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Peter Spens painting at the Beach Volleyball World Championships, Vienna August 2017

Published by Cranley Gallery Ltd. London. Limited Edition of 1500 copies. Copyright © Peter Spens. 2018

Printed by ArtQuarters Press

ISBN 978-0-95-446136-2



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CRANLEY GALLERY JULY 2018



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The Search for Equivalence

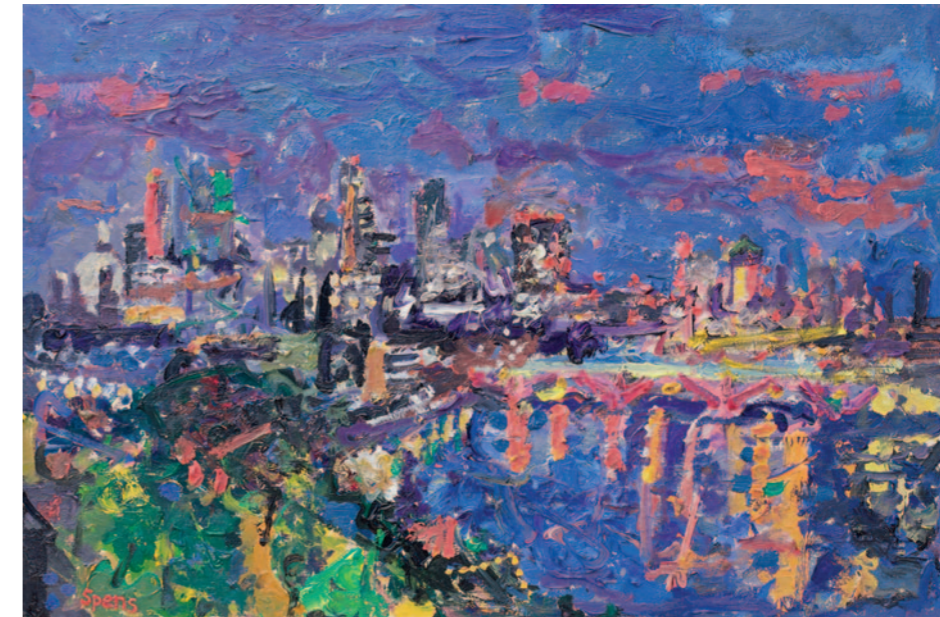
In May this year Peter Spens decided to do a series of paintings of the Chelsea Flower Show. Not a controversial choice for a painter perhaps, but what he was interested in painting was not finished show gardens with all their colour and variety, but the process of the gardens being made. Most of the Flower Show paintings feature men at work in high-vis jackets, heavy lifting gear, girders and pre-cast concrete being put into place.

Spens' choice of subject at Chelsea is important as it illustrates his awareness of the paradox that a finished painting is a static thing whose forms won't change, but the subject is always observed in movement. We see this in the London series, painted from the roof of Brettenham House next to Waterloo Bridge. Here there is constant motion from the walking figures, to traffic as well as the powerful currents of the Thames. Spens manages compellingly to capture in paint these different forms of movement: human, mechanical and natural – energy is everywhere though the painting is a still object.

This preparedness to find a language for things in flux is actually what links an eclectic choice of subjects. From the large Beach Volleyball World Championships, painted over ten days in Vienna last summer, to the intricate colour of trees on Hampstead Heath, from skaters at Somerset House to London cityscapes at night, we see everywhere the resolution of movement into paint. The London night pictures are amongst his most impressive achievements. Spens' brilliantly descriptive, fluid brushwork is, reminiscent of the sketches that launched Monet and the impressionists, while his ability to discover an astonishingly rich palette in the night makes you think of Van Gogh's Arles pictures. These are truly monumental landscapes where there is both great richness in each small area of the picture (go up close to really appreciate this), and a huge impact when the totality is seen from a distance.

But how do you capture the spirit within the constant change of what you see? This is what Spens calls the 'central mystery' of painting. To make a brushstroke the direct product of a visual experience, he works almost exclusively in front of the subject, looking with all his senses. The internalisation of sight leading to a pictorial language that will find an equivalence for these shifting strands.

