

PETER SPENS

# TRAVELLING LIGHT



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Eiffel Tower Stadium, Paris Olympics 2024  
Photograph by Michael Klein

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## TRAVELLING LIGHT



CRANLEY GALLERY



**Fabio Azevedo – President, Fédération Internationale de Volleyball, Lausanne.**

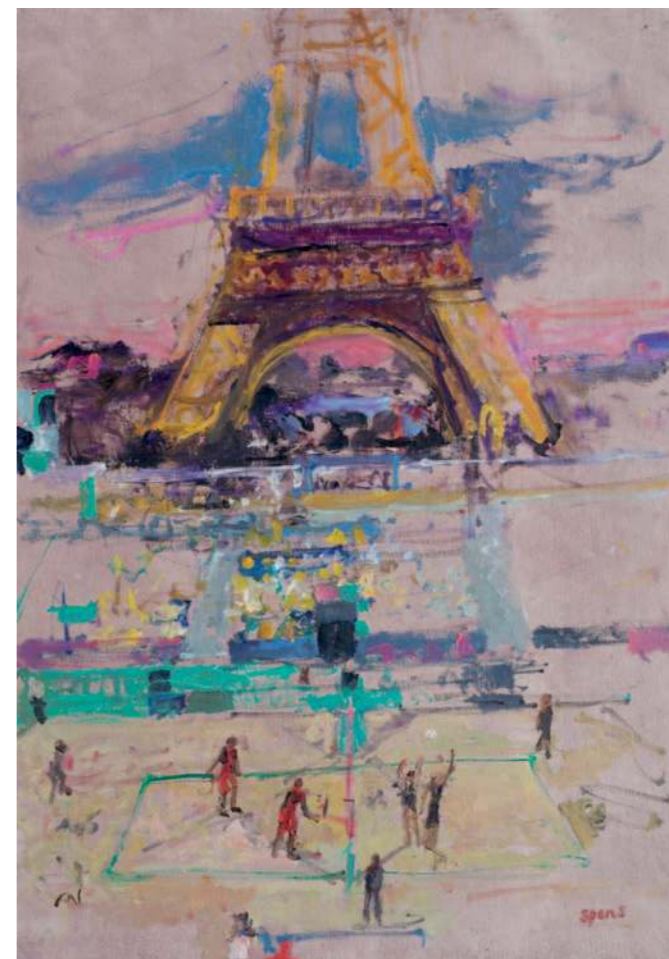
We were thrilled to have Peter Spens capture the magic of the Eiffel Tower Stadium during the Olympic Games Paris 2024 – the most iconic venue of the Games! While millions of photos were taken, a painting tells a different story – two weeks of competition distilled into a single image. The significant media engagement around it proves just that. We're so grateful for Peter's work – he's captured memories that will last a lifetime.

**Greg Breakell, Director of film, Eiffel Tower Stadium. Paris 2024**

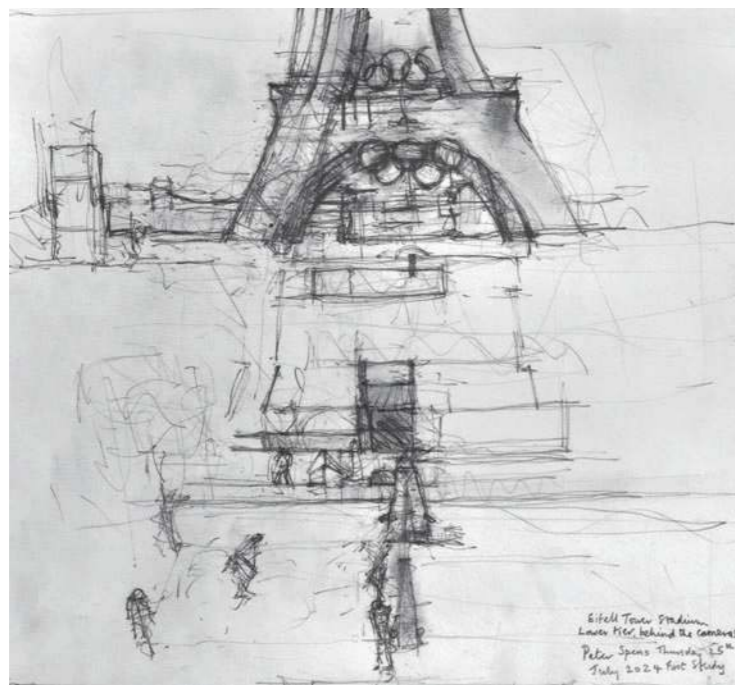
**Peter Spens:** The FIVB President Fabio brought his wife Flavia to meet me at my painting spot at the top of the Press Stand and invited me down to the field of play to meet the Broadcasting team. We were introduced and you told me this was the third Olympics where you had filmed me painting.

**Greg:** I always ask my cameramen to bring to my attention anything interesting and at the start of London 2012 one had filmed you on the roof of Horse Guards. I was little shocked that I hadn't spotted you myself! We were all amazed by your perch up there between the towers. I like to dabble with the paint and brush myself which meant I was fascinated by what you were creating. When I did get a chance to go to the roof with security you were not there!

**Peter:** Bother, when you came up I must have been painting the view across the court back to Horse Guards from the officials tunnel.



**Greg:** I was never able to see the finished piece with my own eyes before I left London, even though I had been tracking it via my cameramen. For me, as Director, to add that unexpected thing of an artist painting live was the cherry on the cake. Then when we moved along to Rio 2016, there you were again with your easel next to the scoreboard on the sand! We had a little more creative fun through being able to get some shots over your shoulder, seeing the event through your eyes as you built your language in paint. But moving onto 2024, the Eiffel Tower Stadium was *the* iconic venue of Paris 2024. It may remain the most iconic venue of any games. When I saw you up there for your third Games, I said I need to meet this gentleman! So, it was special to see your set-up and to get to know your character and talk with you about your passion for painting.



**Peter:** Having my easel on the row of Press Photographers and journalists meant that we were all busy working away. I was told that you were under huge pressure because the person who was going to share the directing with you had Covid, so you directed every game. This gave me a sense of kinship of purpose, we were both on a sort of creative marathon to get the job done - chipping away at the block! Painting twelve hours a day, knowing how much more there is to do, it's easy to doubt oneself. So just keep on keeping on, relax and let decades of painting inform this process.

**Greg:** As a television director working on live sport, whatever is going on in front the camera lens, it's only there for a moment and then it's gone.

**Peter:** When I visited your team in the Directors studio truck I felt like a caveman transported to the 21st Century: dizzying activity! You were directing the story from a multitude of possible camera shots with around twenty people sending clips around the globe. I think that I was at Day 13 of the 16 days on my painting and *still a lot to do!*

**Greg:** But you have given us through your continuous attendance with eye and brush the lasting image of this large painting. It captures a multitude of moments into one piece of art. It was a pleasure to watch it come to life over those weeks to become, in my view, a masterpiece. The print, which I now have hanging in my office, brings back a lot of memories as well as this new friendship.





**Vanessa Langsdale is a friend, collector and Highbury resident.**

**Peter:** The Queue for the lying-in state of Elizabeth II peaked at ten miles long. It stretched through the Victoria Tower Gardens, over Lambeth Bridge then headed east on the south side of the Thames. If queueing was an Olympic sport Team GB would sweep the board!

**Vanessa:** Several who disregarded the queueing rules found it to be a career ending decision. David Beckham queued but fortunately he queued in the right way and was spared! Your colours capture the crowd and the light of that day. Behind the queue on her plinth is the Emmeline Pankhurst statue at the entrance to those Gardens.

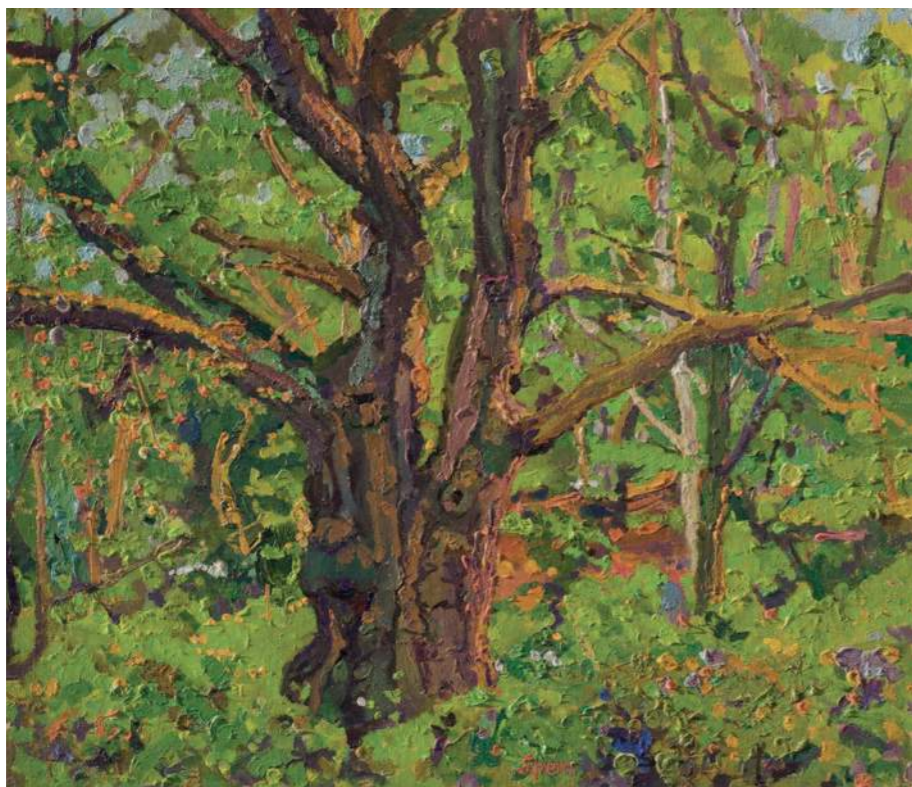
**Peter:** It is an afternoon painting and there are two foreground figures, an elderly person being pushed in a wheelchair by a female Army member dressed in what looked like a quarter inch thick World War II khaki uniform. There was a picture circulating that September of the Queen wearing that same style of uniform from her war years.

**Vanessa:** That pair of figures seems to encompass the Queen's longevity, from her as a young woman in the war to her final years as our Queen and longest serving monarch.



**Peter:** Autumn, Highbury Fields was painted in 2023 after returning from the San Francisco trip. I wanted it to explore the very horizontal afternoon light sweeping up to this elevated spot and for there to be a flow of figures.

**Vanessa:** You have captured my experience of Highbury Fields with all its committed dog walkers. The streetlamps establish the diagonal corridor of the path. The Highbury Terrace backdrop of repeating front doors and windows interplays with these large sculptural plane trees.



**Peter:** A spring portrait of a veteran tree. I painted the other side of the same tree some years ago. This trunk is rather like lots of individual ones joined together.

