



cords. After two years of treatment, which left him unable to take solid food, he became a full-time painter and established his style and themes.

He was a story-teller, often featuring Bert, an elderly, round-shouldered character in cap and braces. Bert was physically based on Bunt's father, while representing us, or Bunt as he might become, and often accompanied by his dog. Bunt wanted us to imagine the dog as ours, and to name it.

He often wrote descriptive short verses on the backs of the pictures. There was melancholy, too. The more one looks at these naive-seeming characters, the more subtle and expressive they become.

Clockwise from left: Tribute to Stanley Spencer, Gary Bunt, 2021; Swan Upping at Cookham, Stanley Spencer, 1919; Down the Garden Path, Gary Bunt, 2025



EXHIBITIONS

HUON MALLALIEU

SPENCER AND BUNT: WHAT A DREAM

Stanley Spencer Gallery,
Cookham, Berkshire,
6th November to 21st March

When this exhibition was proposed to artist Gary Bunt, he exclaimed, 'What a dream' – giving it the title. He died aged 67 in July 2025, but had time to complete enough new work for the show to go ahead.

There are 20 paintings and sculptures by Bunt and 15 by Spencer, notably the remarkable *Swan Upping at Cookham*, lent by the Tate. That is partnered by Bunt's equally remarkable 2021 *Tribute to Stanley Spencer* – the view as if seen from the older painter's window.

The two are very well-paired. Like Christopher Wood and Winifred

Nicholson, the self-taught Bunt (born 1957) referred to Spencer, who died in 1959, as an inspiration.

Despite the apparent naivety of their styles, both were thoroughly sophisticated artists. And both were obsessed, as Bunt put it, with 'God, Christ and painting'. Spencer would surely also have agreed with him that God has a sense of humour.

Bunt's father was a building-contracts manager and his mother worked on Kentish farms. He began as a bricklayer until a sideline as a rock guitarist took him into wild living and drugs. Painting was a passion from childhood.

And then, at 41, as his first show was opening, he was hit by cancer of the vocal

In the 1920s, a *Times* critic wrote of a Spencer *Resurrection* that it was 'as if a Pre-Raphaelite had shaken hands with a Cubist'. A Surrealist might have been more accurate.

Both Spencer and Bunt are part of another longer English tradition – Ruralism, which links naive painters such as John Miles of Northleach (1781-1841) and his depictions of Adam in the Garden of Eden to the 1970s Brotherhood, by way of Samuel Palmer and the Ancients. 