

PETER SPENS

# CHARTING TIME



Cg...





The artist drawing at Hampstead Heath, June 2020 (*above*)  
The artist painting *The City between trees, Hampstead spring*, May 2020

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CRANLEY GALLERY





## TALKING THROUGH THE YEARS

**Mark Allin:** We have often talked together over 45 years about painting and what makes it relevant, vital and personal.

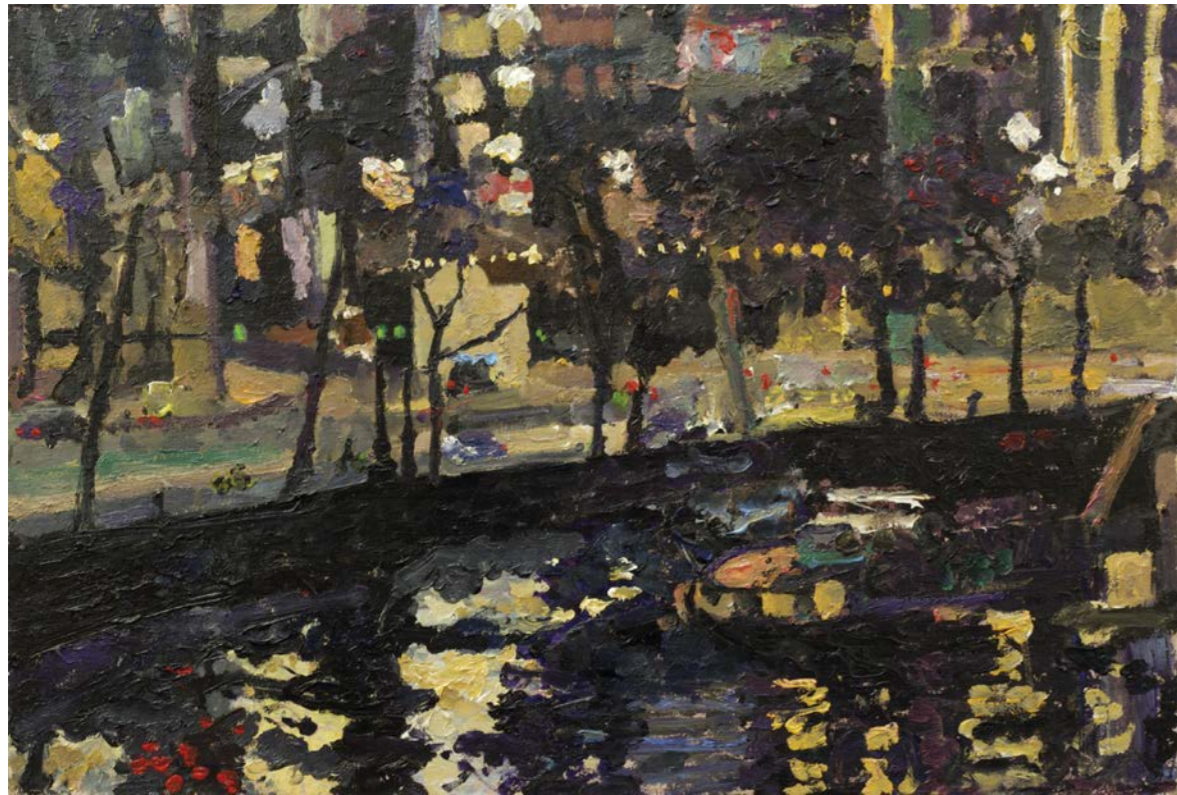
**Peter Spens:** Yes and today at the gallery we are looking through four years of work made before, during and after the pandemic. Nature has been a great external moderator throughout; ever nourishing and returning us to the here and now, relieving worries about impact to our social, economic and cultural structures.

**Mark:** Painting provided you with a sanctuary to react to these times and contemplate the very human response to extraordinary challenges. The *Charting Time* exhibition reflects these years which, for many people, have been a period of fragmentation and stasis, especially during the lockdowns. These works take us to a resolution of this fracture through engagement with paint to the landscape and urban worlds. That resolution is significant for us all. These paintings embrace the experience of these last years without being a documentary (although there are documentary aspects to it).



**Peter:** The *Henley Regatta* and *Cheltenham Festival* very much show life as it was before the pandemic: the rituals of congregation for sporting events which were about to disappear, the energy of a crowd focused on a challenge.





**Mark:** *Night, Embankment from Waterloo Bridge* and *Skipton House* both capture the days of our pandemic. The Thames work has a sense of uncertainty and darkness to it and the PPE meeting depicts the response of the combined forces of the NHS, Army and Navy. It has a quotidian familiarity, almost looking like *any* meeting: but something important is happening as we cannot see the national screens that everyone's attention is fixed upon.

**Peter:** It was quite moving to be given the opportunity to observe this combined effort in action from the corner of the room at Skipton House.