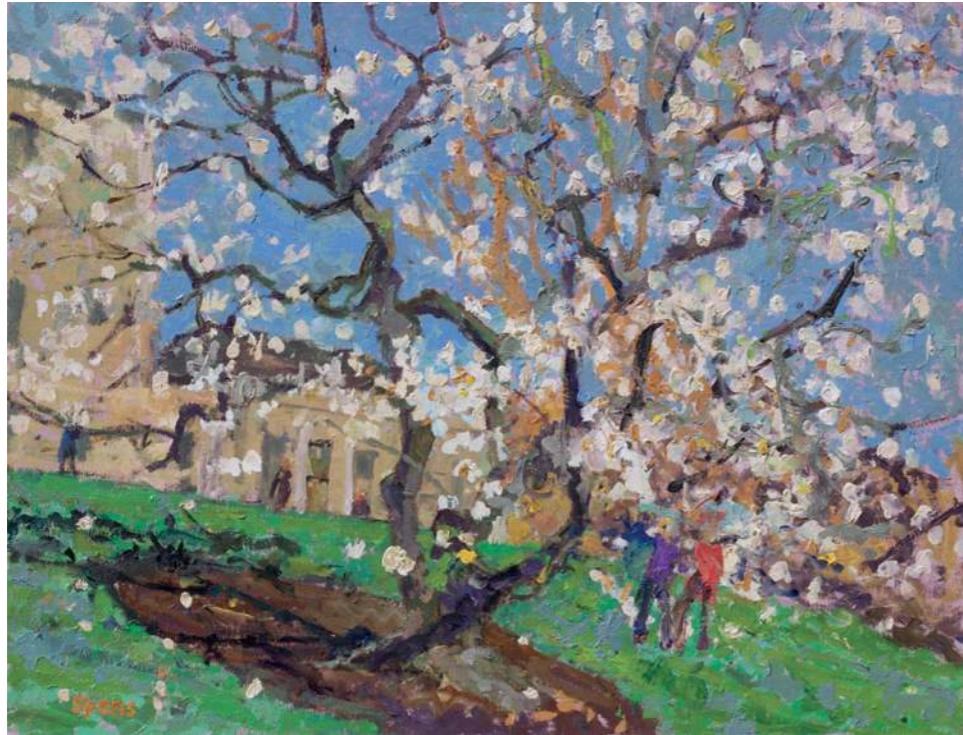
**Vanessa:** The rush of fresh greens surrounds the gnarled bark of this ancient tree. The shallow space in this picture brings out the energy and pattern of spring growth. Looking at the next one of the copse with dry grass, this is clearly a late summer painting. The way that you have composed this picture features the beauty of the copper beeches which really are absolutely stunning and gives the sense that the land is falling off steeply behind them.



**Peter:** It's a composition where the chord of deep copper beech colours float as the dominant shape in the painting. The walking figures and dogs give a sense of scale to these huge trees.

**Vanessa:** There is an echo of these russets and purples in the foreground foliage.

**Peter:** What I lived in fear of when working on this one was the cutting of the hay! I used to ask the groundsmen 'When are you going to cut it?' and they would kindly reply 'We know you are painting it and we're going to leave it as late as possible'. It is an afternoon painting so each time I turned the corner and found that the baked grass was still there I felt tangible relief!

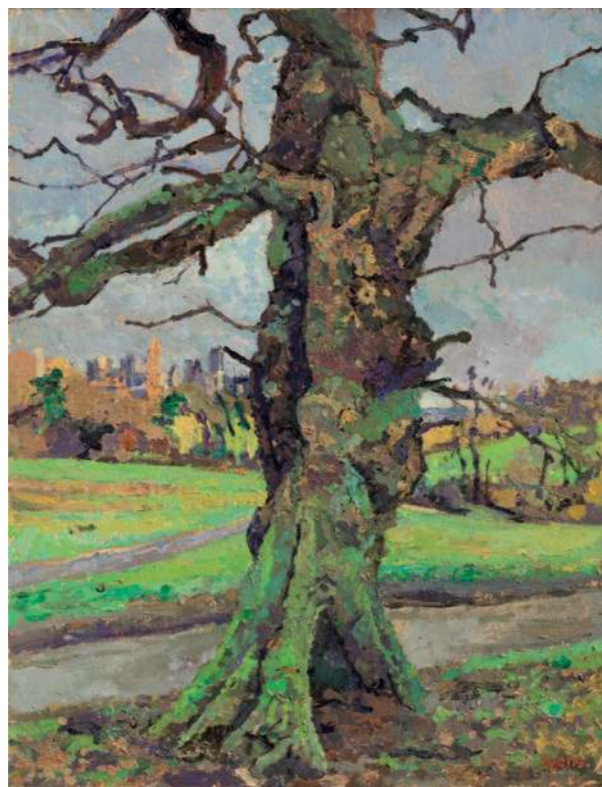


**Peter:** This is an early blooming Magnolia on the slope below the south side of Kenwood House. It gets full sun and having the angled bank behind it also advances the bloom. I am looking up from the bottom of the bank at Kenwood and seeing the walkers on that path.

**Vanessa:** In the large Flowering Magnolia there is something quite mangrove-like about the way the branch swoops down and forms a twisting L-shape, rather like the convoluted path of the Thames. Here is just that first stirring of spring coming back when the buds start cautiously opening. I like the dog in the foreground guarding the child whose hat has rather dog-like ears!

**Peter:** In the middle there is a more advanced magnolia, then you see Kenwood House to the right. Not all of the blossoms have come out on the foreground tree so the scatter of blooms act like punctuation. I think those early weeks are one of the most poignant times, with a sense of resurgence before full spring commences.





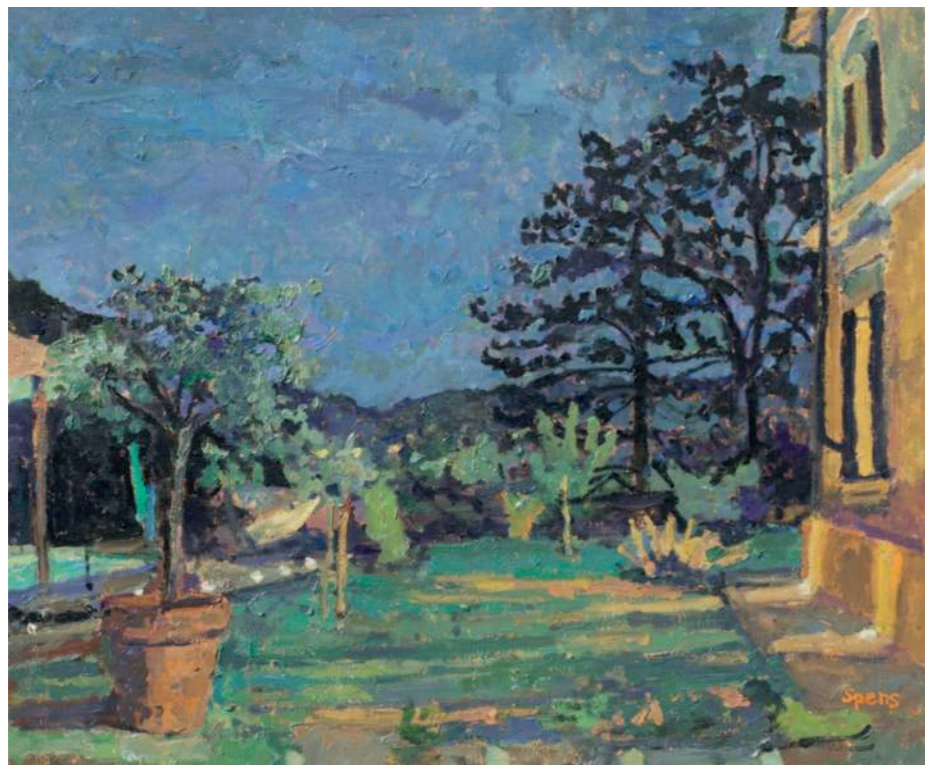
*Peter:* The towers of the City on the left place this as a London picture. No figures, it's a tree portrait, distinguished, more than a hundred years old with a cave-like structure at the bottom.

*Vanessa:* That will be the fungi gradually eating it from the inside. Happily the symbiotic relationship has the fungi giving back the nutrition needed to keep the tree growing. The talk is that trees communicate with each other by the mycelium on their roots. My daughter is a forager and has told me all about the Wood Wide Web! I came across you painting this next one with the Hepworth last year.

*Peter:* That's right and to the right of the sculpture is the cool white of the Stellata magnolia which contrasts with the warm flowers of the white and pink magnolia to the left. We are chatting in your sitting room and there are two of my magnolia paintings on the wall.

*Vanessa:* I have a pair of your magnolia paintings from this very tree in the room next to the garden and in a few weeks time the magnolia will be in flower. Then it is as though the walls are talking to the trees!

