

A Wonderful Life

WITH A VIBRANT NEW SHOW AT CORNWALL CONTEMPORARY, THE ADVENTURE CONTINUES FOR KEN SPOONER

Words by **Alex Wade**, photographs by **Mike Newman** / www.ocean-image.com

To say that Ken Spooner has a zest for life would be a serious understatement. At 72, the Staffordshire-born artist is so exuberant, so excited, so downright passionate

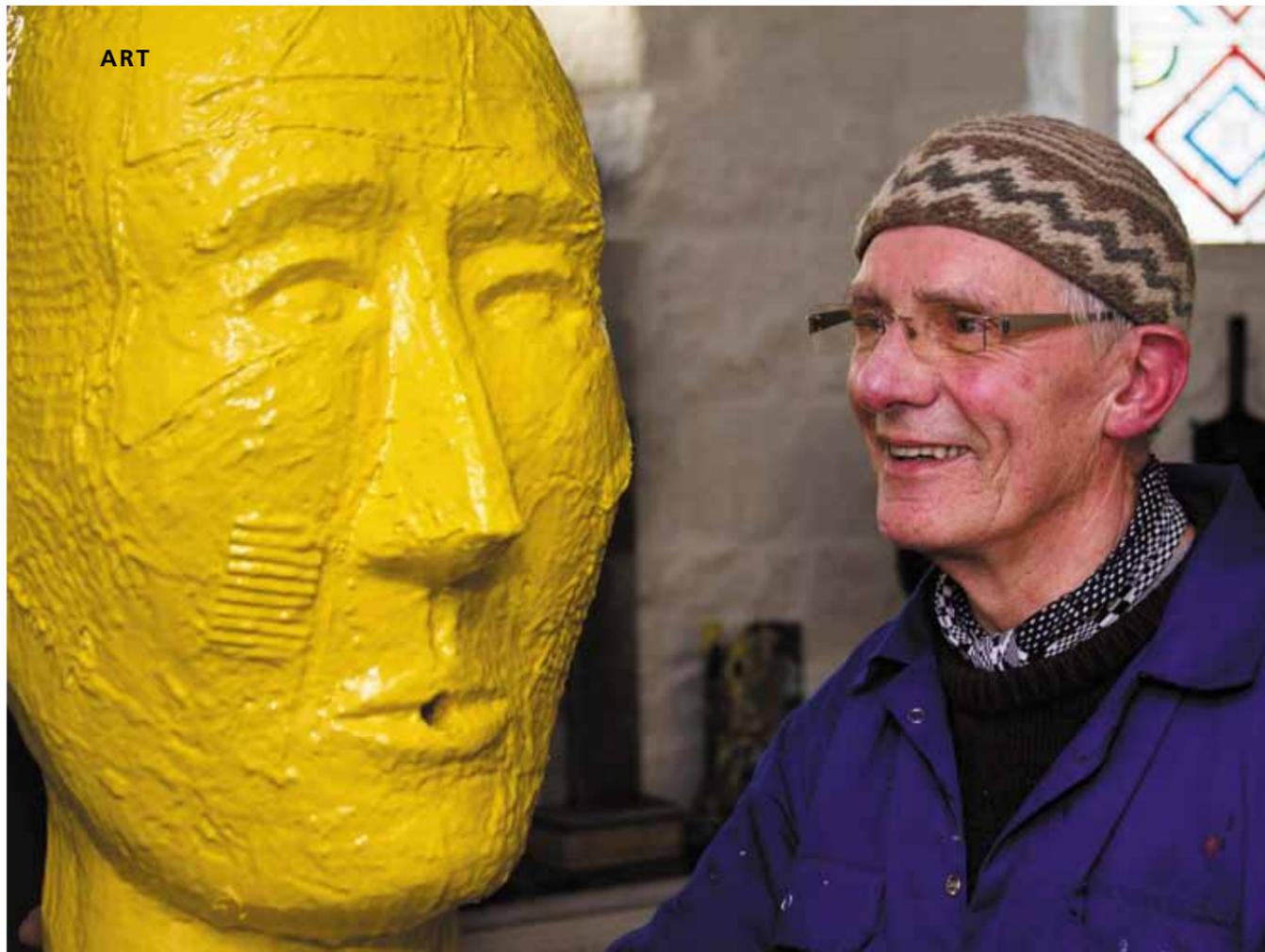
about so many things, that it's a struggle to keep up with him. His thoughts and sentences ricochet from one subject to another at breakneck speed, but first up, as we speak in Spooner's converted chapel in the West Penwith hamlet of

Crows-an-Wra, is an anecdote about Jimi Hendrix.

"I carried Hendrix's guitar case once," says Spooner, chuckling, his eyes alight at the memory. "It was at a festival in Bath in the 1960s. All the great bands were there – Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin,

The Who, Eric Clapton. Hendrix arrived late for his performance, at the same time as me and some friends. We got talking and then helped him set up."

