

JOHN SPEIRS



'Conversations with the Sea' by John Speirs is a group of paintings that are intimate portraits of the sea in its many moods. Subverting the tradition of marine painting in broadly brushed canvases, Speirs' captivating images of the sea appear to fill the canvas with glittering stillness and rampaging force. For all their apparent indebtedness to the Impressionist style this series, however, they also invoke a therapeutic engagement with the sea. Paint, colour and brushstrokes work together to explore the ever-changing character of water as it smashes against the rocks, rolls towards the shore or sparkles in reflective moments.

John was a leading graphic artist with J Walter Thompson and became a trouble-shooter for the advertising world, often 'parachuted' into companies to salvage many a campaign. Other companies he has worked with include Saatchi & Saatchi, Ted Bates Lord Geller and Chiat Day Clients have included Hennessy, IBM, Chevron Oil, Avon, Franklin Mint and Yardley. He is very well-known for his illustration work, with hundreds of books to his

name, where his inspiration by Brueghel and Bosch can be seen. His versatility as an artist seems to stem from his love of drawing – he was always drawing as a child.

Based in New York for 22 years, where he went in 1978 to work as a catwalk designer with Bill Gibb and Kate Franklin for British Fashion Week; he returned to England recently, and travels regularly to Uzes in France to paint en plein air.

He comes from an old South African family and was schooled at Rondebosch School in Cape Town and then onto the University of Cape Town - Michealis School of Art, where he trained as a fine artist. At the Frank Joubert Art Centre in Cape Town, he met one of his mentors, the great South African artist Irma Stern. He couldn't wait to spread his wings and won a scholarship to the Slade, where he met his wife Gill and his career took off.

In the artists' own words:

'I was born in Cape Town with a paintbrush in one hand and a tube of oil paint in the other. Throughout my formative years in South Africa, I was lauded as a prodigy and greatly indulged by leading artists – Irma Stern, Maggie Laubser and Eleanor White. My ego soared. At the Michaelis School of Art, I was too hot to handle and was shipped off to The Slade with a hefty bursary in my pocket. The Slade was my perfect catalyst. Colour, flashy paintwork and exuberant draughtsmanship – often frowned upon by the establishment – brought me to the attention of Larry Rivers, Oskar Kokoschka and others who recognized my hedonistic spirit. The need to support a family and a dangerous appetite for collecting paintings took me through years of restraint in advertising, packaging, fashion, publishing in London Paris and New York. But the love of paint, deep in my soul, had to burst out. After a long sabbatical I took up the oil paint, the brush and a heady lungful of turps and started to paint again with a passion I had never known before.'

His influences include, van Gogh for his colour, Karel Appel the Dutch Abstract Expressionist Painter, the Scottish Colourists, Soutine for his verve and the Fauves, Matisse Derain and Vlaminck. Luscious paint and exhilarating colour! Classical draughtsmanship, in the Slade tradition, has dominated all his work.