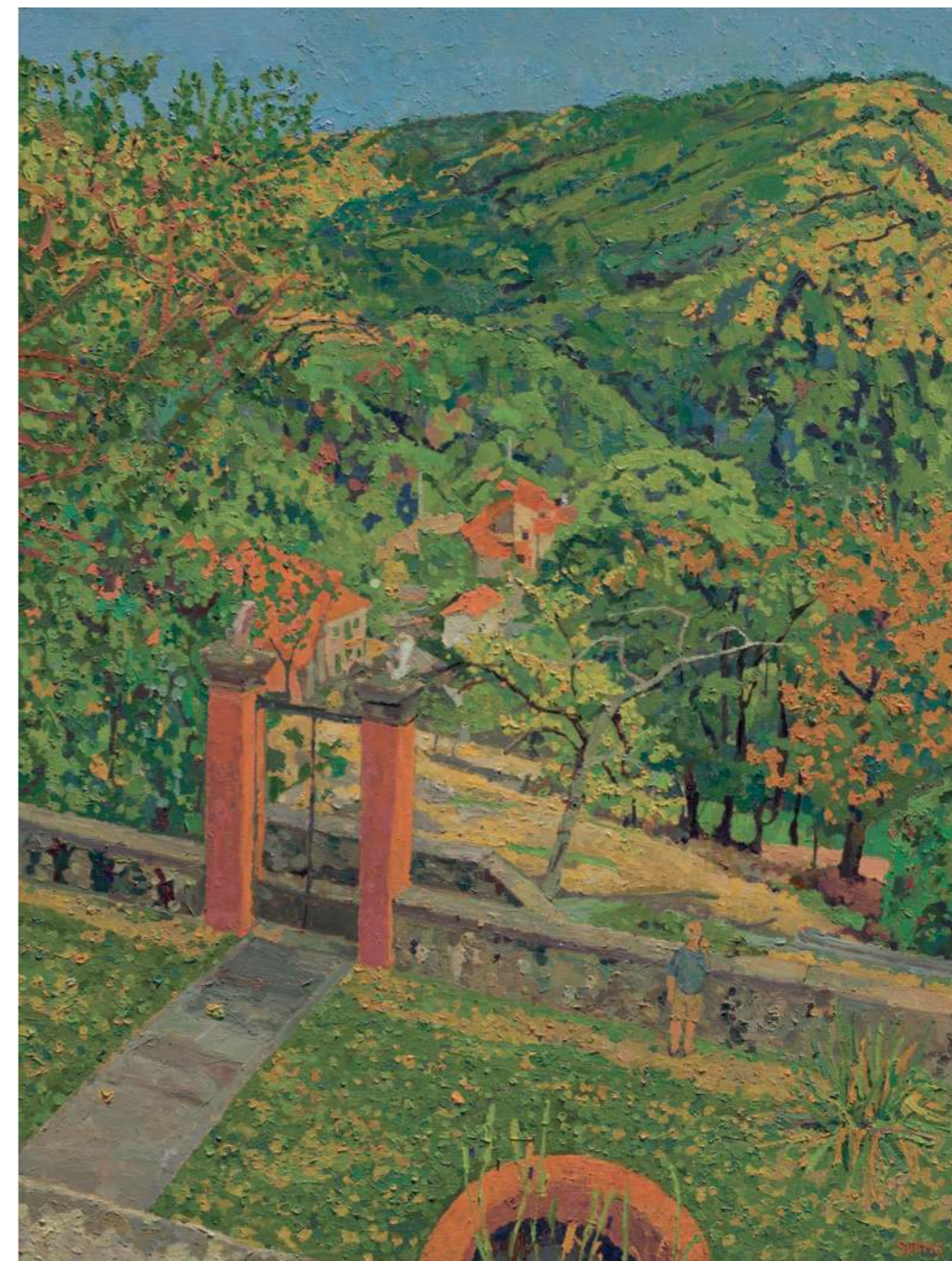




Martin Young and Keith Daley spotted me working on a series from a 13th Floor Balcony at Tapestry Apartments behind St Pancras and the Regents Canal in September 2021. They have become friends, collectors and commissioners of my paintings.

*Peter:* We are in London looking at the paintings from your Italian home in the northern Tuscan territory of La Lunigiana. The commission 'First light, Villa Libraio' is about the sun's first rays catching the top of the foothills in this steep sided valley. It lasts only about 20 minutes before becoming full morning light.

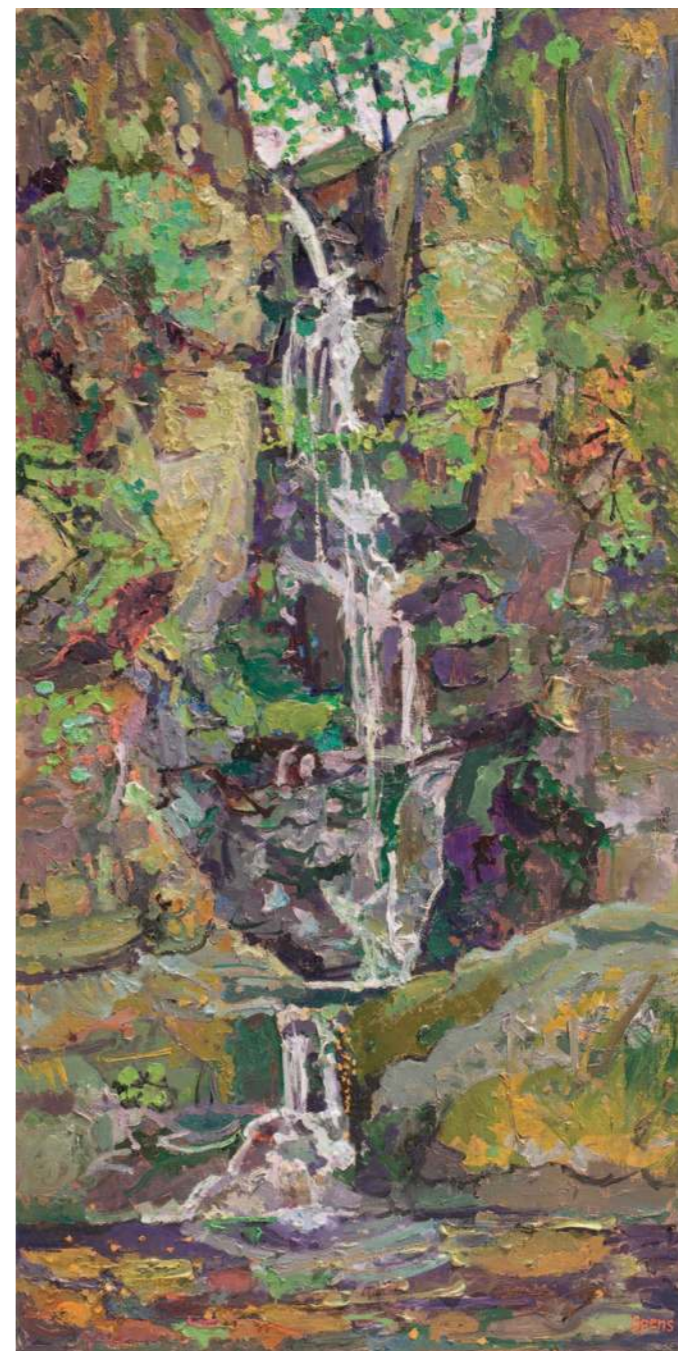
*Martin:* The focus of the hamlet in the middle ground captures the house of our dear friend Monica, who has made us feel completely part of the local community.





*Peter:* 'First Light' was not finished during the August 2022 trip, so I returned the following year. The afternoons of the 2023 trip were spent walking down a very steep sided valley to the river below and then upstream to this extraordinary waterfall.

*Keith:* Martin, Jo and I also took the perilous path to see what you were up to! It truly is a magical spot down there which has been that way for millennia. The acoustics of the valley make the sound of the waterfall bounce around in a mesmerising way.

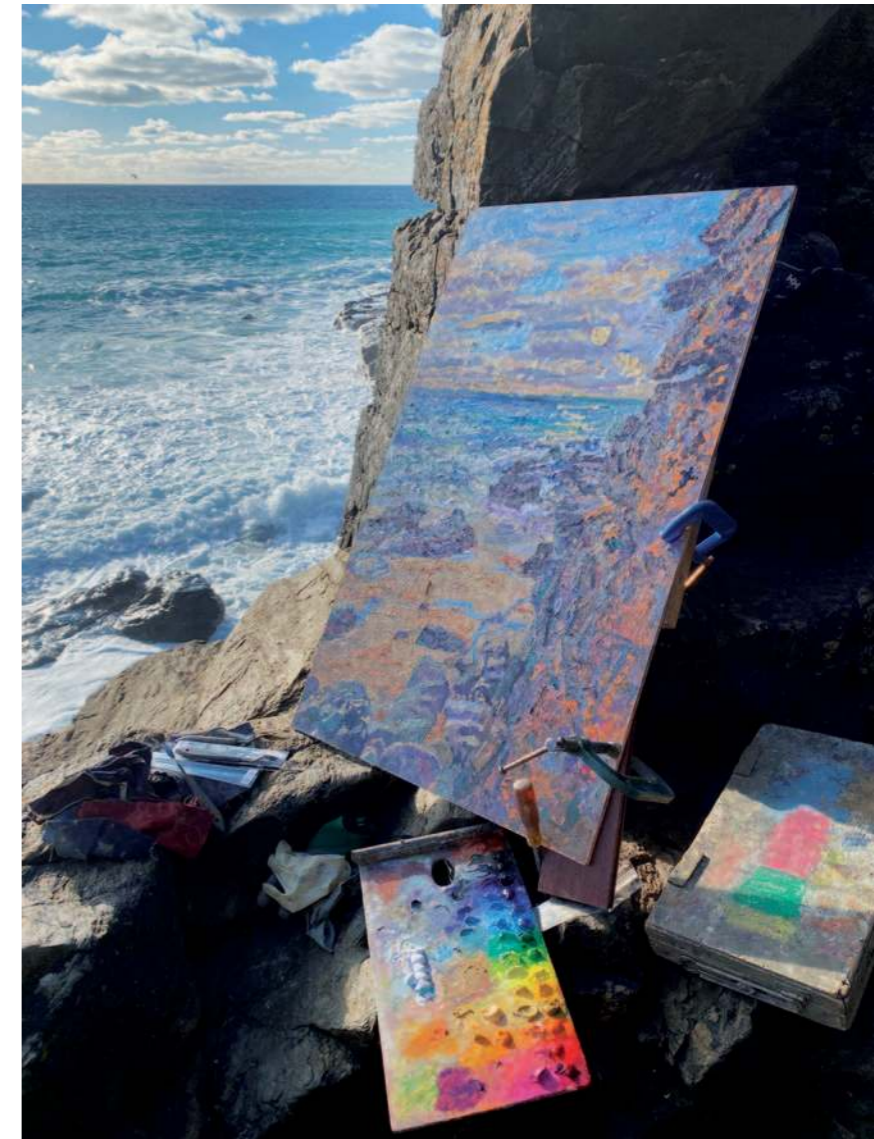




Gideon Hatch and I studied Fine Art at Bristol graduating in 1983. I have been a regular visitor to Gideon and Lucy's home on the Isle of Wight, which is, alongside Cornwall, one of the principle locations for my seascapes.

*Peter:* I came to visit you in July 2023 and you both knew that a painting at the start of the Fastnet Race was the one for me! It was a long walk down to this viewing spot at Bouldnor.

*Lucy Macdonald:* You managed to finish the painting before a huge storm rolled in. Many of the Fastnet competitors opted to shelter to see the storm out. During the calm before the storm we watched the boats emerge out of the mist in a rather magical way.