The idea that a brushmark can capture movement is central to Chinese calligraphic art. But oil paint is Spens' medium and he uses its viscous nature to create a language of low relief created from the overlaying of mark on mark built up over a series of sessions. This low relief of paint maps a history of changes and adjustments which embody Spens' success in capturing his subjects. Another key element, the 'patterning of colour', is seen most tellingly in some of the Hampstead tree works. The eye picks up the different colour patterns and their intermingling with one another across the surface of the picture. This echoes Spens' fascination with Vuillard, one of the Nabis group of painters, who loved to show female subjects in patterned dresses disappearing into wallpaper patterns behind them. The detail



crops from the larger works in the catalogue evidence the way that the musical language of the surface can be enjoyed without figurative reference.

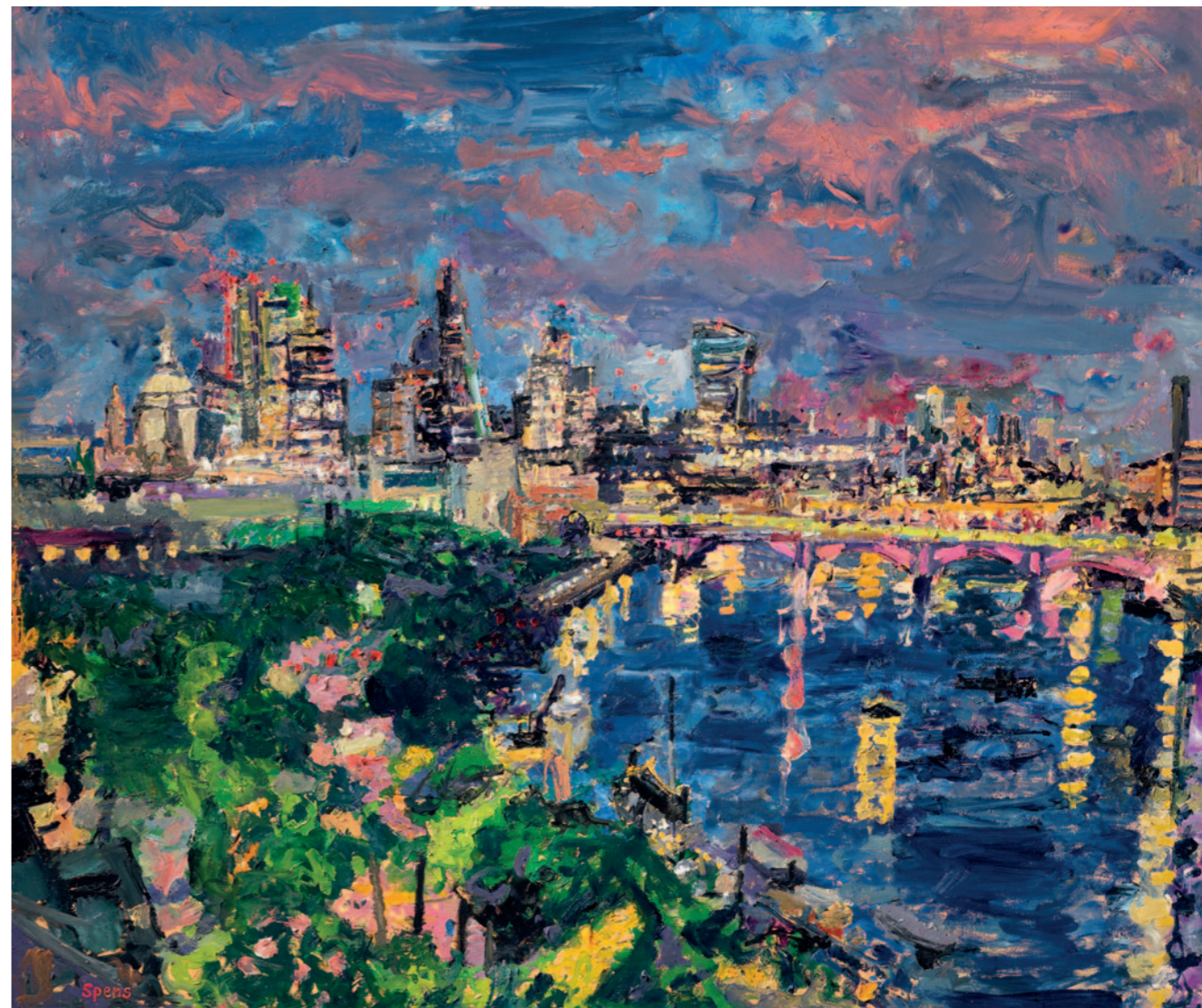
In the current show there are two large London cityscapes painted on an earth red ground in only black and white, with the occasional note of the ground tone restating the structure. These pictures were painted *before* the night versions of same view and they stress the basic structural elements of shape and form. These fundamental spatial relationships form the paintings 'architecture', without the distractions of local colour. These black and white pictures have a rather different feel, more sculptural and timeless than the works in colour. They also do the groundwork that underpins the night paintings more gestural structure.

