

In search of essence: The art of Hugh O'Donnell

By Brian Fitzgerald

*"When I make an image, I am growing something."
— Hugh O'Donnell, 1997*

Because so many of the paintings in Hugh O'Donnell's latest exhibition focus on the growth dynamics of plants, one would assume that he has plenty of leafy vegetation in his third-floor studio in the College

Pollock. If Pollock had painted peapods, leeches, and leaves, perhaps they would look something like O'Donnell's creations.

An abstract artist who has taken nature as his theme — *evanescent* critic Doer Ashton writes that he paints images "that are abstracted from nature" — O'Donnell has won audiences on both sides of the Atlantic, boasting on the New York City arts scene with a much-

like is "implacable and cool in the autumn light," he writes. He sees Waramang as Thomas saw Walden: "the earth's eye."

To find the location that proved to be the formative influence on O'Donnell's work, however, one must go across the world and back a quarter-century, to the Kyoto City University of Arts, where he studied from 1974 to 1976 on a scholarship sponsored by the Japan-



Hugh O'Donnell advises Winchester High School student Halley Murray at the 808 Gallery in a daylong workshop on December 7. School from Boston, Brookline, Chelsea, Everett, Lexington, Woburn, and Winchester participated in the *Growing Things* workshop series. Photo by Kaimon Zeleny

of Fine Arts. It must be a virtual greenhouse.

"It isn't actually," says the CFA professor. In fact, not counting the plants he draws and paints on his canvases, the room is surprisingly free of verdure. "I like nature to be outside, in the garden," he says. "When I'm in the studio, it's just me."

When O'Donnell is ready to create, he does it alone, accompanied only by memories of nature. But when he starts painting, welcome to the jungle, as these memories overwhelm the British — now American — painter. In turn, he translates the colorful visions into art in larger-than-life-size depictions that engulf the viewer. Indeed, immersion is an overriding theme in this 10-year retrospective. One can't help but feel almost a part of the extreme close-ups of plants rendered on a scale reminiscent of the megaworks of Jackson

hailed American debut at the Guggenheim Museum in 1980, where his work is still exhibited. After 20 years of living in the United States and more than a decade in the foothills of the Berkshires in Connecticut, O'Donnell is putting on his first solo exhibition in Boston — *Paintings and Drawings, 1992-2002. Selections from the Green Age Series and The Body Echo Project*, which will run at BU's 808 Gallery, 808 Commonwealth Ave., through February 2.

Influences from Kyoto to Connecticut

Where exactly is all the greenery that inspires O'Donnell? The source is bucolic Washington, Conn. Since coming to BU in 1997, he has divided his time between Boston and his house in Connecticut, near picturesque 95-acre Lake Waramang, a place that continues to have an impression on him. The

me government. It was there that he delved into the works of the country's 16th- and 17th-century Momoyama period. "I saw these monumental environmental paintings," says the tall, lanky artist. "I was struck that the imagery was based pretty much on nature, imagery that got people to look at trees, flowers, and particular moments in nature not just from an aesthetic point of view, but from a symbolic point of view as well. They were painted on huge screens, and they were symbolic of moral issues and spiritual issues. I hadn't seen that point of view so much in the West."

For example, the blowing grasses in O'Donnell's 2002 oil painting *TU the Golden Weather Breaks* and the pods in *The Seed That Makes a Forest*, another oil painting from 2002, feel infused with the styles of the East. He was influenced by the understated simplicity of the famous pinewood screens by Momoyama painter Hasegawa Tohaku (1539-1610), and both artists have a reverence for the vitality of nature. O'Donnell's images give the impression of being alive: the pods appear ready to germinate. And his paintings are certainly monumental: both are nearly eight feet by eight feet.

Teaching as a learning experience

In conjunction with the exhibition, O'Donnell has also been busy holding workshops for Boston area high school students entitled *Growing Things*. The students' images, also on display at the gallery, depict studies of growth structures found in common fruits and vegetables. "They were able to use materials that they normally don't get to use in regular high school art programs," he says. "They usually don't have that much access to oil paint. I feel that they should experience what it's like to make large, fully committed pieces, using the same ma-



The Seed That Makes a Forest, 2002. Oil on canvas, 94" x 94".

terials that the best artists are using. Also, in school they normally don't get an adequate amount of time to devote to their art in 45-minute classes. When they get the chance to work for a full day, or three days, they experience something that they never have experienced before."

Judith Simpson, a CFA associate professor of art and chairman of the art education department at the college's school of visual arts, says that a student's time working in a gallery setting, "surrounded by his own work, is a unique and exciting educational concept." She adds that the workshops also were as a period of "shared pedagogy, where students and teacher learn from each other."

O'Donnell agrees. He says that spending nine-hour days with these students invariably helps his artistic endeavors. "You teach what

you want to learn," he says. "I want to learn how to access the growth dynamics in nature, and not simply copy images, so I tell the students to borrow from a quality of a piece of fruit and make something of their own." That is exactly how O'Donnell works in the studio. "I want a tree or bush to literally be my trainer," he says. "I want to practice the rhetorical structure that I see, rather than to copy it. Rather than try to do a reproduction of an image, I want to take a quality of it and access that quality, and make a freely expressive image of my own."

Hugh O'Donnell will give a talk at the 808 Gallery on Tuesday, January 21, at 1 p.m. For more information on the exhibition, see Calendar, page 4, visit www.bu.edu/ART, or call 617-353-3124.



The Things of Light, 2002. Oil on canvas, 94" x 94".