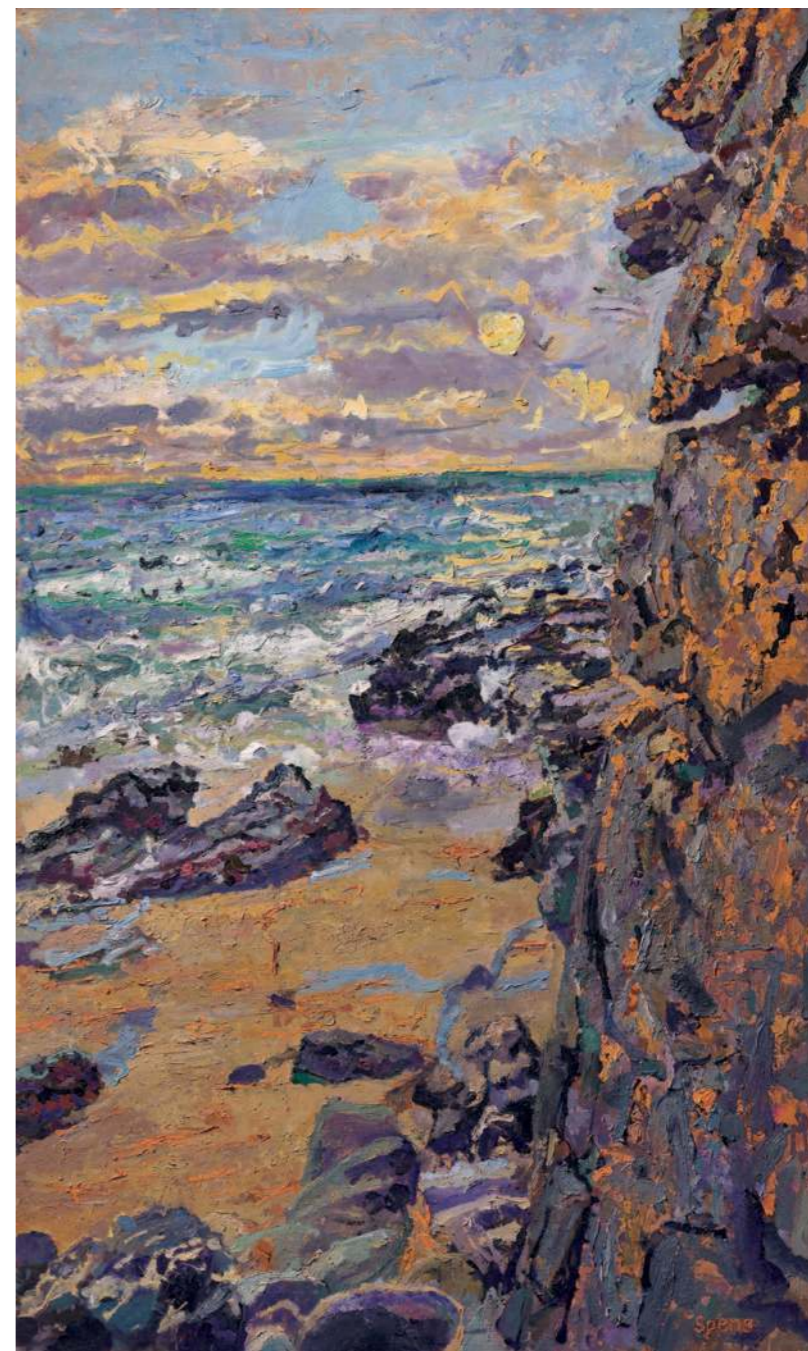


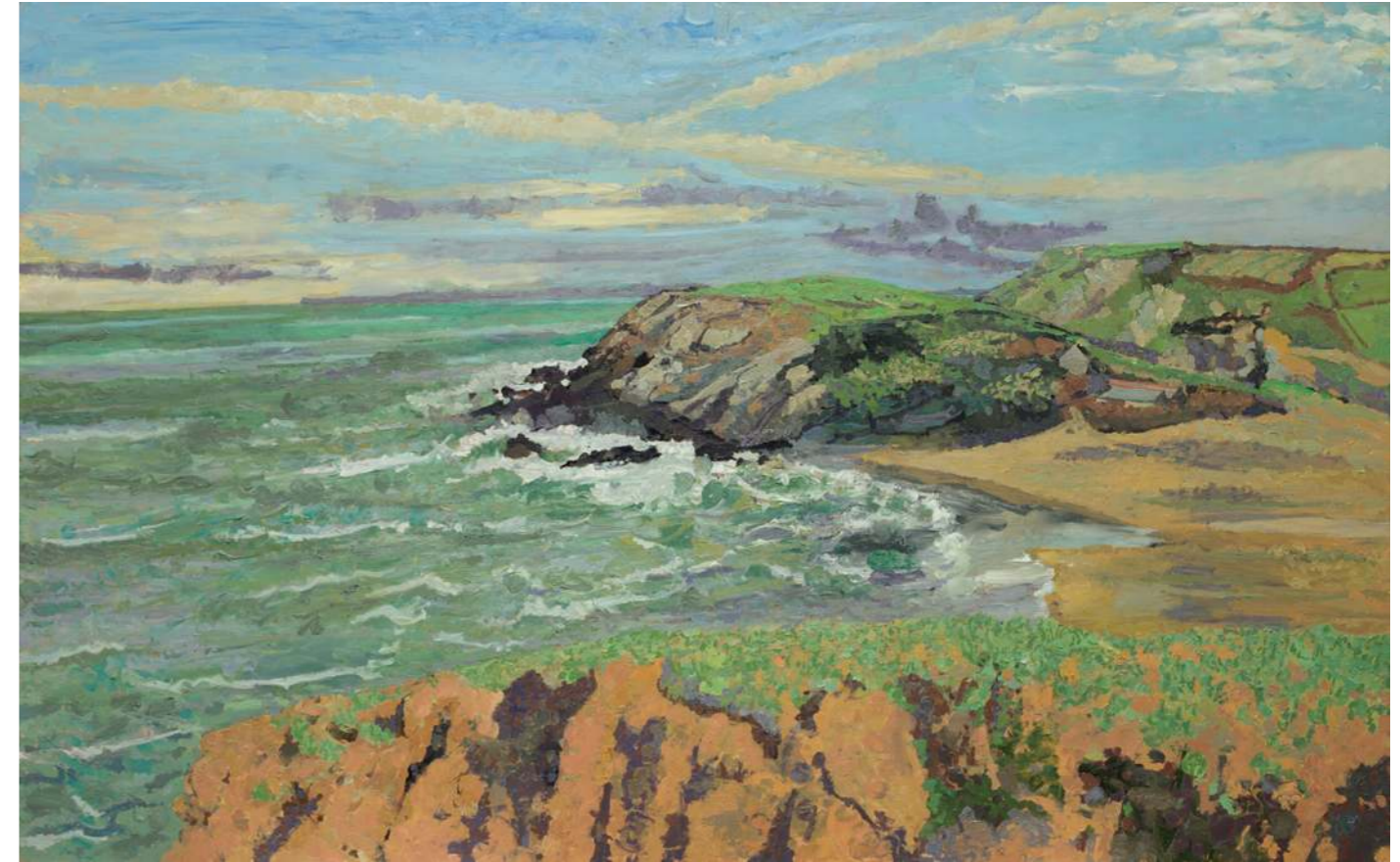
*Gideon:* Yes, later on it was 'blowing a hooley' and these hi-tech boats came close to shore before tacking. Each boat had that call to make as to whether to press on through the storm or lose hours sitting it out in harbour.



*Gideon:* In 'January sea, Porthcew' there is a wall of rock on the right and this pattern is echoed in the sky in a similar chromatic of purples and ochres.

*Peter:* It was tricky getting the materials down the steep rocky path but worth it for this inspirational spot. I had five consecutive days of good winter light.





*Gideon:* I like the orange lichen on the granite boulders on Lizard Point in this predominantly blue green painting. The vast sense of space in this pair of works from the Lizard make them very feel very calm. In Church Cove the green sea is cantering into the headland and up the beach.

*Peter:* Both paintings are about four feet across and the landscape format encourages a sense of walking on the rolling rhythm of these headlands.



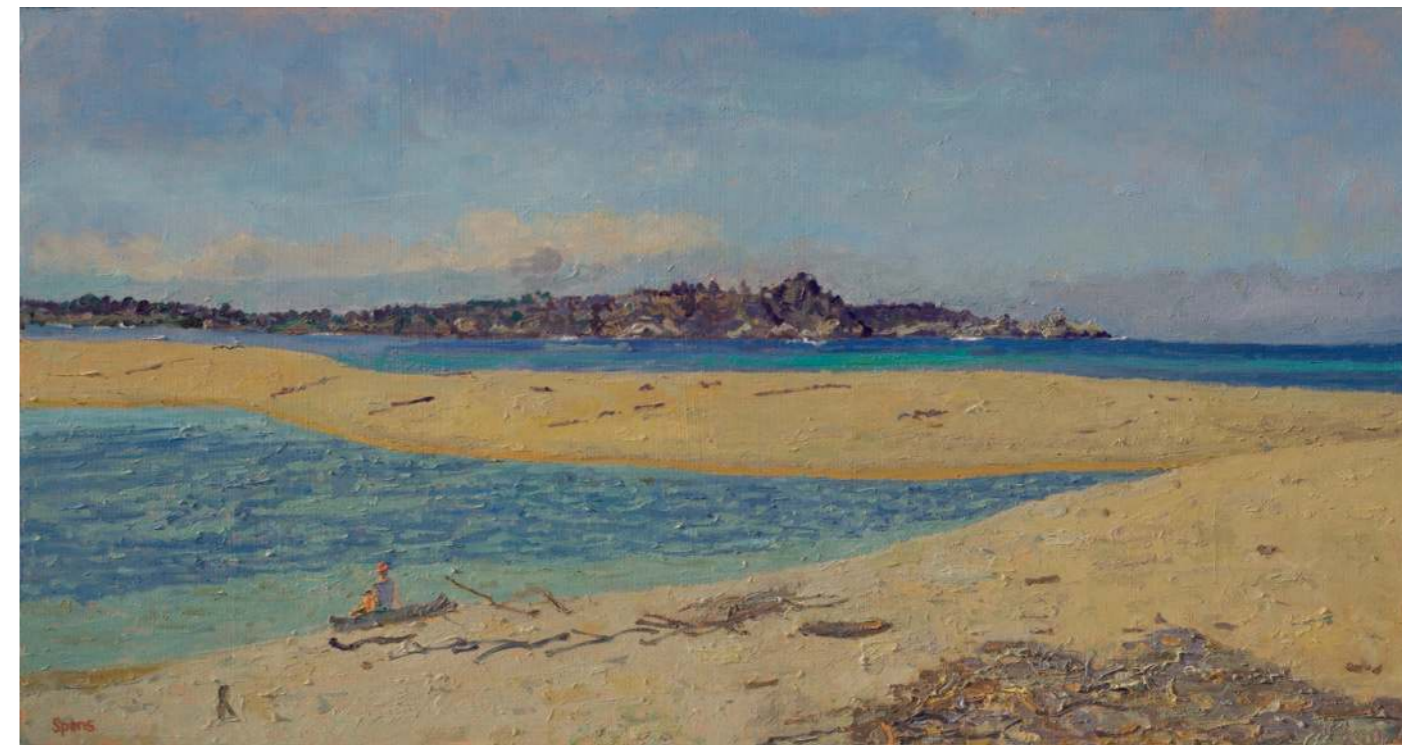
*Peter:* In 'Whitecliff, July morning' I was trying a very wide format, just under a triple square.

*Lucy:* I recognise those deep purples of the seaweed on the rock of the Bembridge shelf. The reflected sky in the rock pools in 'Whitecliff from Forelands beach' establishes the horizontality of this space back to the cliffs. Two paintings from the same spot but space created in very different ways.