A picture has a flux and process of its own just as nature does. The black and white study of Lago Maggiore happened in one long five-hour session. The re-grasping of the total form enabled a work started one year earlier to be completed: The colourist language of the final illustration of Lago Maggiore from the same terrace had been refreshed by the black and white study. Both approaches form part of the same passionate vision.

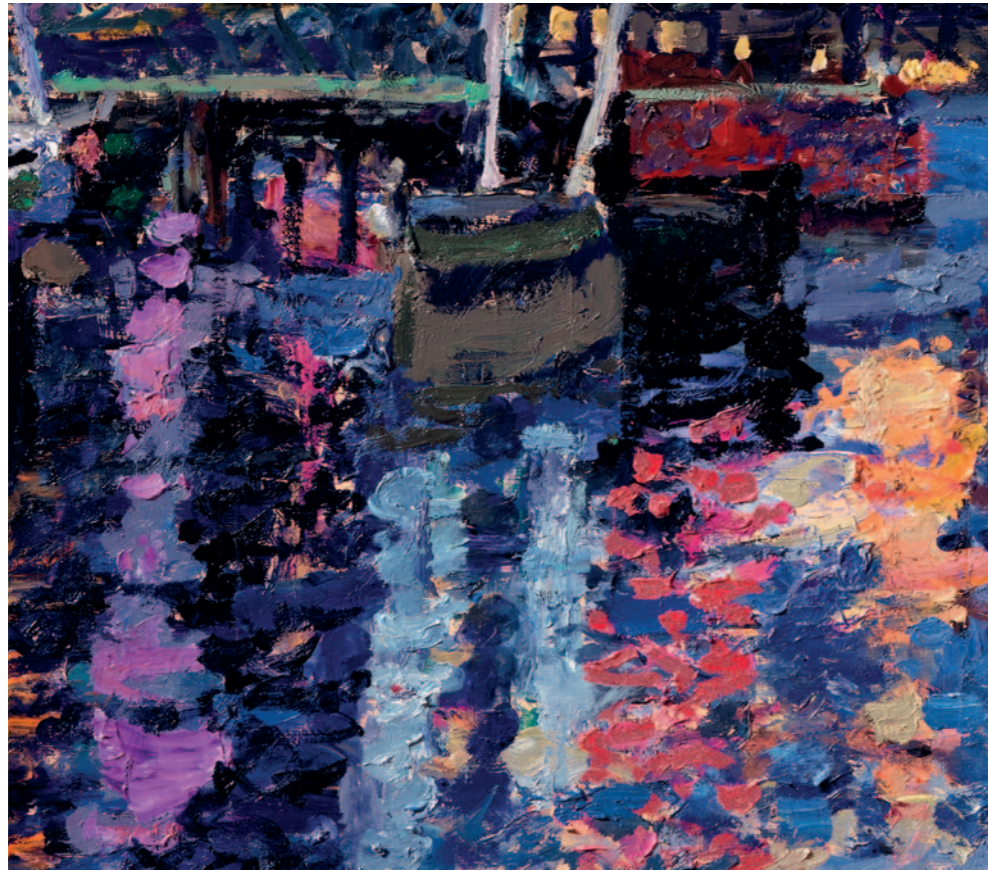
Roger Mills, July 2018

Roger Mills studied at Cambridge and the Courtauld Institute of Art, with a particular interest in the works of Ben Nicholson.