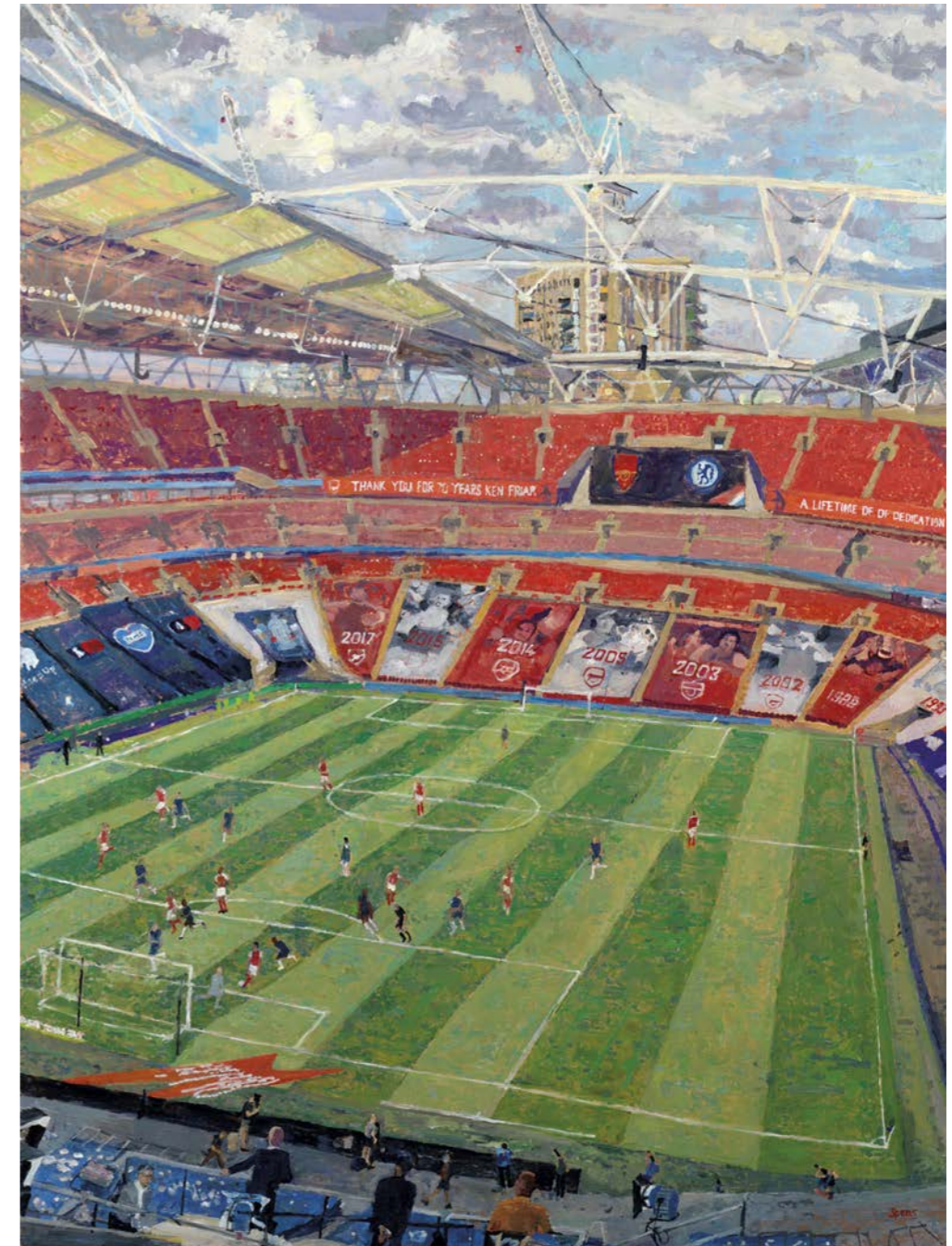
**Peter:** The National Army Museum commission to record the military involvement with COVID gave me a great sense of purpose to set down these many different organisations coming together to tackle the pandemic.



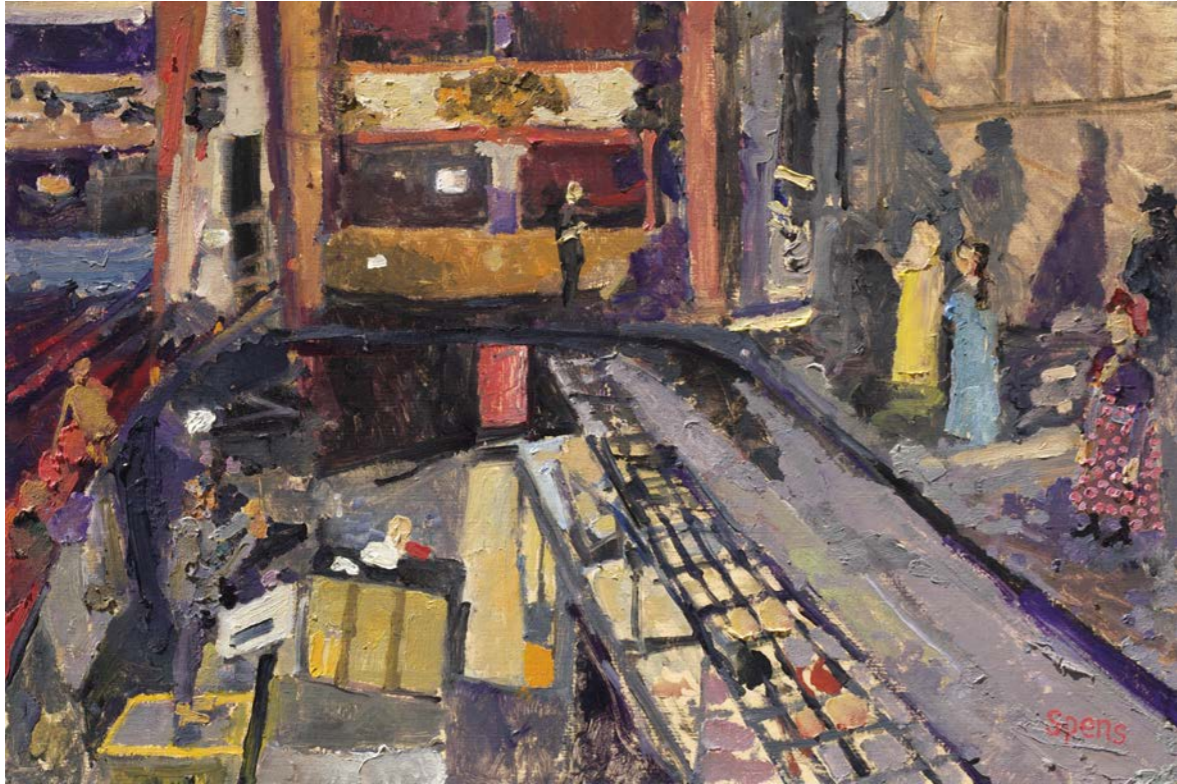


**Peter:** The FA kindly gave me access to paint the 2020 Cup Final in an empty Wembley Stadium. I started there on the Tuesday before Saturday's game and worked all hours to establish this hulking structure in advance of the match. My painting spot behind the BBC commentators helped to give a sense of scale. Fortunately the Arsenal captain's winning goal was scored at this near end.

**Mark:** The painting perfectly captures the human excitement of the goal being scored but in the eerie context of seat block covers showing past FA Cup glory days of both teams. That summer, football was reasserting itself in these 'new normal' conditions and giving further evidence of the pandemic switch to remote consumption through screens.