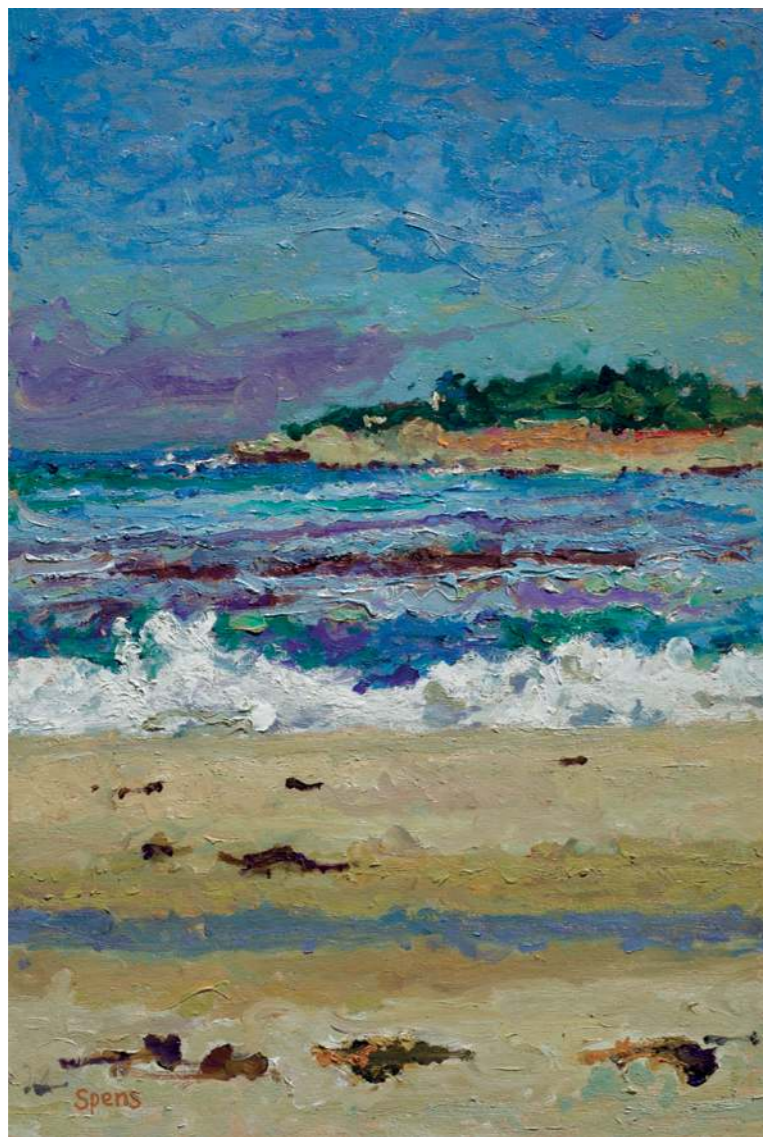
I met Rob and Katie Manson when they visited the gallery in November 2022. We talked about my first visit to San Francisco in 2018 on a family holiday and how I thought since then that it would be an extraordinary place to paint. With great kindness, Rob and Katie invited me to do just that.

*Peter:* Painted on the final full day of the 2024 trip. Last days are always good days to paint as they are full of appreciation of place before imminent departure! This profile of the crashing waves on River Beach depicts such extraordinary power.



*Rob:* This sandbar is there all year round, but in the rainy season they have to go down there with bulldozers because otherwise the river just backs up and floods the valley.

*Peter:* On days when there were strong onshore winds the waves would reach over the this snake of sand. It was a glorious place to paint. But here is a tale for our times, I saw the Dad and his young son sitting cuddled up on that log together and I thought 'Oh, they are sharing a moment!' I painted them in. Then Dad's phone rings, he takes the call. The son gets up, wanders off and trips into the water, panic and screaming ensue. Moral of the story: just do one thing at a time!

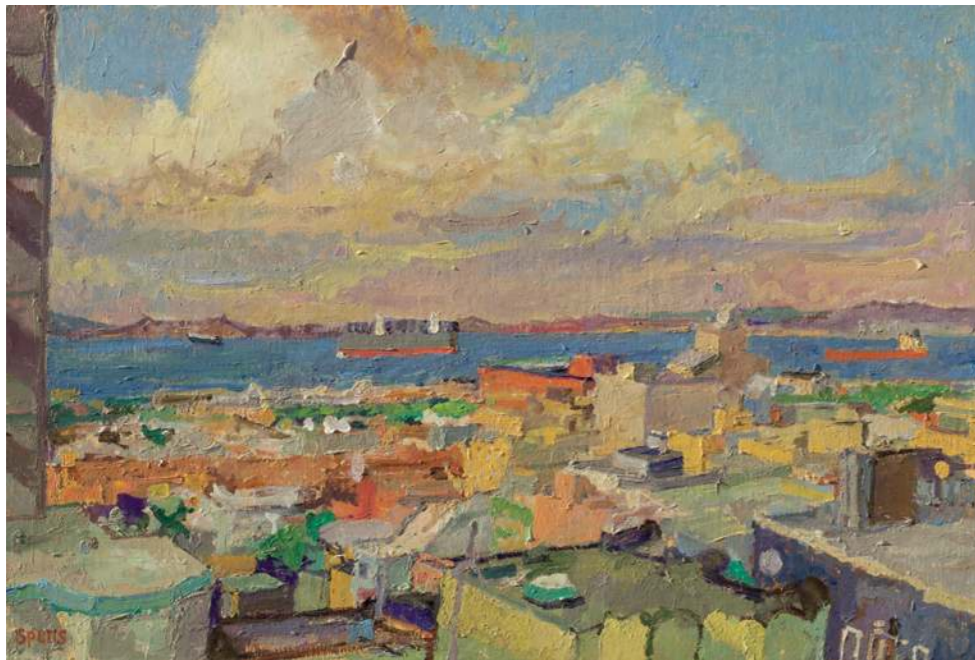


*Katie:* I don't even remember you doing this one! It has so much energy.

*Peter:* I have become fascinated by the language created by portrait format seascapes and their horizontal bands of pattern and colour. Illustrations 20 and 21 also explore this format.



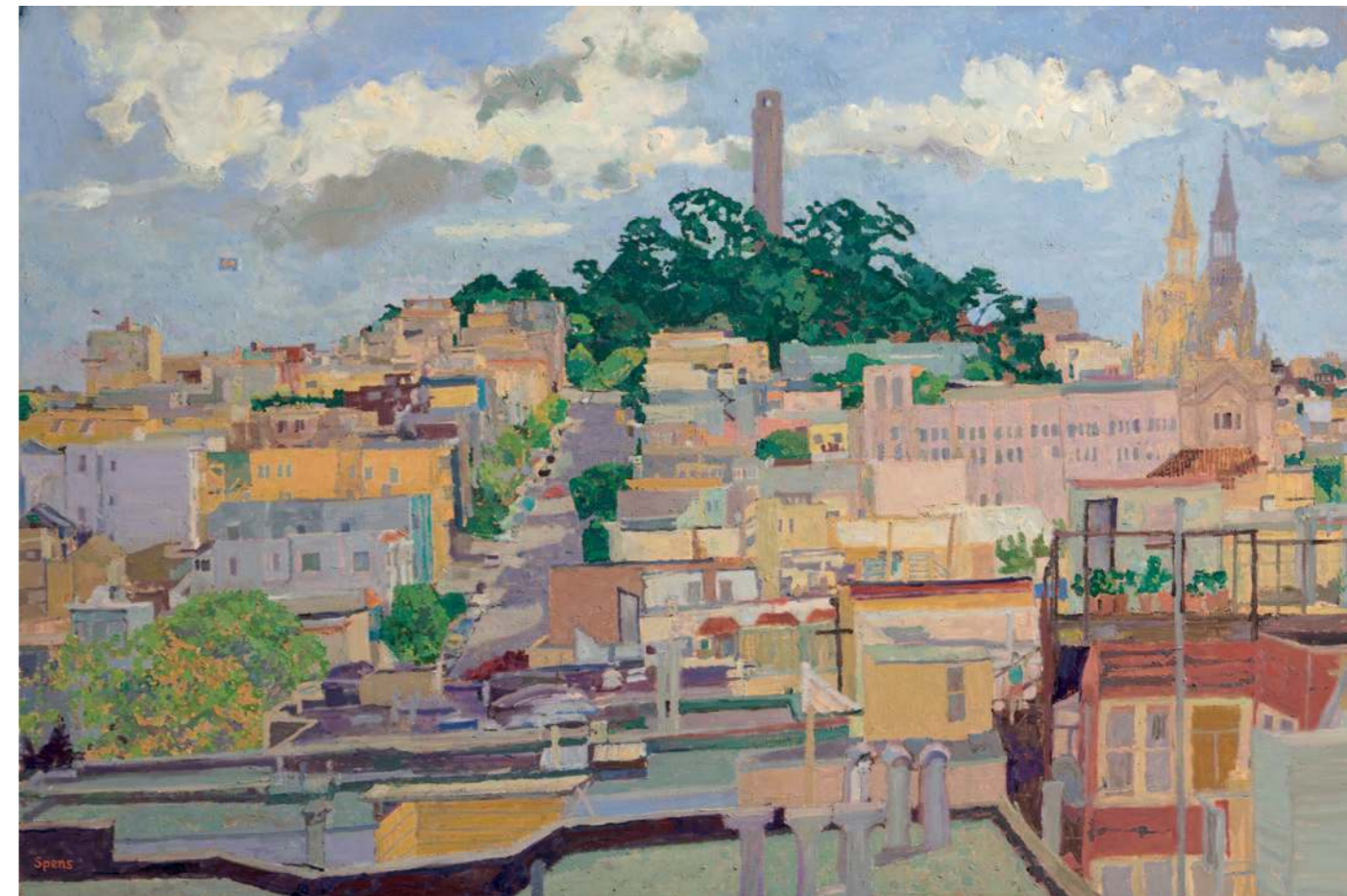
*Rob:* I remember our discussions about the regularity of clouds moving in an easterly procession up the valley in the late afternoon. This one is like a ship gliding into port!