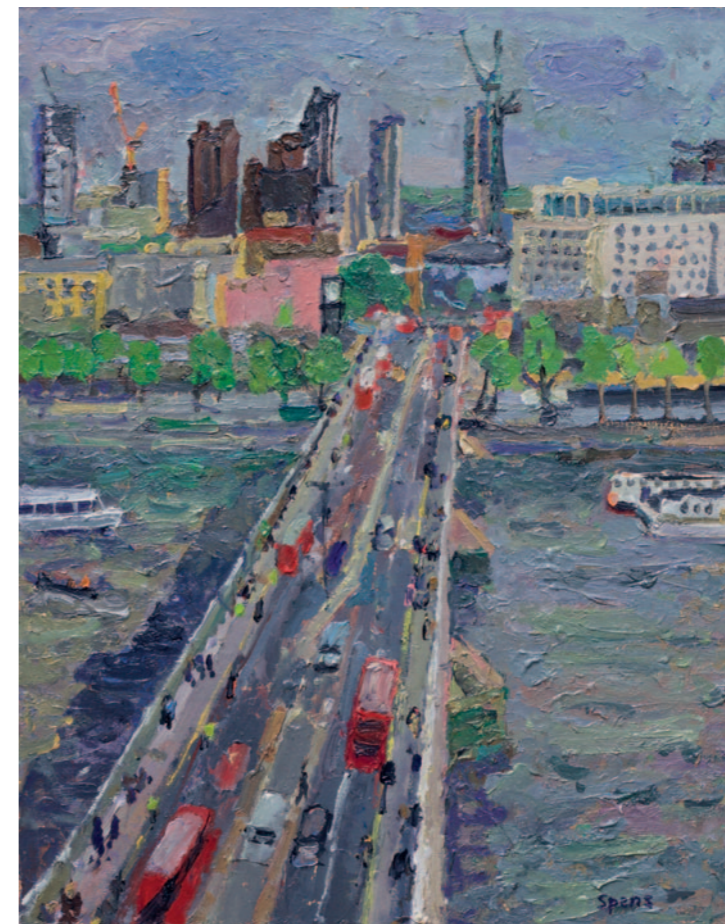








8 | Skate, Somerset House. 2018
Oil on board. 35.5 x 34 cm



Study for Waterloo Bridge. 2017 | 9
Oil on board. 35.5 x 28.5 cm





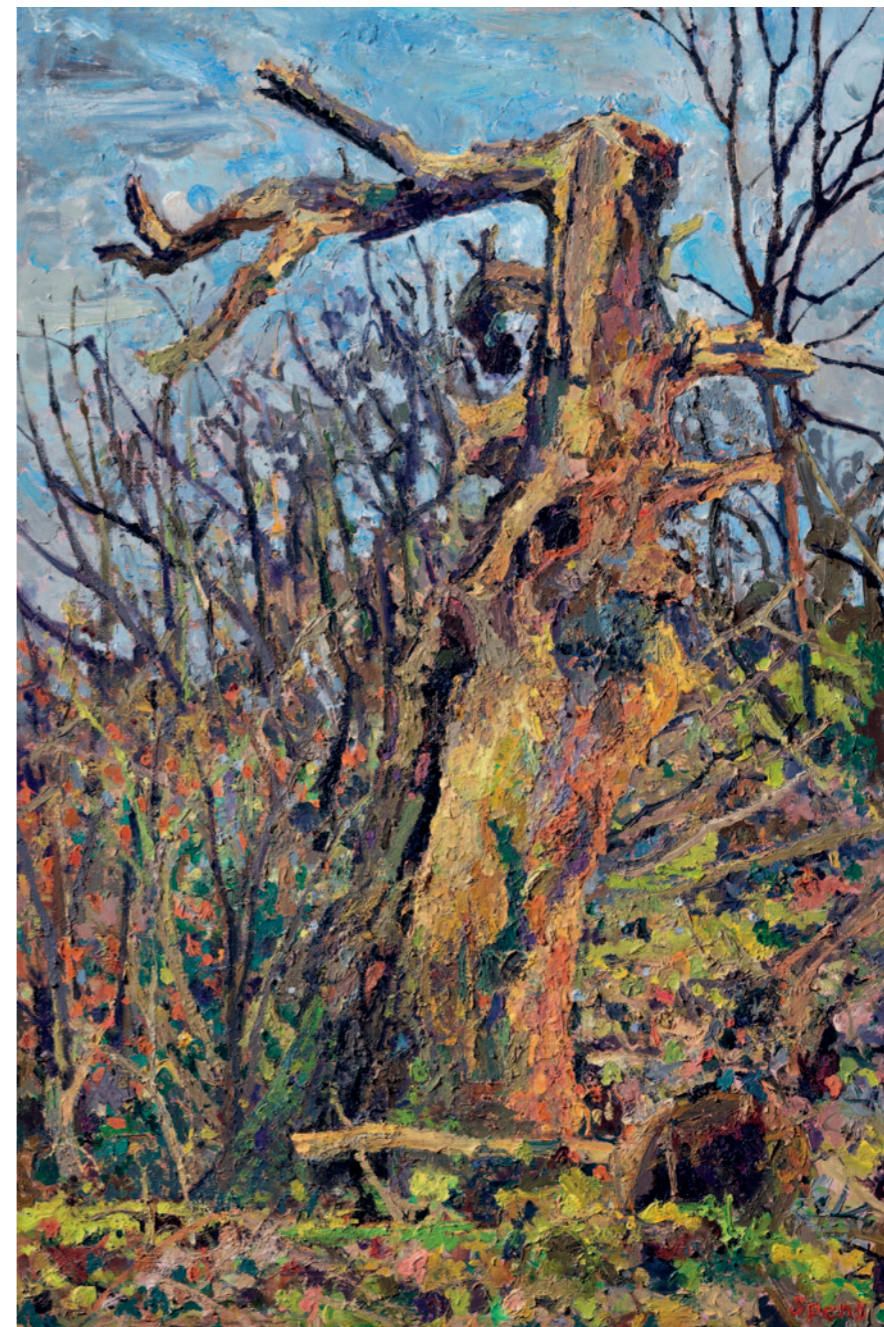
11 | Christmas, Somerset House. 2017
Oil on board. 34 x 38 cm



