

Since moving to England in 1969, the artist Frank Spears has continued to exhibit regularly — about once every two years — in South Africa.

For two weeks from November 3, new works of his will be on show at the Hoffer Art Gallery, Pretoria.

He usually flies out for such occasions but he will not be doing so this time. "I'm getting a bit old — I'm 75," is the explanation, but it is not necessarily one to be taken too seriously; he looks extremely well, moves fitly and, in his semi-basement studio looking out on to a rolling expanse of Hampshire lawn bordered by gardens and placid ponds, still paints with dedication.

The themes he has explored and experimented with in the past continue to preoccupy him; vases of flowers, landscapes that are evocations of remembered places rather than on-the-spot likenes-

ses; musicians, sad clowns, necromancers; a young girl at puberty — impressionistic figures hinting at allegory.

Not a studio prop is in sight: "I've drawn from life for so long that I know what a woman looks like . . . and when I'm painting flowers I certainly don't say, 'I'm going to paint roses or dahlias.' The idea is to make an artefact, not a copy.

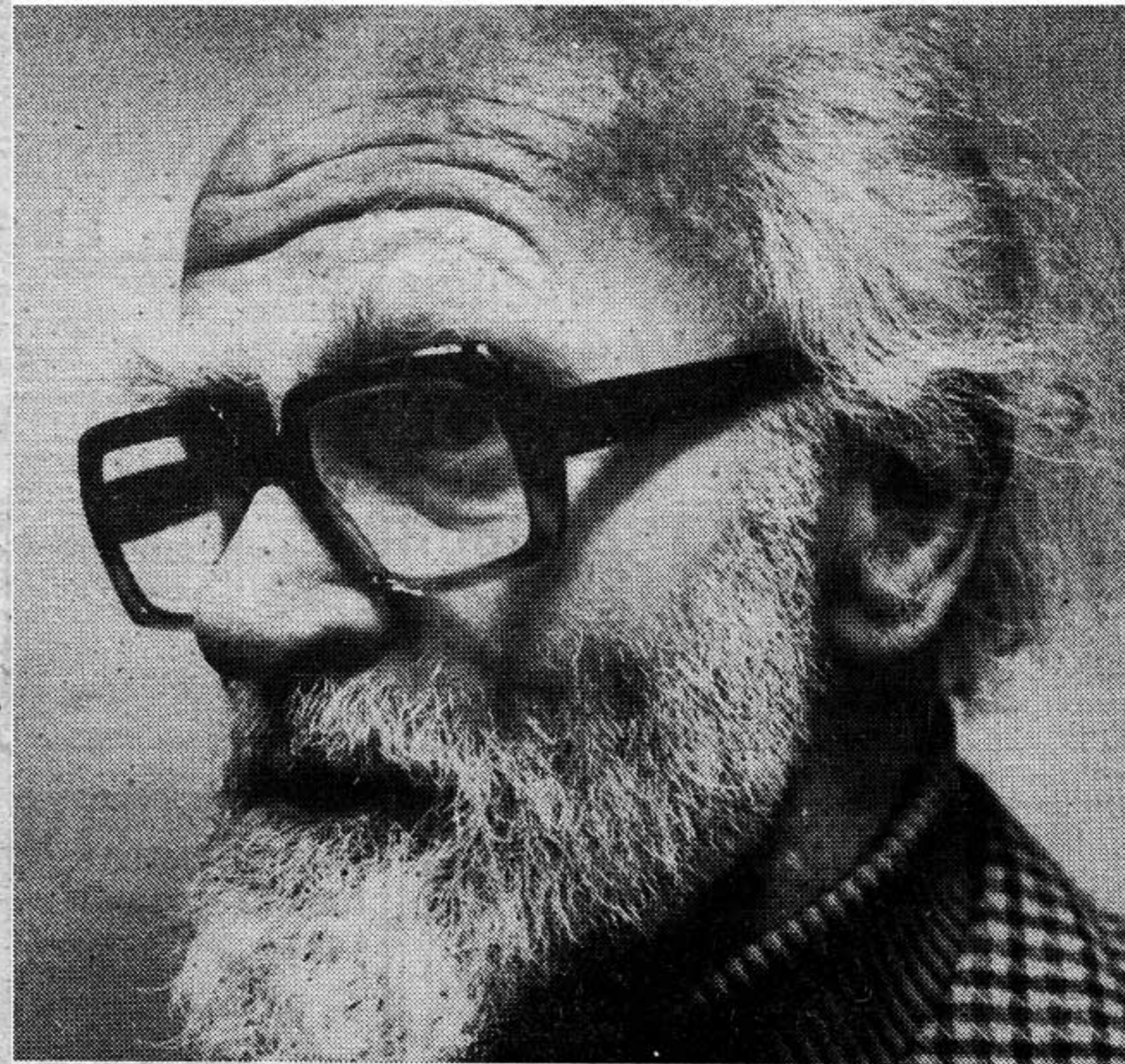
"A painting is an expression of an idea. I see the artistic process as being to create order from chaos, and after that to pass on a glimpse of magic. A composer of music is doing exactly the same thing."