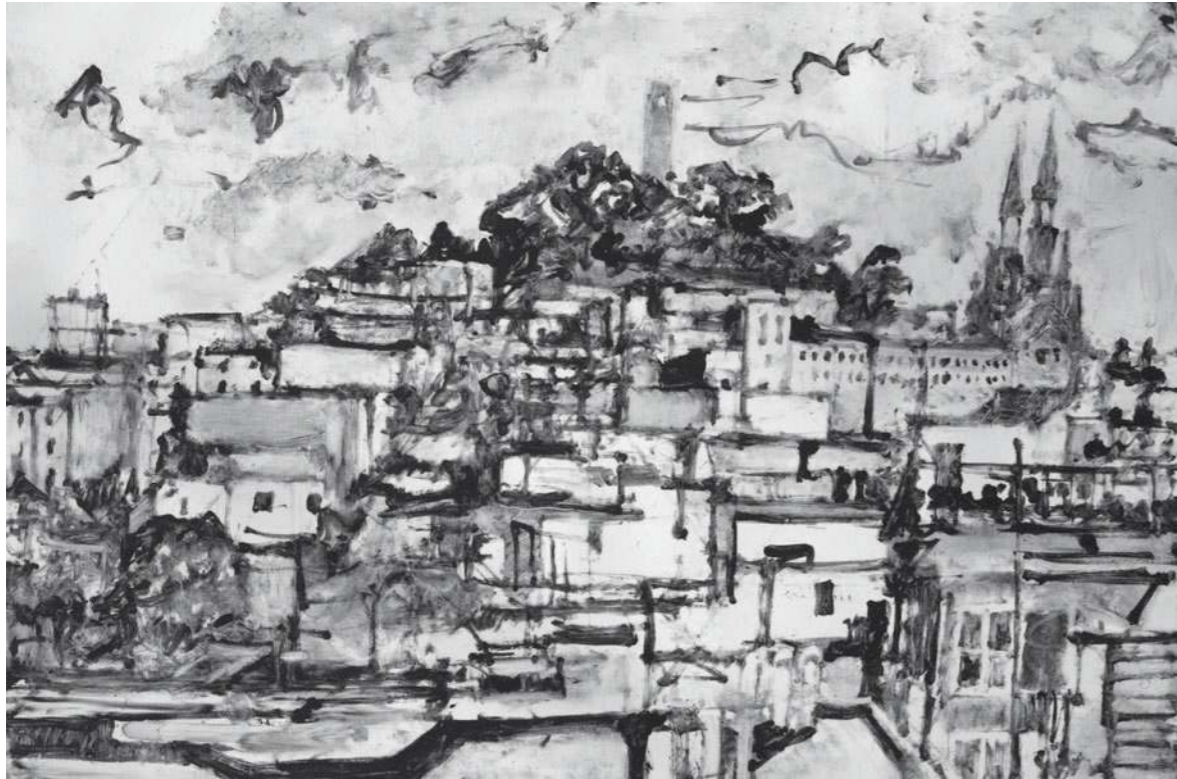
*Peter:* When you came to the gallery and made your generous offer to enable me to paint a San Francisco series you told me that you had a roof terrace. What amazing views I could study from the roof of Greenwich Street: Coit Tower, Russian Hill, down to the bay, lots of possibilities.

*Katie:* Well, I think that you made very good use of our terrace.

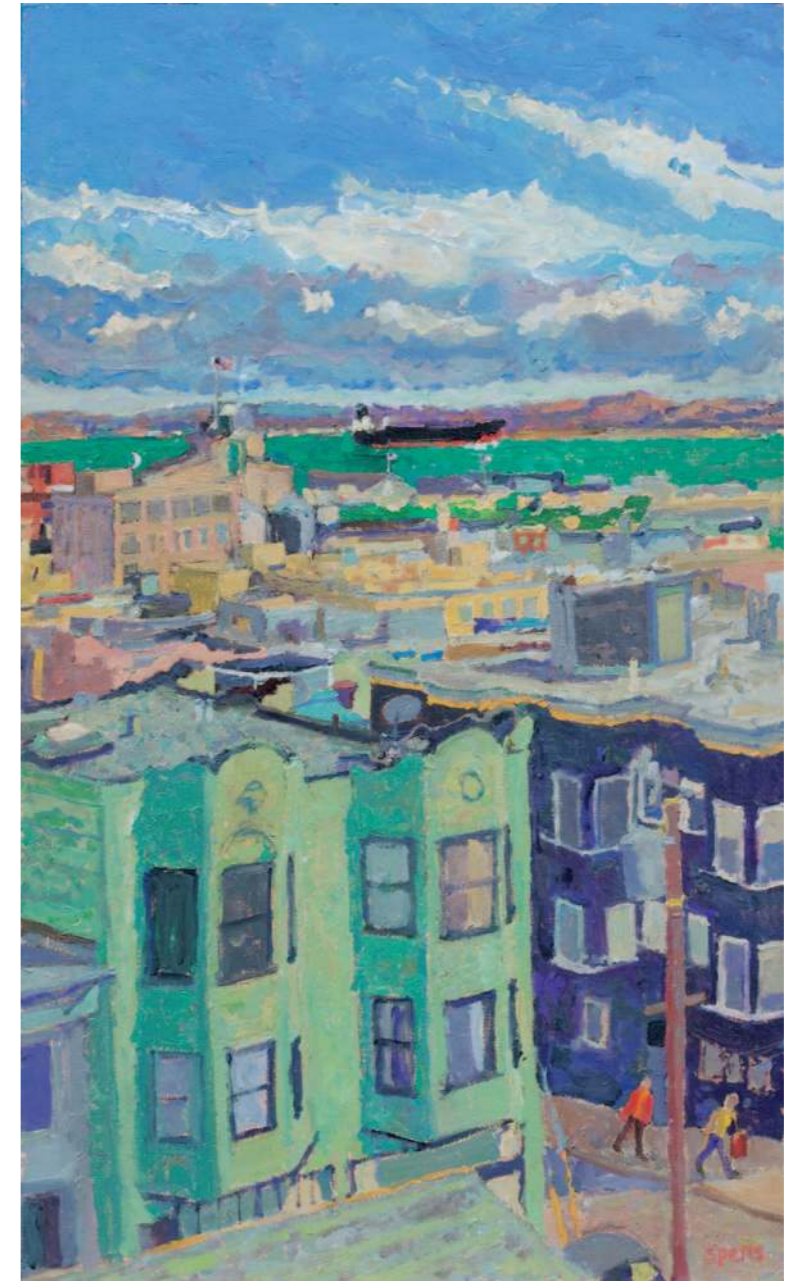
*Rob:* A spectacle of yourself actually - the neighbours all knew you were up there, you could be seen from the street below, then you also had fan clubs on Taylor and up in the Coolbrith Park!



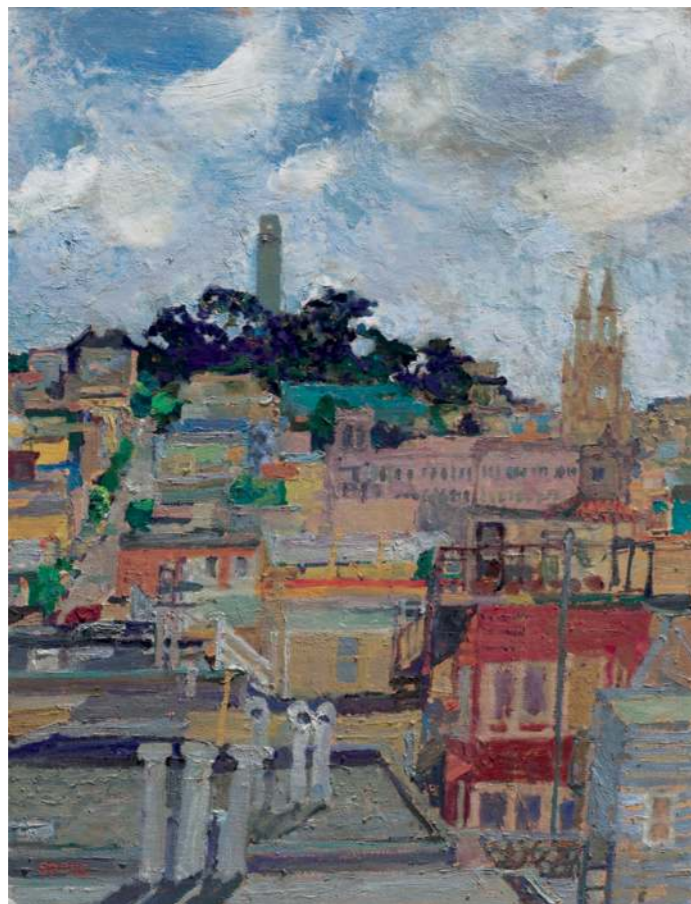
*Peter:* That's all part of working live! It was also a big bonus to have local knowledge and history from you both. I spent most mornings of the 2023 trip working on the The Coit Tower / Telegraph Hill view with it's steep streets, wooden buildings and the Saint Peter and Paul Church.



32 | Coit Tower from Greenwich Street, San Francisco. 2024  
Monotype. 43.5 x 60 cm

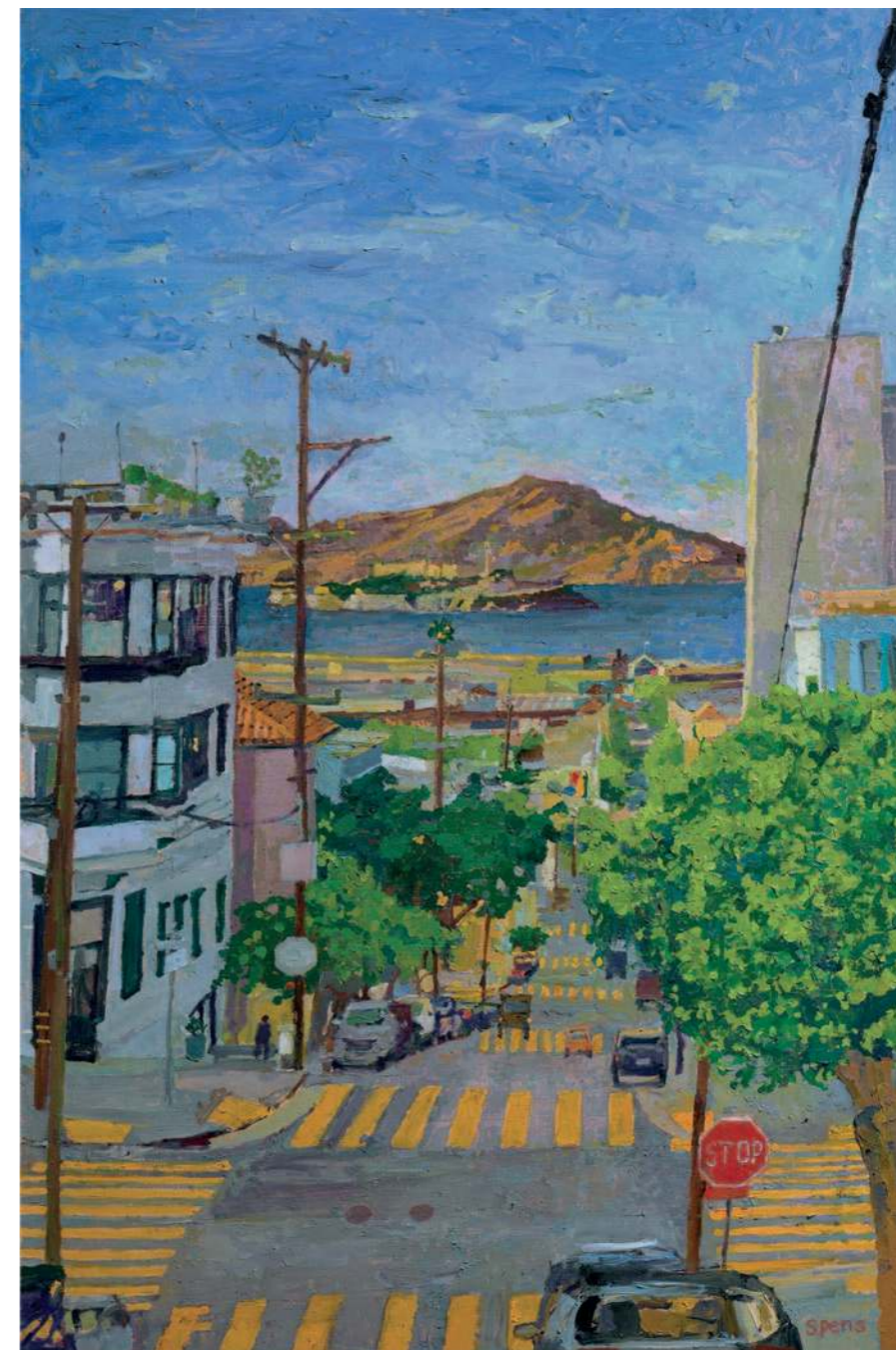


Maltings from Greenwich Street, San Francisco. 2024 | 33  
Oil on board. 50.5 x 30 cm