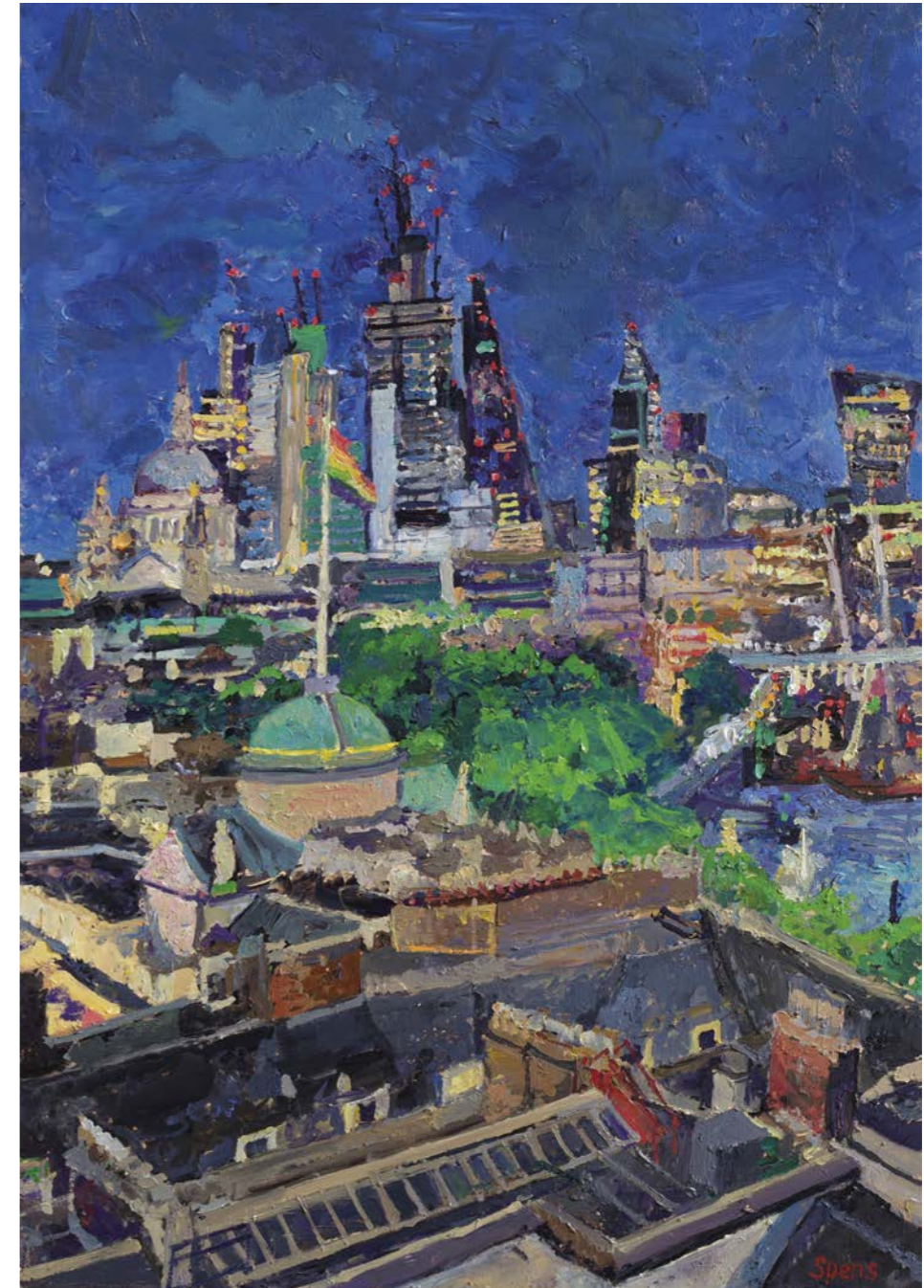




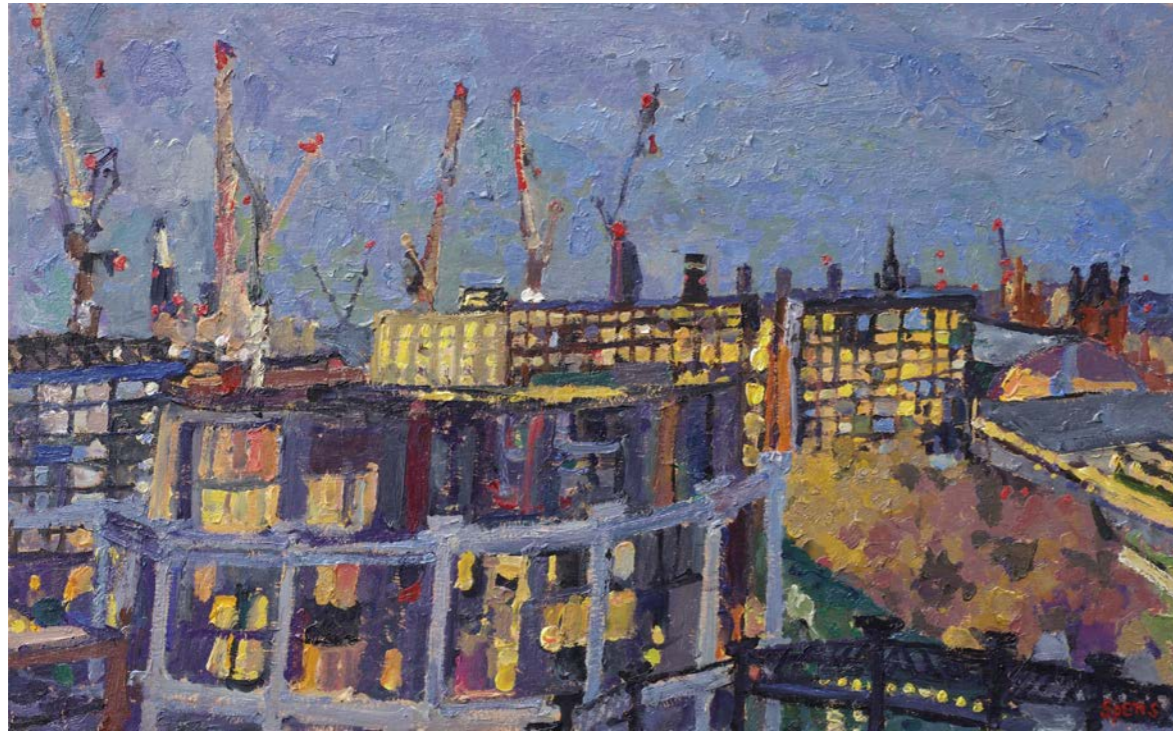
**Mark:** We move from the construction above ground to human life within the city. The secret intimacy of rooftops, the emerging green of riverside plane trees alongside the intensity of the Director's Rehearsal with first night approaching.

**Peter:** Yes, fascinating to listen to the Director of the Jack the Ripper opera at the ENO stopping and starting the performance to negotiate small changes with the cast.

High summer, the flag over the slate roofs of Wren's Somerset House proclaims a celebration. The City of London appears like a crowd, the cranes sprouting red accents on their tips. What an inventory of geometry. Cezanne proposed that nature rather than architecture should be treated by means of the cylinder, the sphere and the cone!







**Mark:** These two paintings portray the breakneck pace of construction in London but also remind us that this development is happening on an organic human space. These landscapes are built from concrete, steel and glass onto the industrial heritage around Coal Drops Yard.

**Peter:** Painting from a 13th Floor balcony at Tapestry Apartments shows London's extraordinary capacity to reinvent itself on full view. Passengers arriving at St Pancras drain into the underground; St Pauls sandwiched between the emerging Google HQ and the Shard; the cast iron carapace of gasometers housing flats and a public garden overlooking Regent's canal. The soundscape was also so rich and pulsing with voices, transport and birdsong.





