

January 3, section  
'Visual Arts,' p. S.05

## O'Donnell captures nature in paintings

**S**hots of light streak across the canvas. Branches divide. Seed pods explode into new growth. When Hugh O'Donnell depicts nature, he doesn't imagine its beauty from a safe remove. He immerses himself in it.

His large-scale paintings and drawings capture the energy that propels the universe to life, the unceasing activity lurking within forests and ponds and beings of every size.

"Hugh O'Donnell: Paintings and Drawings 1992-2002," at Boston University's 808 Gallery through Feb. 2, fills this cavernous exhibition space with a rare vitality. Abstractions and near-abstractions ap-

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pear to pulse and throb, as paint hurtles across canvas and paper in an echo of processes often invisible to the naked eye.

Dylan Thomas turned the rhythm of this movement into poetry, in such works as "The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower." For O'Donnell, discovering Thomas' language resonated strongly with what the painter was doing visually. In his artworks, which bear titles derived from Thomas' poetry, the insistent, instinctive surges that animate nature take the form of bold gestures in paint, not words.

Giant sprouts, as dark as black but rich with hidden colors, dance over layered blues and whites in "The Seed That Makes a Forest." With their sperm-like shape and willful movement in every direction, they embody a generative principle writ large. "From the Cloudy Bases of the Breath" whispers instead. In this small oil-on-paper

piece, leafy shapes float in front of faint green arcs, half-buried under a chalky veil.

Things emerge and decay in this glimpse of an ongoing cycle. O'Donnell keeps his images specific enough to suggest actual moments, and vague enough to encompass the eons preceding and following his chosen subjects.

"When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world," the naturalist John Muir wrote a century ago. A similar philosophy has inspired O'Donnell's vivid emblems of organic activity.

A mesh of red strands twists and snakes upon a dark ground in "A Weather in the Quarter of the Veins," a 4-foot-square painting of a fragment that could be microscopic or celestial in size. The ambiguity — common to O'Donnell's works — hints at the correspondence between events at every level of existence, from the cellular to the cosmic.

At the same time, the vigorous, all-over quality of his images suggests the physical involvement of the artist as an integral part of the creative process. Internal and external become inextricably bound in the coursing channels of paint.

The London-born artist, who now divides his time between Boston and rural Connecticut, found himself captivated by the motion of his body as he swam in the waters of Lake Waramaug. This literal immersion led him to investigate other facets of the natural world from the inside.

Standing in the midst of his paintings, the artist explained, "I'm looking at a bush. I think, 'How does it do that?' I'd like to do something about branching. I'd like to see where it goes. It would be about branching, filling space and movement."

Surrounded by his many painterly versions of branching, O'Donnell wondered out loud, "How do we get the feeling that we're part of the infinite? How do you make something that others can open up?"

In "Tumbling through the Spun Slime," a collision of frenzied lines captures not only the appearance of elements converging, but also the sensation of proceeding through this tangled environment. Slowly, what looked at first like chaos assumes some order, and the threads of colored static soften into calligraphy.

It takes time, however, for such a shift in perception to occur — just as it takes time for nature's transformations to unfold. By incorporating the fourth dimension in his works, O'Donnell further animates the painted surface.

Change is imminent, in the form of pods on the brink of bursting, or light breaking through a thicket of green strokes or multiple panels of oil on paper coalescing into a single image in the "Body Echo" series. Because he is willing to watch and wait and feel what is fleeting, the artist succeeds in harnessing flickers of eternity.

# Feeling natural

Hugh O'Donnell  
dives into  
nature's swirl  
of activity



**LIFE FORCES:** 'The Seed That Makes a Forest' (2002), right, and 'Body Echo' (1992), below, frame a decade of work by Hugh O'Donnell being shown at Boston University's 808 Gallery through Feb. 2.



**BOSTON**  
**Herald**

Joanne Silver Boston Herald January 3, 2003