Sledding by Kenwood Lake. 2018 | 12
Oil on board. 40.5 x 40.5 cm

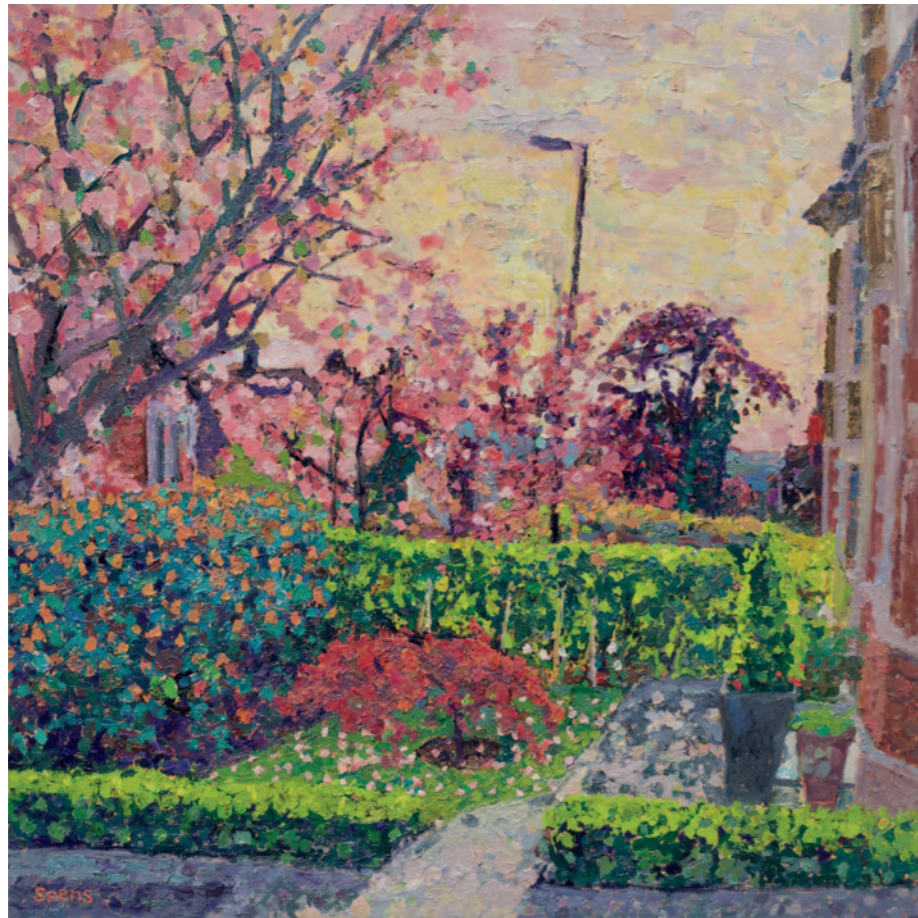


13 | March snow, Hampstead Heath. 2018
Oil on board. 25.5 x 40 cm