*Mark: Winter, Westminster from Brettenham House* typifies this group of London paintings. It is one of the most famous views in the world but nothing in it is either cliché or a mere document. Instead, there is a restrained intimacy through direct observation. I note that the scaffolding masks all but the clock face of Big Ben.



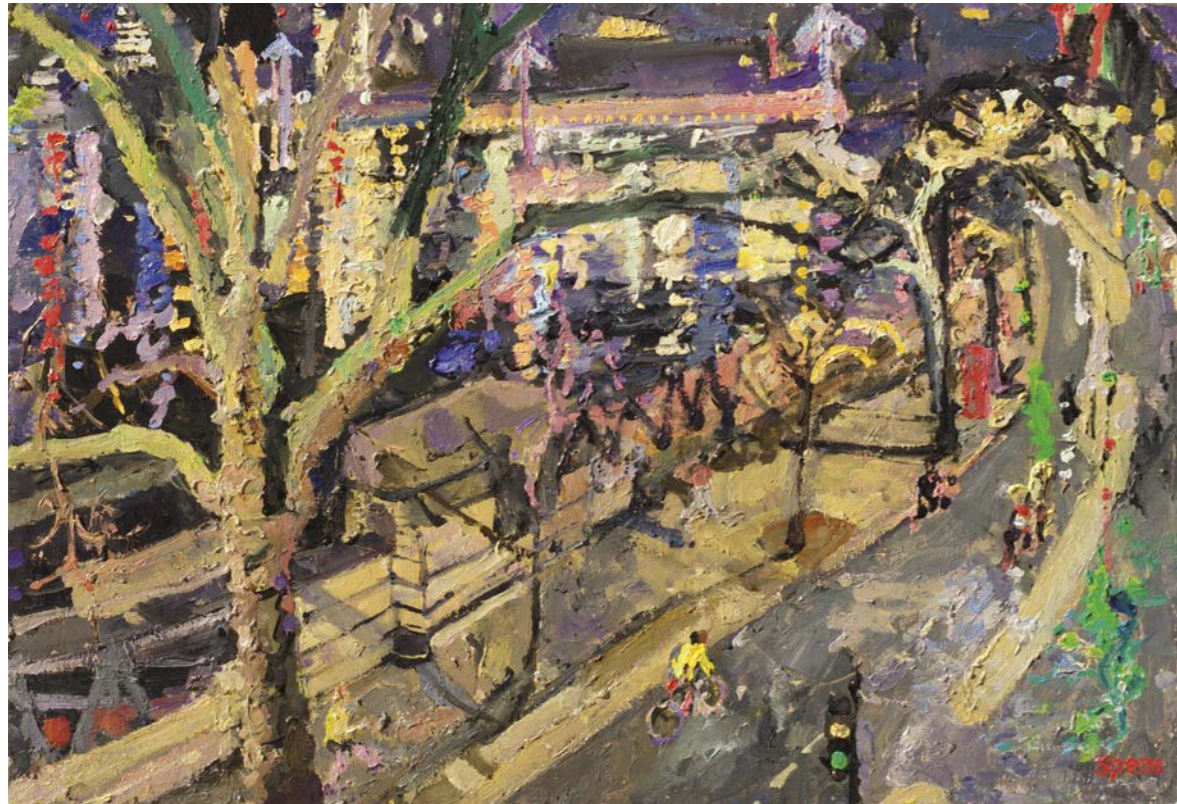




*Peter:* During the lockdown of early 2021 I started this Thames series from Blackfriars Bridge: working those January nights I have never felt London to be quite so deserted.

What a contrast to the adjacent Waterloo Bridge 'all lights on' painting from January 2019.





**Mark:** With this Embankment picture, although lockdown is still on, people were starting to put a toe out of the door. I love the balance between winter trees, street lighting and their reflections on the wet road and the Thames.



**Peter:** *West from Waterloo Bridge* had a trickle of traffic to it but the buildings were still very much closed - most lights were out with the vast majority still working from home. The visual language is pushed quite hard to create a mingling of movement, light and colour.



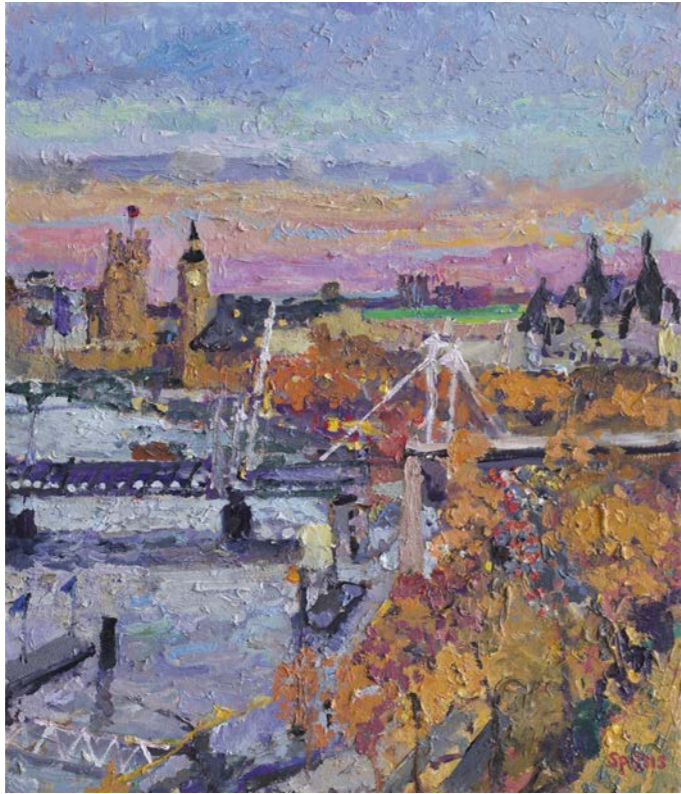


*Mark:* 'Full moon Gasometers' gives us another way to see the City. This time at night, illumination creates patterns of line and colour like a tapestry.

*Peter:* ... and woven into this fabric the flow from office home. Looking across at all these apartments within the Gasometer reminded me of Chinese cabinets with a different life in every drawer.







*Mark:* The flow of the river, the pulse of traffic, people streaming north and south over Waterloo bridge.

*Peter:* ... and east and west by river and Embankment, as well as a subterranean matrix of tube lines:  
London stratum.

21 | Evening, Westminster from Brethenham House. 2018  
Oil on board. 36 x 30.5 cm



22 | Night, Waterloo Bridge. 2018 (right)  
Oil on board. 91 x 61 cm





**Mark:** The sea paintings are an integral part of the story of the exhibition. They represent an essential human response to nature, the environment and the passing of time.

**Peter:** The sea and its rhythmic nature defies still points and requires a more dancing, fleet-footed approach to the activity of painting. Turner's principal theme was the insignificance of man next to these vast forces.