**Rob:** The Taylor Street painting gives the perfect line up of two central pieces of San Francisco Bay: Alcatraz and Angel Island.

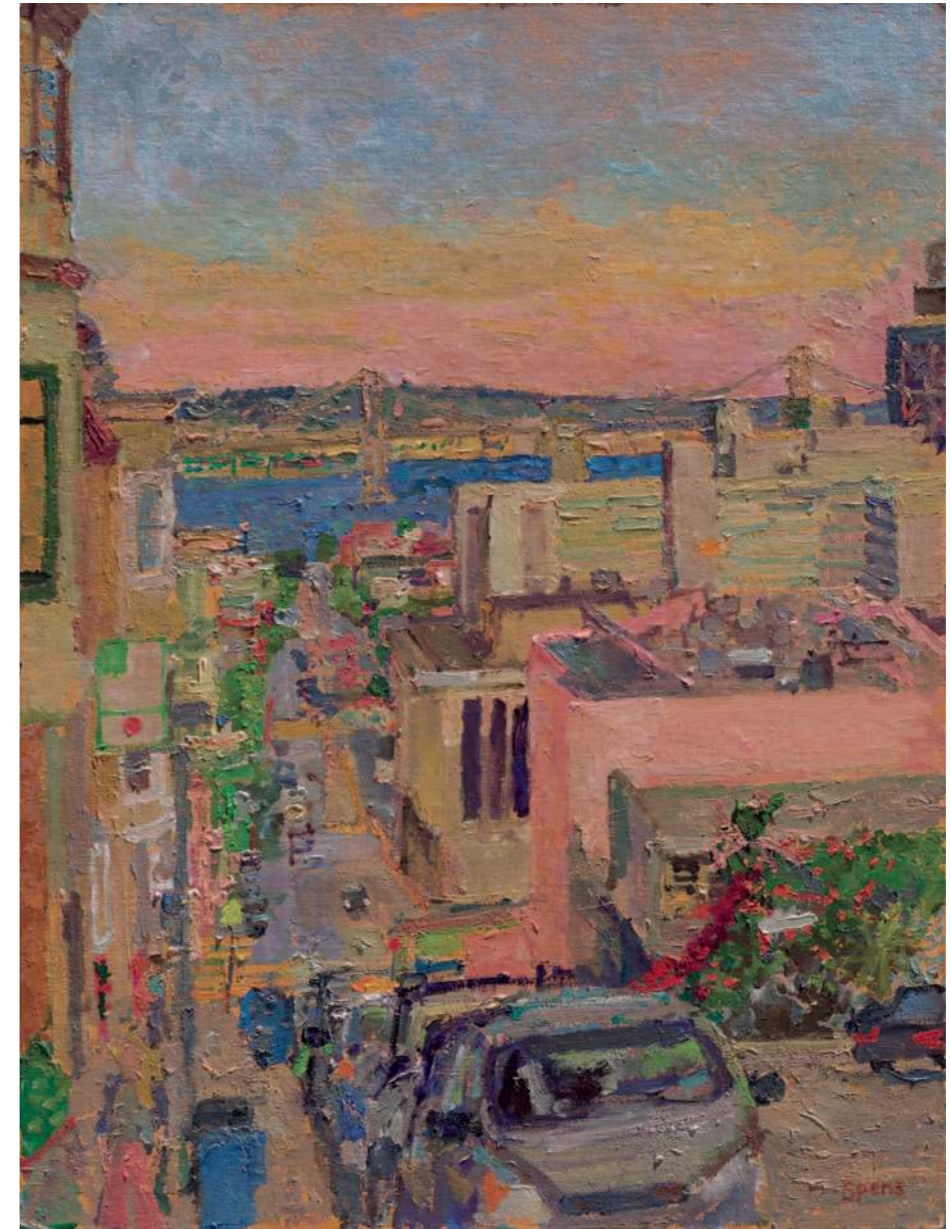
**Peter:** I was working in the street and one afternoon a Sotheby's Realtor filmed me for his prospectus for an apartment using the phrase, 'You know you've got a great location for your condo when you have famous artist Peter Spens working outside your lobby'. There is definitely a lot more showbiz in US real estate than with their English counterparts!

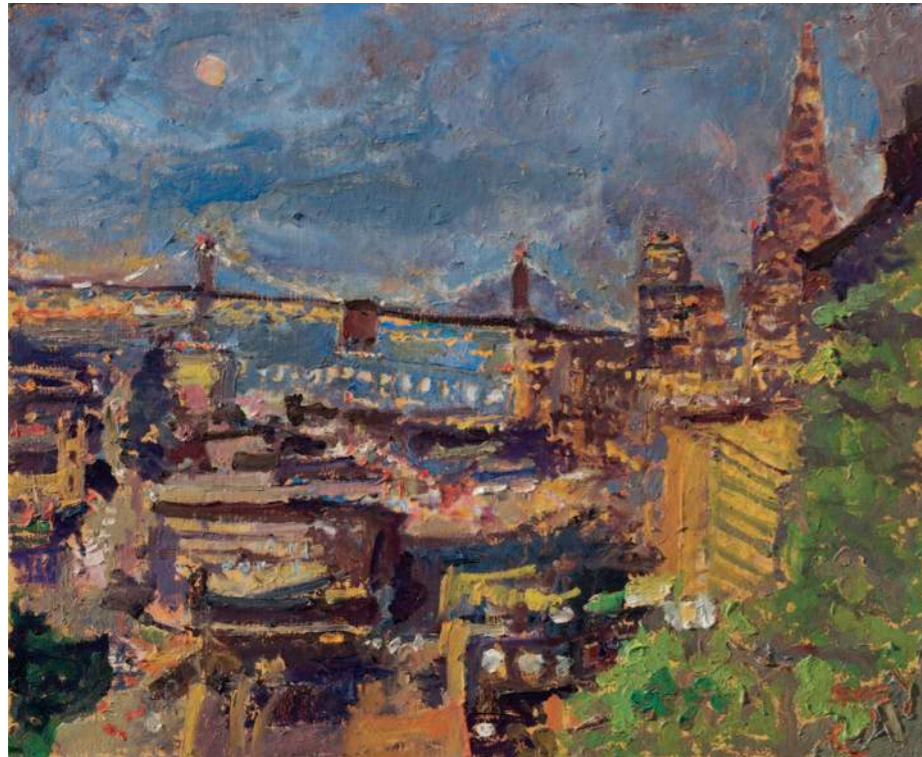




**Rob:** This picture of you standing at the Junction of Taylor / Broadway is where Steve McQueen did the promotional stills for the classic film 'Bullit'. It is where he lives and buys meagre rations for him and his girlfriend. It's his domestic life rather than him driving what is generally acknowledged to be the greatest car chase of all time!

**Peter:** Yes, the coolest man in cinema. We watched the film together and then one week later whilst painting I was informed by a passer-by of the significance of this spot in the McQueen legend.



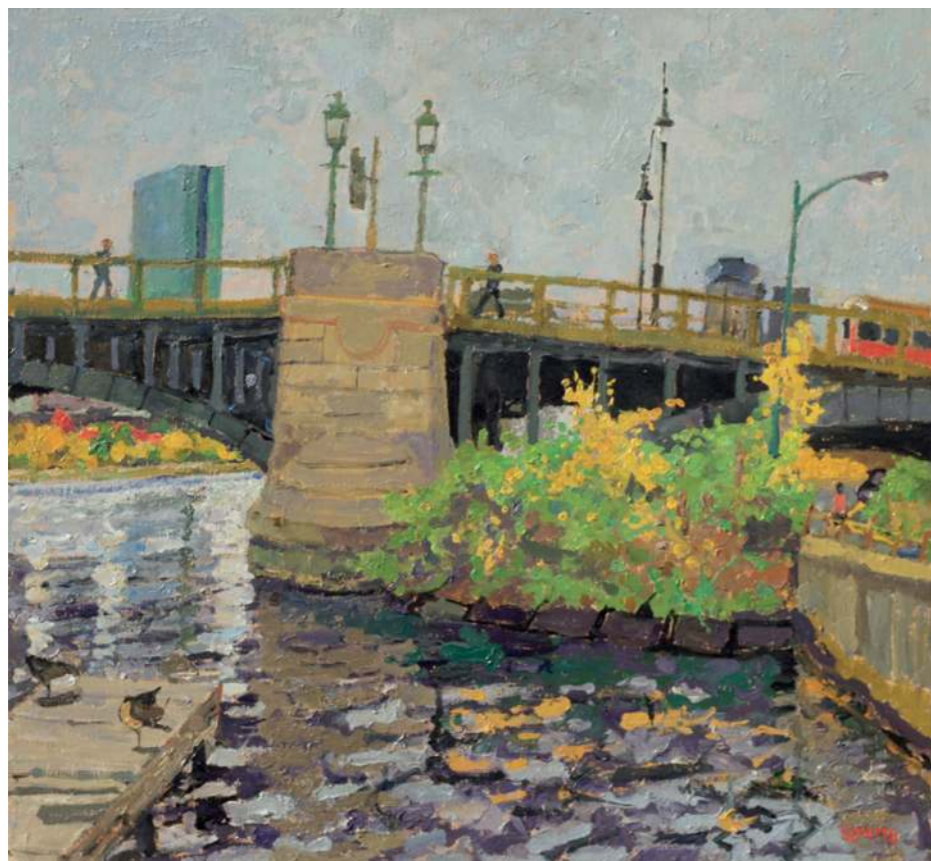


**Katie:** Very few people know of the existence of this steeply angled park at the summit of Taylor. From here you have painted from North Beach across to the financial district on the right and then out to Bay Bridge with the port of Oakland behind. It is named after Ina Coolbrith who was a poet and lived in a shack there. She would have experienced these lines by Carl Sandberg 'The fog comes in on little cat feet. It sits looking over the harbour and city on silent haunches and then moves on'.