14 | Hollow Oak, Hampstead Heath. 2017 (right)
Oil on board. 91 x 61 cm

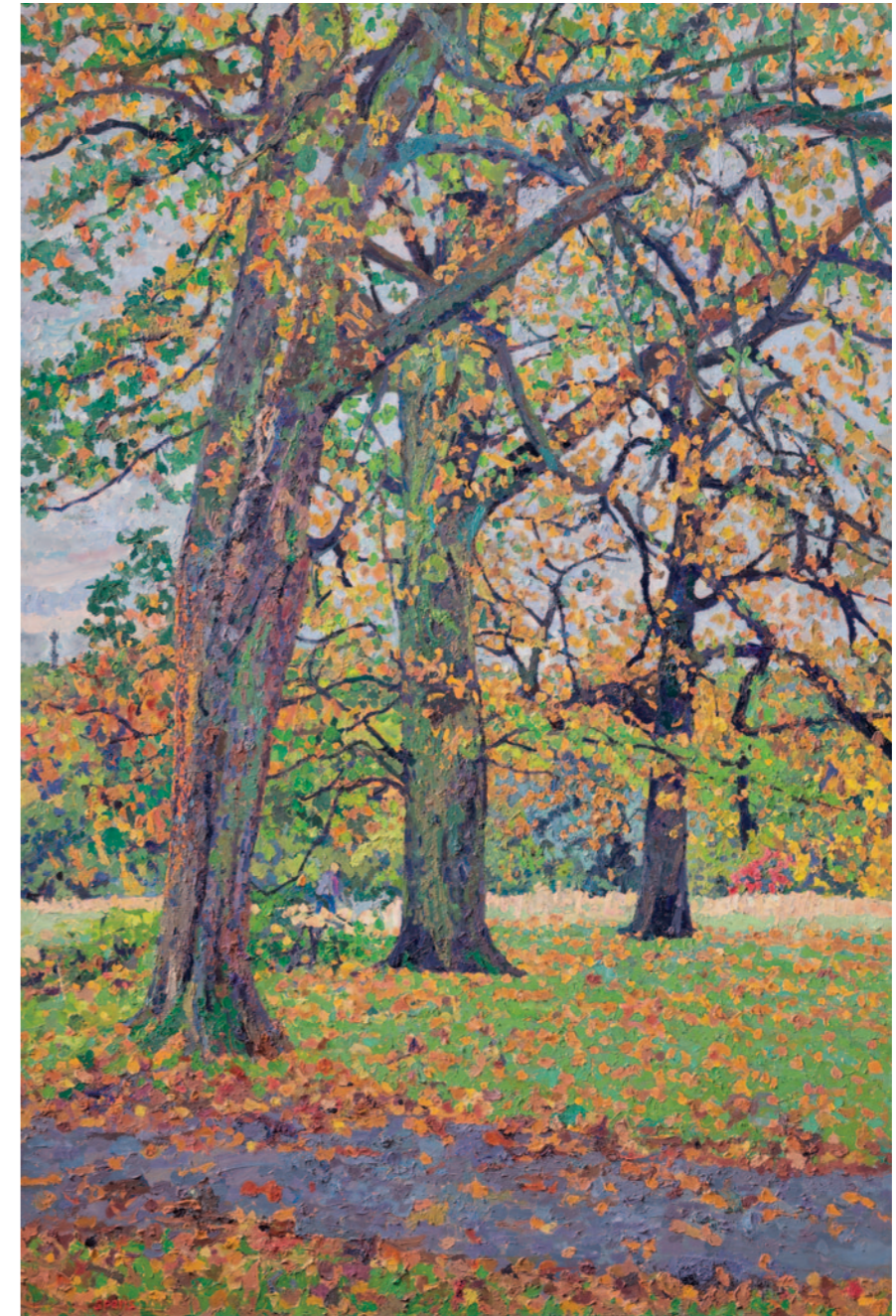
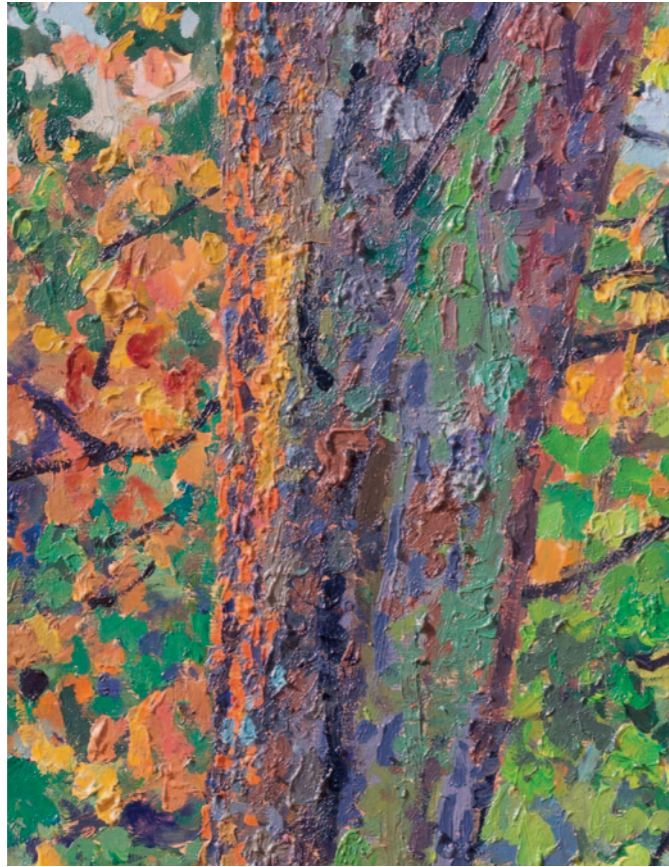