For a time, says Frank Spears, he "flirted around" with abstraction, but he decided that it wasn't the correct thing for him: "I didn't think it would really be honest for me to destroy the subject, the inspiration, altogether. And so I let that subject be shown in the painting, and I use it in the title."

## By JEREMY LAWRENCE in LONDON

One of the new paintings with which he is best pleased, and which will be seen in Pretoria, is entitled "Attica." It is a mosaic of golden sunlight on antique columns, with a Mediterranean sky in that cerulean shade of blue that will be familiar to admirers of his work. The inspiration was a day spent in Athens when the plane in which he was flying had to stop there for repairs: "Months later I thought I'd see what I could 'do' with Athens. I'd already done Rome, Assisi and Venice, as well as other cities of the imagination. . . ."

Of another painting to be exhibited he says: "I've become a Dante fiend — and I'm also keen on T S Eliot. I'd thought of making a celestial landscape with angels; then I realised that what I'd painted was Virgil saying farewell to Dante." (In the "Divine Comedy," Virgil acts as Dante's guide through Hell and Purgatory but, being pre-Christian, he is unable



Frank Spears: "I'd always resented having to shave . . ."

to proceed with him into Paradise.)

Born in Walsall and brought up in nearby Birmingham, Frank Spears emigrated to Cape Town as a young man in 1928, having answered a London Times advertisement seeking a chief designer for an architectural firm. He had studied architectural design in London; but in Birmingham he had also studied art, drama and music, and a dream he then cherished was of becoming an opera-singer.

"I did a great deal of singing — as a tenor — with the Cape Town Orchestra on Saturday nights, and also on the radio. In those days it was all 'Sudden death': there was no pre-recording. I was in the first broadcast production of a musical comedy, 'The Southern Maid', directed by Walter Swanson."

It was in 1952, the year of the tercentenary celebrations recalling Van Riebeeck's landing at the Cape, that Frank Spears decided to grow the distinctive beard he still sports. The motive was patriotism and something else too: "I'd always resented having to shave. And I've never done so since."

The beard inevitably invites comparisons with that of George Bernard Shaw; when Shaw came out to South Africa before the war, Frank Spears was an enthralled listener at his lecture in the Cape Town City Hall. "But it was my wife who actually met him."

Before Frank and his American-born wife Dorothea settled back in England in 1969 they spent six months touring Italy. Frank having set his heart on gaining a smattering of the Italian language, Venice and the country around Perugia were among places that were to provide a

potent source of artistic inspiration for works he describes as "the nearest I can get to landscape."

The Spears' first English home was a farmhouse near Titchfield, on the Hampshire coast with a view across the Solent to the Isle of Wight. Three years ago they moved to their present home, one of two Victorian wings added to an already spacious Queen Anne rectory in the Hampshire village of Meonstoke. The house is owned by the Spears' younger son Johnny, a solicitor. (Their elder son, Hilary, is headmaster of the Brebner School in Bloemfontein.)

For his studio Frank has appropriated the original kitchen of the rectory. Painting in oils and egg tempera (the commonest technique of easel painting up until the late 15th century), he takes anything from weeks to years to finish a work, several being in progress together: "I hang them up, and the day comes when I say 'That's no good' or 'That has to be changed'."

Completed works adorn every room of the house, but many will soon be removed from their stretchers, rolled up and airfreighted to Pretoria: "Whenever I have an exhibition, the whole house is denuded!"