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808 Gallery at Boston University/Boston

HUGH O'DONNELL: PAINTINGS AND
DRAWINGS 1992-2002
SELECTIONS FROM THE GREEN AGE SERIES
AND THE BODY ECHO PROJECT

On each side of this enormous gallery hangs one of two separate bodies of work that corresponds to the wedding of outer and inner life forces—nature and the human body.

Most of the paintings in *The Green Age Series* are aggressive in size—single canvases up to 8 feet square, with diptychs stretched out even wider. Their poetic titles are taken from the verse of Dylan Thomas, most notably his early work “The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower.” The color in a painting such as *Tumbling Through the Spun Slime* creates its own poetry, taking nature’s most intense hues and whirling them in a calligraphic dance of space and motion. O’Donnell proclaims that his relationship with nature is participatory rather than observational, and the works themselves reveal that bond: Light generates the motion of growth, and arcs anticipate transformation.

The *Body Echo Project* makes more of a drawing statement. Formed by the piecing together of a 3-foot-square paper module and realized in a limited palette of black, green, and red, the works “echo” the body’s kinesthetic movement and inner processes. The paper ground shows through the charcoal-and-oil stick gestures. Through repetition and mutation of drawn coils, tangled tubes, and frond-like passages from one module to another, pattern pulses to the heart’s rhythm and replicates dividing cells.

O’Donnell’s impetus for all the works was physical and playful: the acts of swimming and paying attention to his child’s identification with nature. Taking that experience into the studio requires the kind of risk and abandon—even wildness—that gives his work vitality and great presence. The standards thus set are so convincingly conveyed that when O’Donnell falls short, as happens only occasionally (usually in the more representational works), the pulse is stilled. One has the sense that the artist is watching his hand instead of allowing it to move with the breath of the cosmos.

—Meredith Fife Day



At the 808 Gallery Boston University/Boston.
Hugh O'Donnell— That Moves the Water Through
the Rocks, oil on canvas, 96 x 78 inches, 1996