Liam Spencer: Painting from Life
at Salford Museum and Art Gallery
Reviewed by Mark Iddon March 2011

The retrospective exhibition of the artist Liam Spencer now on at the Salford Museum and Art Gallery, is a wonderful opportunity to see a range of vibrant impressionistic painting of views which will be familiar to many people living around Manchester and Salford.

The exhibition has been at the Rochdale Touchstones Gallery for the last four months and will be moving to Oldham in June. The collection is of his work, over the last 20 years or so, and features his Manchester paintings, and work from visits to Andaluci, Beijing, Istanbul and New York. There are many paintings from his private collection (earlier in his career), and key works on loan from private collectors along with new work including views of Chapel Street, Blackfriars, Salford Cathedral, Kings Head in Salford, and the Bridgewater Canal at Worsley.

On entering the gallery there are two similar views of Salford Quays, one from 2000, with The Lowry Theatre and Imperial War Museum prominent with a fading industrial backdrop, alongside a recent (2011) view where the above buildings sit beside the rising new Media City building complex with a civilised canal side walkway. The first was painted for an opening exhibition at The Lowry Theatre which brought Liam to the attention of a wider audience as a Manchester artist. Although he would tend to refrain from commissioned work, he was selected to produce paintings of the City of Manchester Stadium for the Commonwealth games in 2002 and the distinctive style of Liam's work was used in the marketing of the event. Although important in establishing Liam's status as an artist, they do not feature in this collection and the work shown is of a quality that there is no void where this work should have been.

Liam is actually from Burnley, a town in which he still has a strong affinity, but graduated from Manchester Polytechnic (now Metropolitan University) in the 1980's. After graduating Liam decided not to make the move to London where it was assumed you needed to go to gain recognition as an artist but stayed in Manchester to make a go of it. This is reminiscent of the Anthony Wilson / Factory Records refusal to get on that gravy train and start something here and he joined the Manchester Artists' Studio Association.

Liam cites the painters Albert Marquet and Tom Watt, amongst others, as early influences in his work and took to painting in oils outdoors 'en plein air'. This presented him with some restrictions in carrying materials, mixing colours and a constantly changing light source. He

made a ‘pochade’ portable paint box and with a two hour slot to capture the essence of the view with a limited colour pallet without getting caught up with the detail of his reference view. Now he tends to use a camera and collages several adjacent images together to achieve a panoramic view. It was a camera that produced pictures with a panoramic view, which was popular a few years ago for a short time, which led to him thinking that paintings need not be restricted to the conventional rectangle which led the way to the creation of the impressive Salford Quays views as described above.

From his days of being a student, Liam realised that the subject of a painting did not have to be glamorous but sought to bring to life the views that may initially be ordinary are transformed with the careful and considerate attention to bring about the balance of colour, light and composition of a Liam Spencer painting. Whilst not bound to incorporating detail, the paintings are certainly not a sanitised view of the city with no hint at removing the obtrusive telegraph poles, street signs, lamp post and traffic lights which clutter our cities alongside the iconic landmarks. These can be seen in many of his paintings including The Peveril of The Peak, and The Britons Protection pubs.

Some of the paintings feature a lurid blue sky, which many Mancunians will note is not

ubiquitous view, but that is the artist's prerogative and there are many paintings with dusk or night time views which reflect his interest in trying to capture the mood of his subject in different lighting conditions.

Other work in this exhibition range include views from the window of his first studio in Granby Row, to views of the Mancunian Way from his studio at Hanover Mill, near Piccadilly Station but no longer exists, to visits to New York (2003), Beijing (2006) and Istanbul (2008). I thought it interesting that people are included in his trips abroad, when many of the paintings are absent of the people, and was able to ask him at a recent Q&A, he replied that it was just down to people staying still for longer in the warmer climate. I also wanted to know if he intentionally removed the dirty, grimy surface of our industrial city to reveal an inner beauty, but he said that it was just the conditions and light on the day. Maybe, but it would have been a conscious decision to paint a particular view on any given day. More recently Liam has moved his studio to the Rossendale Valley near to where he now lives and his work now contains rural views including a snowy scene of Bonfire Hill, Hollingworth Lake and the Touchstones gallery in Rochdale feature alongside his urban landscapes to demonstrate new facets to the diversity of this artists work. After living in the city for many years, Liam now has a greater appreciation of the Lancashire landscapes similar to those in which he grew up.

I was just a bit disappointed in the dim lighting at The Salford Museum Art Gallery with virtually negligible natural lighting. It also seemed that the gallery was too small for this quantity of work and it was distracting as the pieces are competing for attention.

Apart from the above points, this is a great collection of work by an artist whose passion for his work shines through and will serve to provide a historical record as he captures the views of an urban fabric that has seen many changes over recent years and no doubt will change in forthcoming years. He has obviously been busy in recent months leading up to this exhibition and it his refreshing to see his new paintings of Salford, revealing a vibrancy that supports Liam

Spencer’s status as a distinctive contemporary artist.

Born in 1964 in Burnley, Lancashire; Liam Spencer has, over the last 20 years or so, become one of the North West’s most successful and popular artists. Based for many years at Manchester Artists’ Studio Association (MASA) after his degree at Manchester Polytechnic, Spencer came to particular prominence in 2000 with a solo exhibition, ‘Urban Panoramas’, at The Lowry, Salford Quays. His urban landscapes struck a chord with the public, enabling them to see familiar scenes afresh.

The exhibition is on from 26 March to 3 July 2011.