

CHANGING FORMATIONS

By Vivien Knight. March 2005

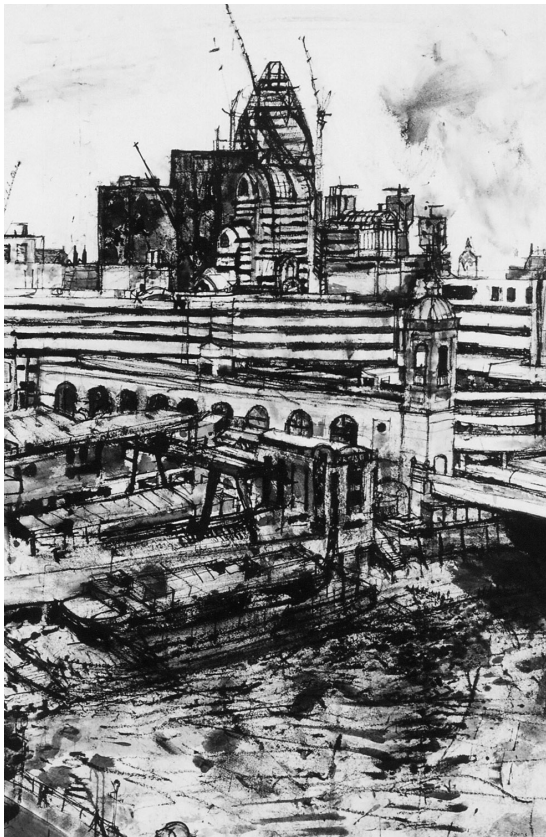
Peter Spens asked me if I would write this introduction while we were discussing the retrospective of his London paintings which Guildhall Art Gallery is to hold in Spring 2006. Located in the heart of the historic City of London, Guildhall Art Gallery is the home of the Corporation of London's extensive art collection, rich in paintings and drawings of specifically London interest from the 17th century to the present day. Since re-opening the new gallery in 1999, we have pursued an exhibitions programme which focuses on London and artists who continue to be stimulated and inspired by this evolving city. We are greatly looking forward to seeing Peter Spens' London paintings, which have been shown in Cork Street since April 2000, brought together for the Guildhall exhibition next year.

"Changing Formations" is the fourth exhibition to be held by Peter Spens at Gallery 27 and was painted over the two year period from summer 2002 to autumn 2004. His colour is generally highly keyed and 'autonomous' in the sense that it is orchestrated to create a colour harmony. He values the way in which an individual brush mark, made in front of the subject, can convey feeling; he never works from photographs, even the most glowing large scale beach or park image has been painted on the spot. Monet, Bonnard and Seurat are probably the main influences on the way he builds up his compositions with discrete 'taches' or brush marks that gradually coalesce to create form, but the viewer may be struck by the variety of handling in these pictures. From the direct study of **Jo and Thomas on Dunwich Beach** or the Matisse-like **Figures on a Terrace, Tobago** to the dramatic **Pendeen**, approach and technique are, Spens says, driven by his vision of the subject as it is revealed by a particular light.

For the past ten years Peter Spens has been painting images of the Thames from the vantage point of tall office buildings, and in this exhibition there are paintings seen from the Financial Times, Riverside House, the Shell Centre and the Vertigo Bar on top of Tower 42. He often returns to the same building over a long period, his work providing us with a chronicle of this constantly evolving City.

In this exhibition, five pictures were painted from Riverside House, on the south bank of the Thames. Spens worked in this unoccupied building from November 2002 to May 2004, painting from top floors the views east, west and north. This group of paintings exemplify Spens' eclectic approach. The three paintings which look east are regular in composition and formed from controlled, even paint marks reminiscent of Monet and Signac. **Night, West from Riverside House** is a trembling veil of expressive colour applied in paint strokes that are gestural and contain a calligraphic intensity. When we were discussing this picture, Spens mentioned his admiration of the energy and truth to motif in David Bomberg's landscape paintings. Spens is fascinated with the light effects of the river, especially when twilight drifts into London's illuminated night, while there is still colour left in the sky. In **Night, St Paul's from Riverside House** form is replaced by an emphasis on shape and pattern which transforms this familiar view into a mosaic of gestural marks. The vivid colours and handling of the two night pictures make them burn with an energy which recall Kokoschka's London paintings.

Underlying his rich colour harmonies and dissonances is a strong sense of structure. Spens is one of a dwindling number of artists who draw. He believes that drawing is the great discipline and describes it as the basis of visual literacy. The large ink drawing, **The City from Riverside House**, is tactile and sensuous despite its urban subject.



The marks, blots and scratches testify to the physicality of the drawing process. Spens also produces monotypes which are sometimes worked in one session from a painting over which he may have laboured for months. These works are structural summations of the pictorial architecture of a painting. He sometimes adds colour to them, as in **Tower Bridge from the Vertigo Bar**, where the dark monotyped outlines contain patches of watercolour, reminiscent of stained glass or Nabis paintings. This monotype was worked from a hard-won and complex oil, of the same title, in which red cranes can be seen in the foreground, and these signals of the ever changing City make frequent appearances in his work. When Spens was painting **Hungerford Bridge from Shell** he was often asked if he was going to leave out the construction cranes alongside the new footbridge, the notion being that art should depict only what is constant and permanent. It is, however, precisely this sense of mutability that draws him back to these spots.

If building and demolition are architecture's seasons, it is the more usual meaning of seasonal change which draws Spens to Regents Park and Highbury Fields. Three of the large park pictures were painted entirely on the spot: **Autumn, Broadwalk, Regents Park** is delicately painted in close colour and tone, conveying a sense of the fragility of this period. The very fresh **Summer, Regents Park from the Bandstand** shows figures at rest in the shade under the trees against a complex background composed by the lake, park and buildings. **Autumn, Queen's Walk, Highbury** directly captures the sensation of being there, with people and their dogs on a sunny day, yellow leaves shimmering against a blue sky. **Summer, Highbury Fields**, although mostly worked on the spot, was completed in the studio and perhaps this gives it a more reflective mood. The strong structure and pattern of the dappled light over a dark purplish-brown brings to mind Vuillard's tonality and imagery.

This exhibition charts the work of a painter committed to drawing and painting in front of his subjects. His vision communicates all the more vividly to the viewer as a result of the directness of his technique.

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