**Peter:** The study above was painted in a Force Seven gale peering out of the window of my painting wagon at Polzeath. In contrast there is the calm of Church Cove, worked on the spot in autumn 2019 but finished in the studio; an elegy to that distant coast during the first Lockdown.

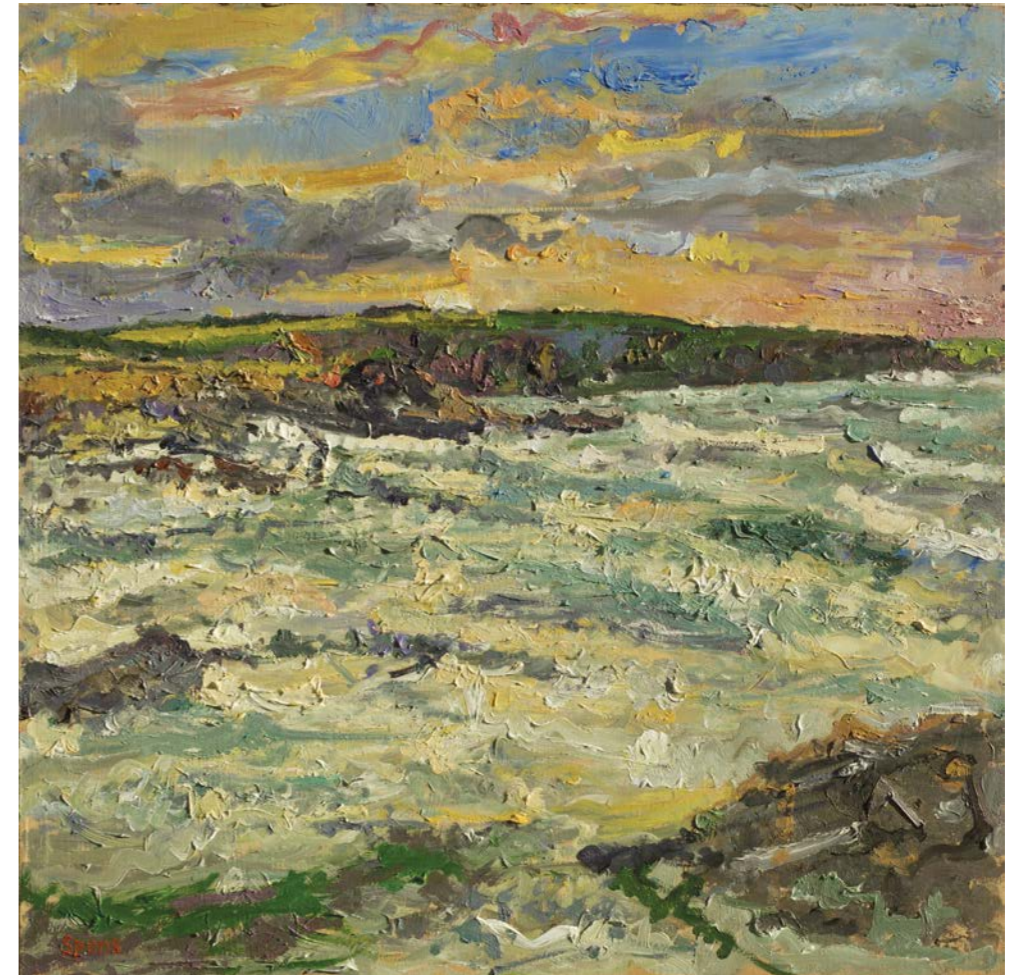
**Mark:** I've got to get a Shakespeare quote in here! Henry VI, Part 2

*'The gaudy, blabbing and remorseful day is crept into the bosom of the sea.'*





**Mark:** These two paintings remind us that we are charting time. From the solidity of the headland at the height of the gale in the morning to the explosion of colour at sunset.



**Peter:** That detonation of colour in the sky is always reflected in the faceted mirror of the waves. The surface of the sea is ever mutable.



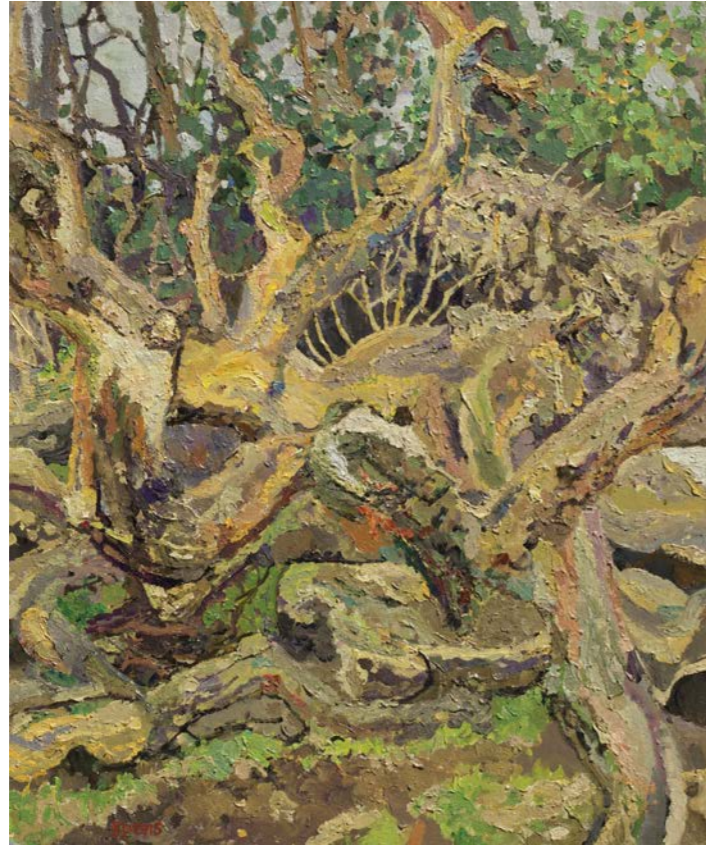


**Peter:** Both these paintings are intensely rhythmic and I strive to translate the swell of the waves into the low relief of surface incident as the paint is laid down. I am seeking a dialogue with the sea's rhythm, painting 'alla prima' where the paint can slide and layers intermingle. The viscosity of the oil paint increased markedly in the cold of that December on the Lizard.

**Mark:** Being close to the sea always provokes an emotional reaction due to the jeopardy of that huge tonnage of water in motion. Our experience is above all one of movement of mass and sound.

**Peter:** You are correct that the sea was close by. This painting board was placed directly onto one of the large rocks of Rinsey, which also offered me some protection. Being swept out to sea is not my intention, although from the paintings it often looks that way!





