with yellow (just the kind of effect that would have appealed to Hercules Seghers, a radical 17th century printmaker Spens much admires), after which Spens continued to paint on it in oil. In what is very much a mixed media approach, Spens orchestrates the different marks and textures with splendid panache, into a lively and coherent whole.

In this new body of work, the colours are more intense and moody, with lots of rich purples. This is partly accounted for by the fact that there are seven nightviews altogether and four of the major paintings are nocturnes, but it is also a question of the emotional identity of these images. Night paintings can be just as celebratory as daytime ones, but the night does tend to bring a darker edge to any scene. It is revealing to note that Spens acknowledges the considerable influence here of a Pissarro street painting in the National Gallery collection - Boulevard Montmartre, Night Effect (1897). In the Pissarro, the wonderfully liquid configurations, the dazzle of reflections in rainwater, combine to break down the solid images but at the same time to unify the picture surface in a pattern of dancing animated marks. In the same way, a red Routemaster in the brilliantly lit Trafalgar Square of Spens' paintings becomes a block of colour conveying movement while yet suggesting the essence of bus-ness.

The pellets of paint, the taches, the semi-pointilliste dabs which Spens employs to build up the image in planes, serve also to increase the objecthood of the pictures. Catalogue reproduction can only tell you so much about the vivid and evocative brushwork of these pictures, their painterly presence. Bonnard remains the leading inspiration behind this body of work - indeed behind much of Spens' thinking about art. In these new paintings, we find a similar balance of monumentality against detail as we do in Bonnard. Also we may discern the orchestration of colour to a poetic or expressive end. Peter Spens mixes the observed and the interpreted with a robust and positive touch.

---

*Andrew Lambirth is the Contributing Editor of the Royal Academy Magazine and writes regularly for Contemporary Visual Arts, The Spectator and The Week. He has written monographs on a number of artists, including Ken Kiff, George Rowlett and Josef Herman.*