

Exhibitions

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 Dave, 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."

• Frank and Cheryl Cohen at Chatsworth, runs from March 19 to June 10. Info: chatsworth.org



True passion: Cohen's real love is for 20th-century art like Edward Burra's *Striptease*, Harten, left, and, above, Stanley Spencer's *Christ Preaching at Cookham Regatta: Conversation Between Punks*

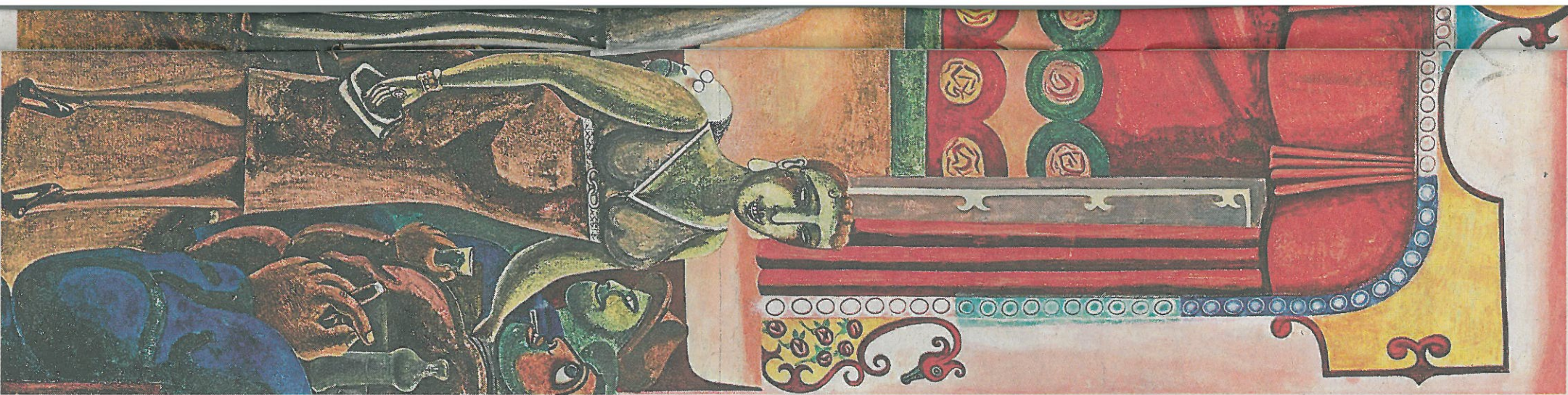
the raw. He paints the streets, how I grew up, my mentality," Burra loved rendering what people do. In *Striptease*, Harten, a Burra in Frank's collection, the waiter balancing his tray is as central to the painting, as much part of the entertainment, as the stripper.

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 Punks*. That wonderful painting, here on Frank and Cheryl'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."

And that unabashed ordinariness in the contemplation of art describes the spirit in which he has always collected. "Have you ever bought anything you didn't like?" I ask him, wondering what part speculation has played in his buying. "No," he answers firmly. "I couldn't bring myself to it."

When he last showed me his recent acquisitions, six or seven years ago, they were primarily works by Young British Artists, frumpies and whimsicalities of minimalism, as many of them seemed to me, that did not merit the love both he and Cheryl lavished on them. When I note the paint and figuration that dominate his collection now, 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?



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, Cheryl credits

'The world has gone art mad. There are now too many artists out there'

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



TURNER INSPIRED IN THE LIGHT OF CLAUDE

THE
NATIONAL
GALLERY

14 MARCH – 5 JUNE 2012

Book now: 0844 847 2409
www.nationalgallery.org.uk

CLASSIC ART

Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Academy Hearing in Coals by Night* (detail), 1835. Image courtesy of the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Widener Collection 1942.9.86.