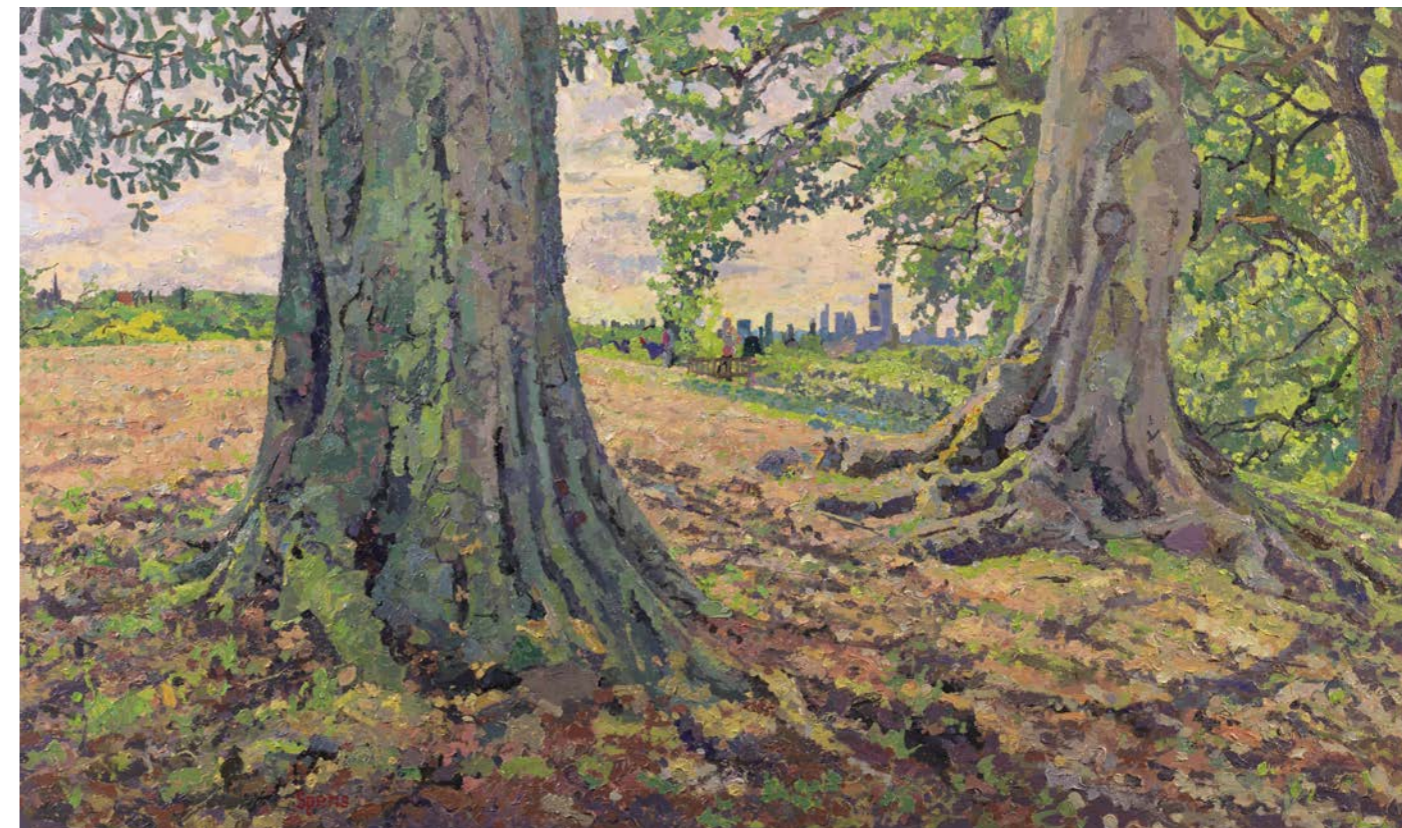
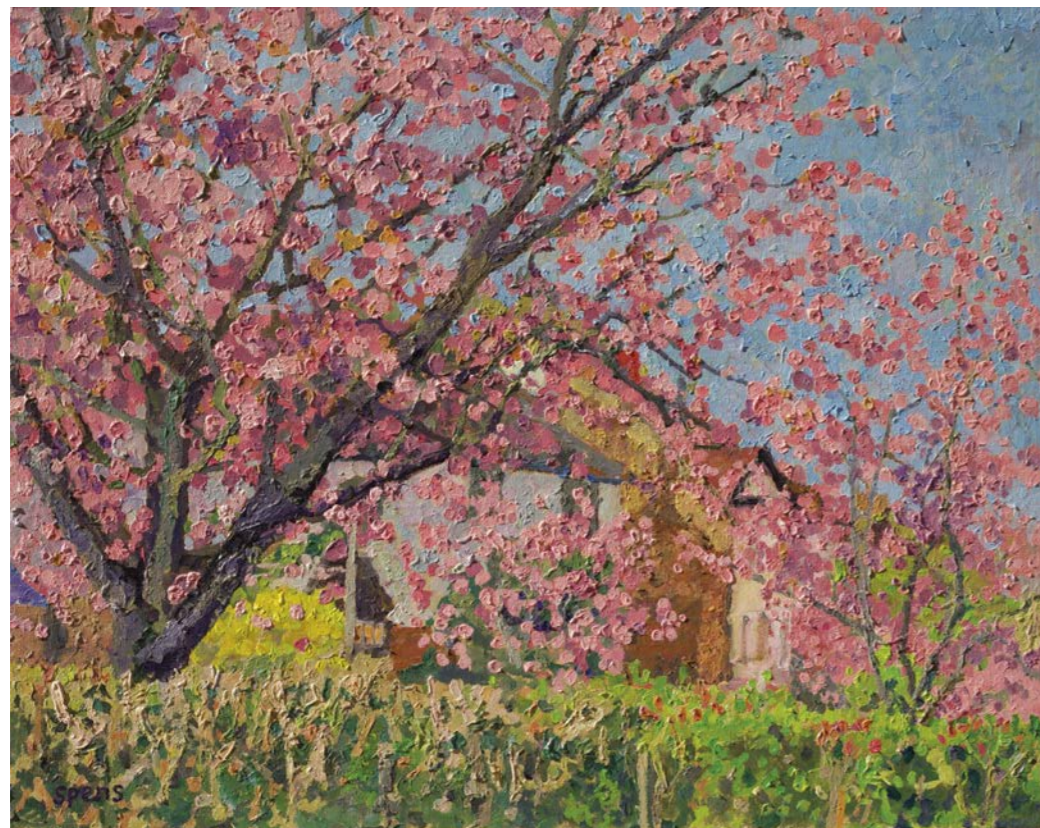
**Peter:** This fallen oak created a vortex composition, spiralling in through the collapsed branches. It was painted in January and February 2021, during that lockdown. I marvel how, stripped of bark, the surface of the trunk reveals river-like patterns, sand rills on a beach. Several days in, it snowed and this change was painted. As the snow melted away, their whites gradually departed: the painting followed the visual flow.

