

about the modesty of it all, financially. "Everything I bought then was on the drip." (It wasn't until 1997 that he sold his home-improvement business and was able to become a big hitter and buy for cash.)

But aesthetically he was aiming high from the start. "After Lowry, the next best painter I wanted to look at was Edward Burra."

Though they bought together, Cherryl credits

Frank with being the more adventurous. She led, but he then took them where her more conservative taste would not have. Edward Burra is a case in point.

Frank is voluble about Burra, "the uncategorisable English surrealist, utterly individual. After Stanley Spencer I think Burra is the next great British artist. You know his water colours are more vibrant than other artists' oils... He saw life in



rue passion: Cohen's eal love is for 20th-entury art like Edward surra's 'Striptease, larlem', left, and, bove, Stanley spencer's 'Christ reaching at Cookham legatta: Conversation setween Punts'

Burra loved rendering what people do. In Striptease, Harlem, a Burra in Frank's collection, the waiter balancing his tray is as central to the painting, as much part of the entertainment, as the stripper.

And here, I come to see, is part of the secret of his collection and the passions that feed it. The art he cares for does not sever any connections with the world he once inhabited.

"I like individuals, I like people," he tells me, as we look at Stanley Spencer's Christ Preaching at Cookham Regatta: Conversation Between Punts. That wonderful painting, here on Frank and Cherryl's wall! "I can be as relaxed with locals in the pub as with hedge-fund guys," he goes on. "Francis Bacon felt more comfortable with working-class people. Lucian Freud, too... I'm a very ordinary person at the end of the day."

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When he last showed me his recent acquisitions, six or seven years ago, they were primarily works by Young British Artists, fripperies and whimsicalities of minimalism, as many of them seemed to me, that did not merit the love both he and Cherryl lavished on them. When I note the paint and figuration that dominate his collection one, he doesn't beat about the bush. "I went off the rails," he says, without apology or embarrassment. In the excitement of the passing moment, didn't everybody else, after all, go off the rails?

"In the beginning I went for Modern British," he says.
"They were my real passion. The Stanley Spencers, the Lowrys, the William Robertses, the Burras. But there was no enthusiasm for them. A lot of the work was in private collections where you couldn't see it. The artists themselves were dead. There were no shows, no razzamatazz. So," he shrugs, "I went into Contemporary. The artists were living. There was an excitement. There was an excitement. There was an excitement. There was an inveterate, infectious laugher. "Yeah. The buzz was there. And I wanted to be a part of it."

"So what made you change back?"

"The whole world has gone Contemporary mad.

There are too many artists or would-be artists out there. Everybody's mail-shotting me, telling me about the latest sensation. I wanted to steady the boat and go back to my

roots. I felt that the artists I liked were under-scrutinised and the market for them was undervalued – an area of wonderful artists that weren't getting enough notice. Here were serious artists being ignored while kids who were barely out of art college... look, it was also ridiculous, overpriced and overvalued."

He isn't out of the

in the quiet domesticity of Wilmslow, but it's here, in his sheds, that you take the full measure of his influence. He takes me around, just the tiniest bit amazed himself by what he's achieved, pulling out a Hoyland and an Alan Davie, pointing to the crated Collishaws and Tracey Emin, Farhad Moshiri, Takashi Murakami, and yes, an Ai Weiwei. "Every country in the world I'm bringing art in from," he says, surveying it all, like Cortez.

But he is too self-deprecating to make a conqueror. "It's like an extension of my old business," he laughs. "All my Home Improvement sites were in sheds on industrial estates. So it's not difficult for me to show art here – it's no different from what I always did. Different product, yes. Instead of wallpaper, it's contemporary art."

He isn't out of the
Contemporary altogether.
He stores the bulk of his
collection in what he is
happy to call "sheds" on an
industrial estate just outside
Wolverhampton. Here, in a
space big enough to park a
jumbo jet, he puts on shows
of young or international
artists he has just bought.
In recent months he has
mounted exhibitions of
modern Indian and Chinese
art. It's hard not to feel that
he is making a political
point with these exhibitions,
showing the British provincial
galleries what they're missing.
It's one thing to see a
selection of what he owns

Frank and Cherryl Cohen at Chatsworth' runs from March 19 to June 10. Info: chatsworth.org

