

ART

By RICHARD CHEALES

PROBABLY two things make Frank Spears seem something of an enigma — his appearance — and the preconceived ideas you might get from his appearance.

Although he's frequently exhibited in Johannesburg in the past two decades, it only was about three years ago that I first chatted to this somewhat forbidding, deadly serious artist.

And found he was gentle and charming, mild and courteous. Only the "deadly serious artist" of my preconceived ideas remained. At that time, however, I was still a trifle intimidated by his Bernard Shaw look and did a sketch of the man with beetling eyebrows — to find, on getting home, I'd forgotten to draw one of those eyebrows!

Today, Spears is a very young 75; his unwrinkled skin makes yours truly look like a very ancient tortoise.

But his depth intensity about his highly individualistic painting, still streams at full flood. "I'm a slow painter," he says. "I work for two or three hours, and then spend two or three hours gardening."

"My wife and I live in a section of a house belonging to our son: my wife looks after the flower garden, and I grow vegetables." The property is 16 km from Winchester, England, and comprises 4,5 ha of land. Spears claims to be as happy with his life as anyone in this fast-changing world could hope to be.

He no longer paints direct from life: he strolls through the flower-garden, ruminatively looks at, say, some roses: and then goes indoors to paint them.

And anyone knowing Spears' work will recall his

Don't be put off by appearances



FRANK SPEARS . . . sketch by Richard Cheales.

gentle pictures of roses: diaphanous, delicate tones that are more whispered colour statements than decisive renderings.

The viewer seems to see the roses materialising before this eyes; and, somehow, smells their perfume.

Originally from England, Frank Spears emigrated to Cape Town when he was 23. He had a specialised ar-

chitectural job, advising on embellishments inside and outside buildings.

"Facades, panelling, that sort of thing," he remembered. "Lots of the buildings that had my 'touch' have gone. But, still . . . lots remain."

He'd studied art in England, but almost all he's learnt has come from personal experiment and, hard

work. The ephemeral style with which he's made his name took years to develop.

"I actually was a watercolourist. I've always intended to go back to watercolours, and still might do so." In a way, his oils have the subtlety and imagination of watercolours.

The Cape years were very full: a keen yachtsman, he designed such craft ("Oh, yes, I expect they're still sailing around, somewhere!"): he did a great deal of broadcasting, and held his first solo exhibition in Cape Town, in 1932.

With most of my preconceived idea of a "fierce Frank Spears" shattered, there's nonetheless still the impression he's something of a lone wolf: he keeps his ideas to himself.

He's charming and friendly, replying swiftly and freely to questions . . . but never elaborating.

So he could be a bit of a dreamer, and maybe in those peaceful, evocative paintings of his, you might "see" more of the true Frank Spears than you do when talking to him.

His current exhibition (on view at Gallery 21, 88 Fox Street, Johannesburg), will be followed by a Pretoria show that will be staged at Hoffer Gallery.

But already Frank Spears is back at that Queen Ann rectory, near Winchester, belonging to his son . . . probably painting for a few hours a day, and then tending the vegetable plot for another few hours.

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