**Mark:** In the spring of 2020 charting time felt impossible. Uncertainty made us fearful of something we thought both inevitable and never-ending. These paintings ground us in natural cycles, a remembrance that everything renews.



**Peter:** My painting on the spot of 'The City between trees', in the beautiful spring of 2020, did seem to be a good point of focus for people on their daily walk to come and watch me at work. A simple statement that the here and now is worthwhile and worthy of prolonged scrutiny.

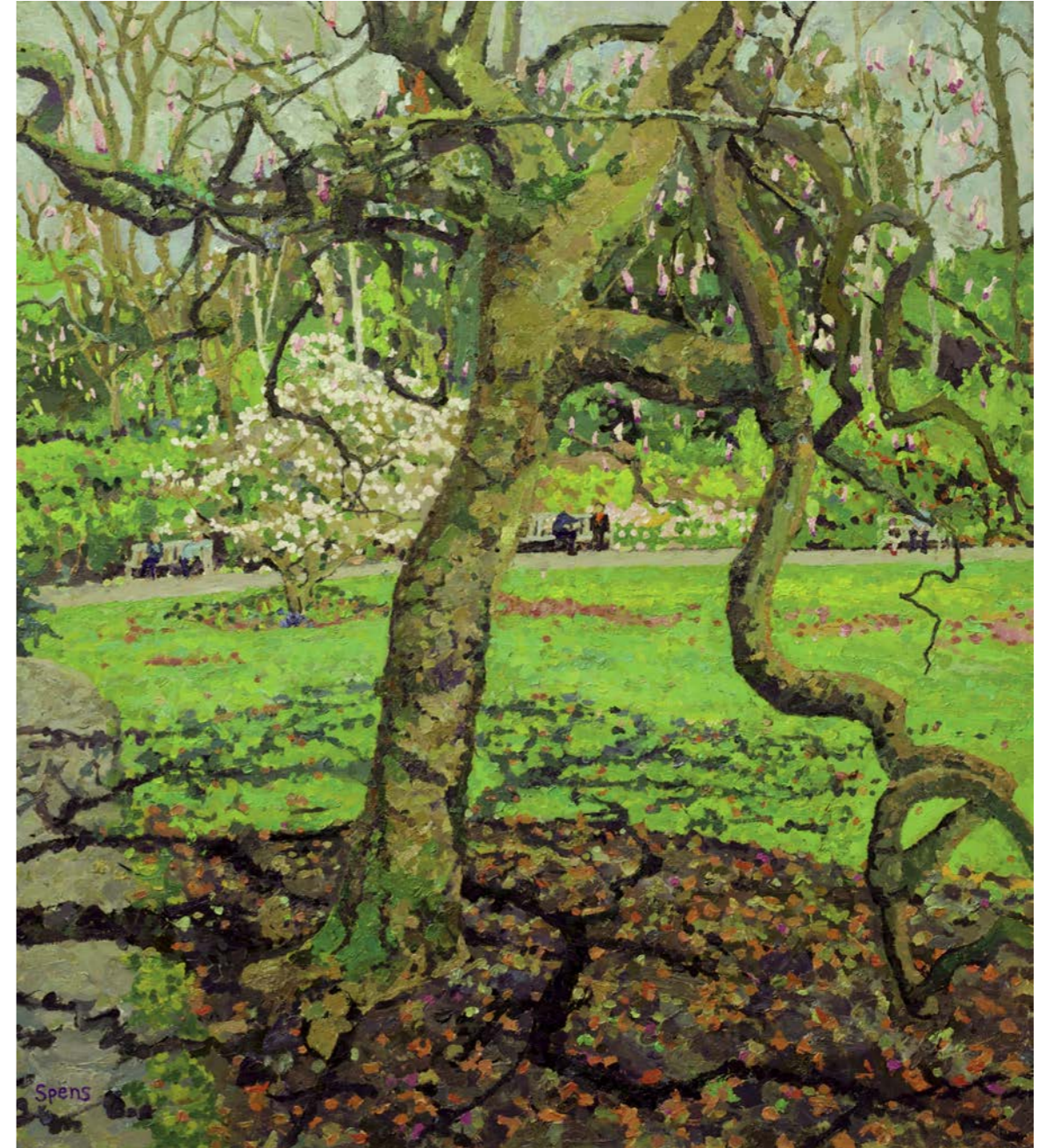




**Peter:** The orchestration of colour in spring, the tap of the conductor's baton from the podium unleashes a crescendo of blossom. People make a point of travelling to Cranley Gardens to commune with this avenue of cherry blossoms.

**Mark:** Indeed it is a spectacle. With 'The City between trees' in the summer of 2020 you continued from the same spot as the spring picture but the green envelopment of foliage against the baked earth radically changes the space in the work. Two seasons, two pictorial spaces at around the same time of day from just one spot. I liked the rootedness of these trees as we were all digging deep into our reserves during this time.





**Mark:** This Mimosa image signifies nature as a protector, forming a canopy over the figures emerging from the house, shielding them from the unknown, enveloping them in a resurgence of growth.

**Peter:** Thank you, I like your reading of the Rosslyn Hill painting. *Early spring magnolia* was interrupted after one day's work in 2020 by Kenwood being closed, but was completed the following spring. *Magnolia blossom* (overleaf right) was started straight afterwards in 2021 but nature brought this to a halt by a heavy frost and so it was completed this March.