16 | Cherry Blossom, Cranley Gardens. 2017
Oil on board. 61 x 61 cm



November, Hampstead Heath. 2017 | 17
Oil on board. 73 x 61 cm









22 | Bathers, Toulenc river. 2018
Oil on board. 33.5 x 40.5 cm



Surfers, Harlyn Bay | 23
Oil on board. 28 x 40.5 cm





26 | Snowstorm, Jungfrau Valley . 2018
Oil on board. 28.5 x 38 cm



Kleine Schedigg towards Grindlewald. 2017 | 27
Oil on board. 27 x 40 cm



When Peter Spens got in touch and asked if he could paint the build of the Lemon Tree Trust Garden I thought this will be different to the usual build photos.

Peter worked with the same intensity as the construction team from Landscape Associates on his Chelsea series and everyone enjoyed him being there, seeing the different stages being captured in paint.

Now that plot at Chelsea is back to turf, these paintings capture the sheer pace of decisions and speed construction of a Chelsea Show Garden.

Tom Massey - Designer of the Lemon Tree Trust Garden, RHS Chelsea Flower Show 2018





30 | Blockwork, Chelsea Flower Show. 2018
Oil on board. 26 x 40.5 cm



Lemon Tree Garden, laying the half-brick wall. 2018 | 31
Oil on board. 26 x 40.5 cm



32 | Fountain and rills, Lemon Tree Garden. 2018
Oil on board. 28.5 x 40 cm



Grouting and planting around the Pomegranates. 2018 | 33
Oil on board. 27.5 x 40.5 cm



34 | Bedding planting around the Lemon Tree. 2018
Oil on board. 29 x 40.5 cm



35 | The LG Garden, Chelsea Flower Show. 2018 (above)
Oil on board. 30.5 x 40.5 cm

Lago Maggiore, evening light. 2018 (overleaf) | 36
Oil on board. 40 x 30.5 cm



SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2000 **Cities and the Sea**, Gallery 27. London
- 2001 **Skylines**, Gallery 27. London
- 2003 **Open to the Sky**, Gallery 27. London
- 2005 **Changing Formations**, Gallery 27. London
- 2006 **Floating London**, Guildhall Art Gallery. London
- 2008 **Observatory**, Air Gallery. London
- 2010 **water, colour**, Air Gallery. London
- 2011 **from mountains to sea**, Cranley Gallery. London
- 2012 **Site Specific**, The Gallery in Cork Street. London
- 2014 **Grandstand: The Cheltenham and London series**,
Gallery 8. Duke Street, St. James's
- 2015 **running script**, Cranley Gallery. London
- 2016 **Active Reaction**, Cranley Gallery. London
- 2018 **Human Lens**, Cranley Gallery. London

COLLECTIONS

- Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer
- Shell International
- BP Amoco
- Land Securities
- Stephenson Harwood
- Guildhall Art Gallery, City of London
- Nationwide Building Society
- ENT @ 150 Harley Street
- Pearson
- Horse Guards
- Jardine Lloyd Thompson
- Fédération Internationale de Volleyball
- International Olympic Committee
- IK Investment Partners