The wellspring of Spooner's enthusiastic recollection →



is not simply a brush with rock superstardom. Rather, it epitomises his extraordinary appetite for just about everything that comes of being alive. As a young man, he too was a musician. "I played in bands in the West Midlands," he recalls. "Once you're hooked, you're hooked – I still have a few guitars now, and play regularly, just for myself." And then comes the essence of the story about Hendrix: "Can you imagine what it was like then, with all those great bands and new music? It was just fantastic. It was like a revolution; young people had choice, for the first time."

Today, Spooner is a man whose life has been admirably well lived. He is also the first artist to be given all three floors of Penzance's much-respected Cornwall Contemporary gallery, in a show starting on Valentine's Day entitled *Ignition; Past, Present, Future*. That the gallery's director, Sarah Brittain, should put such faith in one artist is as understandable as it is deserved: Spooner is, without question, an artist with real pedigree, a man of tireless creativity with a national and international reputation.

He is also an artist with integrity. "Art is everything," says Spooner. "It's about making for the sake of making, the process of creation. It's not about 15 minutes of fame. It's not about the artist being more important than the work. It's not about figuration or abstraction. It's about giving yourself over to what you do."

What Spooner does – and has done all his life, in one way or another – is to throw his unlimited energy and childlike fervour into making things. His oeuvre thus embraces mixed media paintings (acrylic and what is often intriguingly billed as 'studio

debris'), sculpture large and small and ceramics. Much of what Spooner creates is embellished, multilayered, multifaceted, as if no one idea can ever be complete without the beginnings of another. The effect tends to the naïve but eludes classification. What is consistently true, though, is that everything he paints or makes is provocative, arresting and allusive.

Spooner did not leave school with the ambition of becoming an artist. Initially, he worked for his father as a bricklayer, until a chance meeting in his early twenties with a gallery owner in Leek called Harry Smith. "Harry gave me some work helping him hang exhibitions, but I'd begun to paint and after a while he saw my work. He liked it and offered me a show." If that was a lucky break, more was to come: the show was filmed and broadcast by the BBC. One thing led to another and Spooner, at that stage untrained in art, was offered a place to study art at Staffordshire Polytechnic.

By then Spooner had already met his wife, Pat. Indeed, the couple were next-door neighbours in rural Staffordshire. Their son, John, now lives and works in Hamburg, but for many years worked with his father in a business set up after art college.

"I didn't like the politics of art," says Spooner, of his time at Staffordshire Poly. "I just wanted to make things, to create. I didn't want to bow down to galleries."

So despite the success of his show with Harry Smith, Spooner moved into antiques and interior design, setting up what became a very successful business. He employed 36 people at one stage, importing and exporting antiques all around the world. But

throughout, he kept painting, and he kept making things. "I'd work on the business by day, and the art by night," he says. "It was an obsession."

The obsession led to recognition. From 1980 to 1985, Spooner showed at Gallery Country West, in San Francisco; between 1992 and 1999, he was a regular at Gallery Five O'Clock in Lausanne, Switzerland. His work showed in a number of other prestigious galleries; not only that, it was bought by some Hollywood A-listers (whom Spooner modestly declines to name) and commissioned for a number of superyachts. Soon enough, working exclusively as an artist was viable. The catalyst for complete change came with a move to Cornwall in 1999.

"I loved Cornwall ever since I was a young man, when I used to visit on holidays," says Spooner. "Pat and I would come here often too. Eventually the time was right to wind up the antiques business, live a quieter life and settle in Cornwall. We chose West Penwith because we both love its ancient quality, its beaches and open spaces. We haven't been back to Staffordshire in 14 years."

But if stepping away from commercial work was akin to "the lifting of a burden", Spooner's life in Cornwall could not be said to be dull. Alongside the task of converting the old chapel in Crows-an-Wra came a series of shows with Joseph Clarke's Goldfish Gallery. Spooner's reputation grew and grew – even as he managed to inflict damage on himself in the course of his work.

"I've set myself on fire a few times, and I've also smashed up

my foot when a large sculpture of a man fell on it," he says, as ever with a chuckle. So badly did he break his foot that he was confined to bed for some time, but in typical fashion Spooner turned this into an opportunity, throwing himself as much as ever into his work. "Painting is very healing," he says. "When you're involved in something so intense you don't think of pain. It's a magical thing."

To view Spooner's work – whether his paintings, or the sculptures and ceramics hewn in his studio (or, in his words, his "fermentation chamber") – is to meet much that is magical. It is also to meet with the living embodiment of the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo's *raison d'être*: "I paint my own reality. The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to, and I paint whatever passes through my head without any other consideration."

But perhaps most magical of all, to meet Ken Spooner is to hear a man say: "I've had no time for being a tormented artist; I can't sleep for ideas. I've had a brilliant life. I've loved every minute of it. It's been such a wonderful adventure." 🎨

Ignition; Past, Present, Future by Ken Spooner shows at Cornwall Contemporary from February 14 to March 10. The show is accompanied by the launch of a book, also called *Ignition*. Cornwall Contemporary is at 1 Parade Street, Queens Square, Penzance, Cornwall, TR18 4BU. Tel 01736 874749, or visit www.cornwallcontemporary.com