

# TILLOU FINE ART

Energized in America

By Cahir O'Doherty

Raised in the north of England, the son of Irish immigrants, the artist John Spinks had a particularly memorable introduction to his own creativity: when he was a boy his mother often asked him to describe the shapes he saw in the clouds. It was, he realized years later, an invitation to look critically, to appraise the world around him, and it helped to train his eye.

"It was a request to use my imagination -- so it was an epiphany for me that I never forgot," he said. "Both she and my father encouraged me to look closely at life, to begin to appreciate it aesthetically, and to see how much of it was actually miraculous. Many Irish people have an agrarian wisdom, a basic respect for the seasons -- and how harsh they can be -- and so they also learn a respect for the big picture."

Take a subway ride on the A train to the first stop in Brooklyn and you'll find yourself in the area where he comes to work these days, an area that has recently -- and quite coincidentally -- become the vibrant heart of the New York art world. Within the space of just one year the formerly derelict neighborhood called DUMBO (Down Under The Manhattan Bridge Overpass) has become a thriving artistic and cultural center replete with galleries, coffee shops, office tenants and retailers.

It's here that Spinks located his studio, but several years before the current boom, on the seventh floor of a vast warehouse overlooking the East River; and if the neighborhood in which he works has become fashionable in the interim, he pays it little attention. He came here to work, and he'll remind you of the fact with an unaffected candor that has kept faith with his parents and his hometown.

As a young graduate in the 1970s he taught English and drama in the UK, quickly becoming head of his department. But his free-spirited ways, then and now, he realized, mitigated against the possibility of creating his own school within the college.

"I didn't fit the mold," he said. "I was passionate about teaching because I believed that it could actually change things, but this was just as Margaret Thatcher was coming to power in Britain. You could see which way the wind was blowing culturally and politically. The educational resources were being clipped. So I started thinking about making a move abroad. America has an adolescent energy that lends itself to reinvention, so that's where I decided I would go."

He began to show his work here for the first time 10 years ago, and since that time he has sold paintings to both corporate and private collectors. (Throughout the 1990s his work has been shown in the U.S. and in Europe).

"Art is like any faith. I once had a vocation to become a monk, and now I'm an artist, and both are essentially conduits for the big questions."

JOHN SPINKS