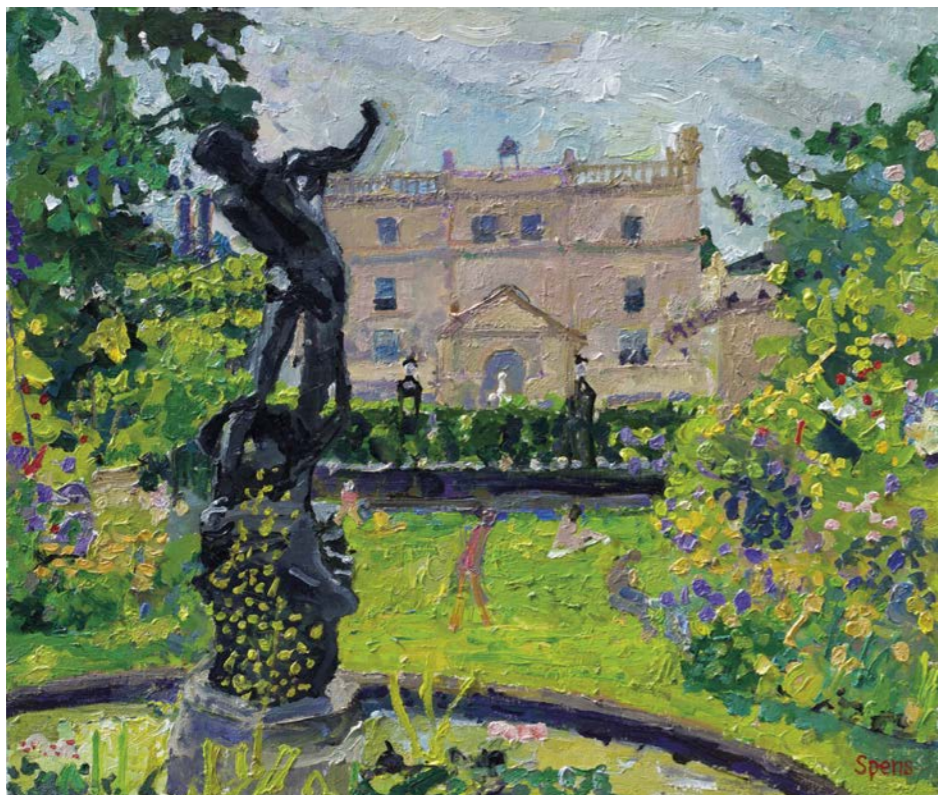


**Mark:** I am intrigued by your work process, if a painting is not finished in one season, you await the same state of nature the following year rather than try and finish it from memory in the studio. Can you explain?

**Peter:** The simple conclusion of my practice is that a mark made on the spot carries a particular energy of time and place. It stays sharp and avoids the rounding off that can happen in the studio. The illustration on the title page *Autumn, Hampstead Heath* was started in autumn 2020 then completed autumn 2021: better to have the chords of colour in front of you, providing the unexpected.



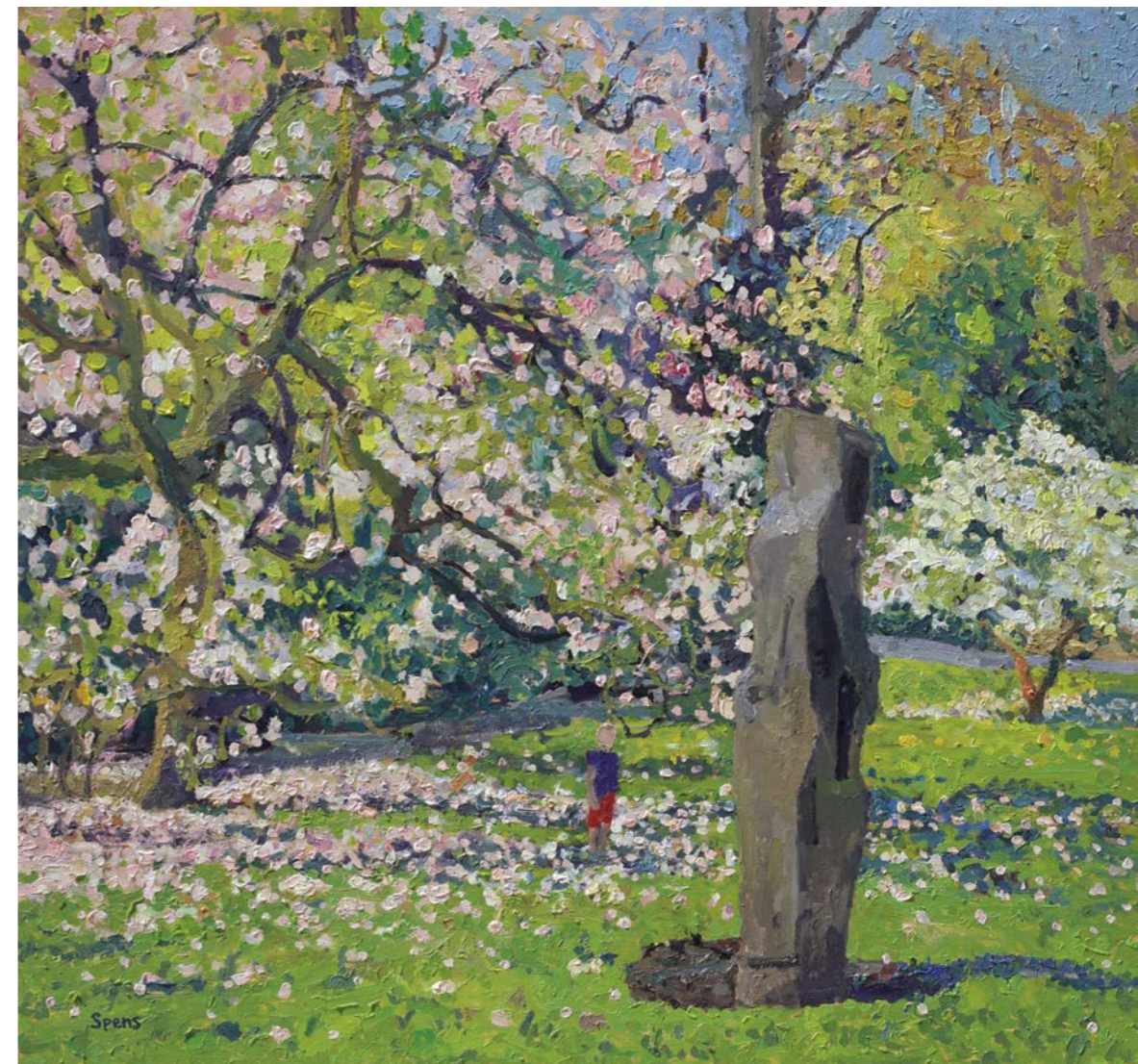




*Mark Allin's* professional career was in publishing. He was CEO of John Wiley & Sons in New Jersey – a leading publisher and one of the world's oldest companies – until 2017. Now back in the UK, he is active in musical composition and production.

Mark and Peter's friendship started in 1973, aboard their school train to Newport Grammar School in Essex.

Mark will be giving a concert of ambient music during the exhibition as one of the gallery events this autumn. Please go to the gallery website for details.







#### LONDON SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2000 **Cities and the Sea**, Gallery 27. Cork Street
- 2001 **Skylines**, Gallery 27. Cork Street
- 2003 **Open to the Sky**, Gallery 27. Cork Street
- 2005 **Changing Formations**, Gallery 27. Cork Street
- 2006 **Floating London**, Guildhall Art Gallery. Guildhall Yard
- 2008 **Observatory**, Air Gallery. Dover Street
- 2010 **water, colour**, Air Gallery. Dover Street
- 2012 **Site Specific**, The Gallery in Cork Street
- 2014 **Grandstand: The Cheltenham and London series**, Gallery 8. Duke Street, St. James's
- 2016 **Active Reaction**, Cranley Gallery. London
- 2018 **Human Lens**, Cranley Gallery. London
- 2019 **All at Sea**, Cranley Gallery. London
- 2020 **2020 vision**, Cranley Gallery. London
- 2022 **Charting Time**, 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
- National Army Museum, London







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