**Rob:** We were also impressed that you negotiated with the Concierge of the apartment block close to the park the storage of your painting and easel. That simplified your logistics enormously.

**Peter:** That storage meant that some days I could just walk up Taylor with my paintbox in a rucksack. The larger painting was started on the 2023 trip and then finished in 2024. The full moon was spectacular.





My daughter Becky and her husband Jason live in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I visited them there in October 2022.

*Becky:* On arrival you were very excited by the views across to Boston from our 22nd floor balcony. The Longfellow Bridge is only a two minute walk away from our Main Street apartment block.

*Peter:* Your balcony has fabulous views which I painted in several lights. For this painting I walked down to the Charles River and looked up at the bridge which is a substantial steel rib arch structure. We used Longfellow to cross the river to visit the old brownstone houses of Back Bay and Beacon Hill in Boston. I was lucky to visit you in the Autumn.



*Becky:* People humorously call it 'leaf peeping' when tourists come to New England in the fall to see the leaves changing! In your Boston Public Gardens painting there are patterns of people, vibrant changing leaves and various *just-off* verticals of trunks, streetlamps, office facades.

*Peter:* You, Jason and your lovely whippet, Amber, used to come and meet me when the light left the gardens. What fun to see the three of you and to really experience a new place by painting it.

*Becky:* Your natural reaction to travelling is to paint; that is how you do new places! Most people don't experience new locations through that lens of disciplined looking. You go at the pace of the place that you are in rather than the tourist pace, which can be quite frenetic. Your way is to stand in one place and watch the world go by for hours at a time. It was lovely when growing up to go on so many painting trips with you and to observe and participate in this structured active observation with pencil and paint.



Alexa and Andrew Murray commissioned a series of paintings for the Marathasa Winery. This ongoing project was started in April 2023.

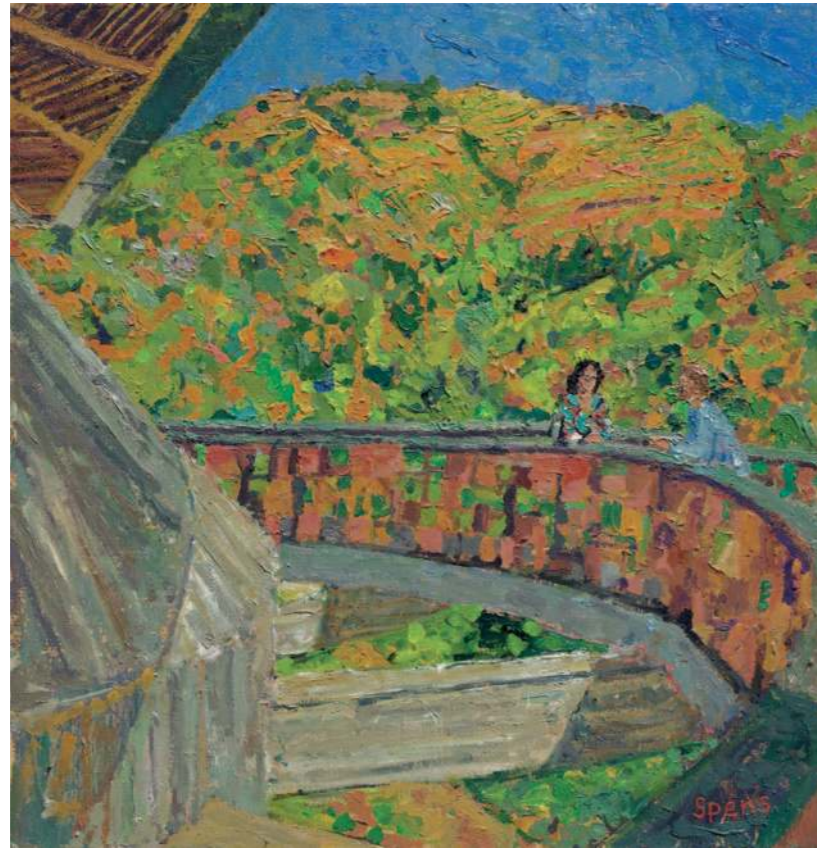
**Andrew:** Alexa and I had been thinking about the relationship between art and wine, and what an appealing subject the Marathasa winery makes, set at altitude in the mountains of Cyprus. So having met you and encountered your enthusiasm for the project, I came up to Cranley Gallery and saw some of your vineyard paintings from your time in the Haute Provence. Our commission started in April 2023 and I remember taking you up to the mountain ridge to show you our new vines with the plain below and the Troodos mountains in the distance. You said 'Right, that's it' and immediately drew it!

**Peter:** Yes, that was on the first morning. I then went back and painted the study in the afternoon. The main painting was started the next morning and continued daily up to the morning of my flight!

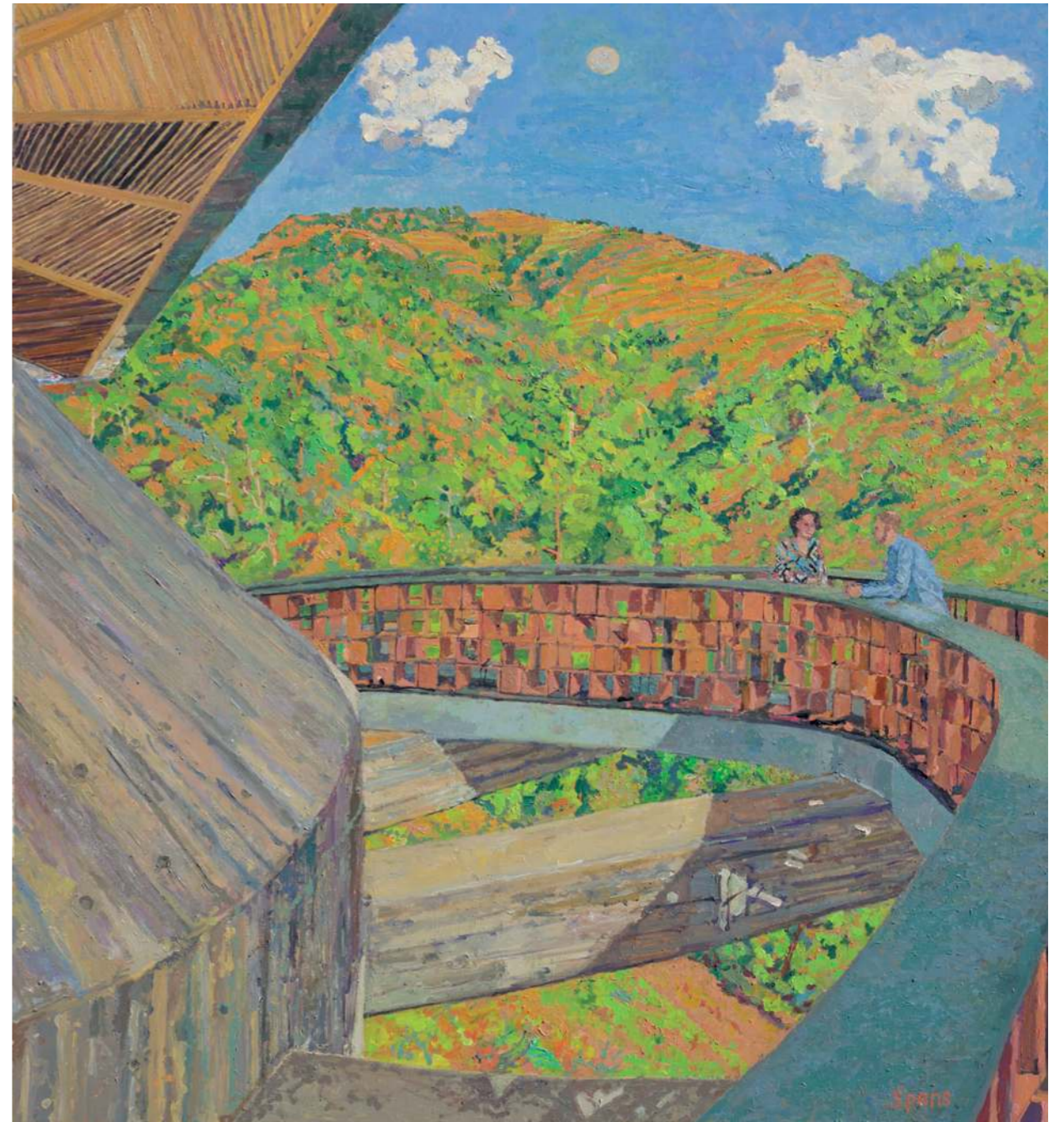




*Andrew:* I hadn't appreciated how much the layering of your painting means that it takes a long time for the colour and form to emerge. The texture built from layers of oil dabs reflects not only the geology and geography but also the foliage and vines: it really works as the medium for this landscape. I took the photo of you working on my phone when I was out for a run. You were very much in the zone, standing amongst the rows of vines, gazing at that magnificent view. The picture was very much in development and the photo tells the story of the whole project in a really nice way.



*Andrew:* When I said 'Can we have a painting which includes the winery?' I assumed it would be a view of it. But you stood on the platform and looked this way, and saw something I didn't see, bringing out the interesting geometry, structures and textures of the different materials used in its construction.





The artist and Alexa Murray, commissions at the Marathasa Winery. Photograph by Andrew Murray

**Peter:** I was blown away by the audacity of the building and its relationship to this vigorous landscape. What dedication from your whole team to get this built! The architect came up with something superb and speaking to him at the opening event he told me of his appreciation for having been given such a free hand by you all. My challenge through painting was to bring the exterior views into this spectacular built environment.

**Andrew:** You have succeeded! I love the vibrant spring colours of the mountainside and the blue of the sky contrasted by the structure in the foreground. One of the things that I really enjoy looking at is the intricate patterning of the ceramic elements of the walkway. It is also a bonus that everyone recognises that it is Alexa and I chatting away! We look forward to you painting the third work from a vantage point above the Winery this April.



Detail from illustration 6 'Beach Volleyball at the Eiffel Tower Stadium, Paris 2024'



## CRANLEY GALLERY

3 Cranley Gardens, London N10 3AA

[www.cranleygallery.com](http://www.cranleygallery.com)

Gallery: +44 (0)7905 770453

[peter@cranleygallery.com](mailto:peter@cranleygallery.com)

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