

# WORLDS IN TRANSITION

Karen Kunc and Darren Waterston chase storms of the spirit

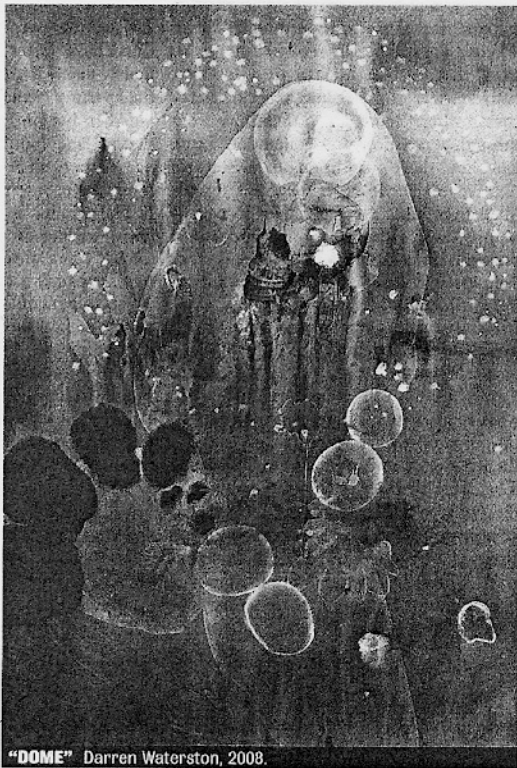
BY DOUGLAS MAX UTTER

**W**IND INSCRIBES SPIRIT IN THE AIR, writing quick testaments on the skin as it passes, caressing and prophesying. In the Greek of the New Testament the word *pneuma* means both wind and spirit — or ghost. Breath and gesture, specific and personal movements through molecules, are the soul of any human thing, the touch of human passage still legible amidst the rush and torque of universal gyres. Anyone who has ever kissed against a tree in a hard rain knows what a brush stroke really means.

When San Francisco painter and print-maker Darren Waterston traveled to Italy in 2005 for an artist's residency in the region of Umbria where the ancient town of Assisi is located, he became immersed in the history and legends of St. Francis. Waterston is known internationally for oil on panel, semi-abstract landscapes, inspired in part by classical Japanese *Nanga* painting. His is a world infused with myth and cosmology, but also the phantasmagoric modern scientific visual vocabulary of X-ray and microphotography. His pigments swirl and eddy in long, rhythmic dances, giving birth across the expanses of his surfaces to heavy planetary concentrations, often dropped like stones in a more fluid realm of transparent, mutating form. His manner, at once process-derived and psychologically abstract, may be uniquely well-suited to transpose St. Francis' Buddhist-like appreciation of the natural world into a suite of 13 prints, on display at William Scheele's Kokoon Gallery through July 5. These were conceived as the visual half of a collaborative exhibition project titled *The Flowering (The Fourfold Sense)*. Santa Cruz art critic and theorist Tyrus Miller composed a series of broadsides to accompany Waterston's visionary hand-colored fine-art giclee prints, originally exhibited at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon.

Several of Waterston's spirit-blown, water-borne images reveal an indistinct but instantly recognizable human form. "Receiving," for instance, features a white-robed, angelic-looking being in the lower left corner of a dark blue expanse. Opposite, a large hand seems to form out of the darkness, with a sort of patch ripped down to a deeper night just at the heel

of the palm. The glowingly robed, transfigured St. Francis turns his head away from piercing rays that emanate from beyond God's fingers. As he raises his left hand defensively, another rent in the fabric of space appears. Though there is no explicit text, Waterston here depicts in sublimated form the moment when the monk received the



"DOME" Darren Waterston, 2008.

stigmata or wounds of Christ.

Other prints in the series are less narrative. "Umbria" sets the scene for revelation, like a peal of distant thunder. The very simple composition consists of a vast, uncanny, balloon-like object, floating hugely above a dim, Leonardo-like landscape. Bruise-colored in muted red and umber tones, the semi-transparent visionary object is a gibbous mandala composed of concentric scarf-like washes. A spatter of starry splashes shines through.

In an essay written for a beautiful little book that also features these prints, Tyrus Miller explains that his parable-like broad-

## IN SEARCH OF THE MIRACULOUS

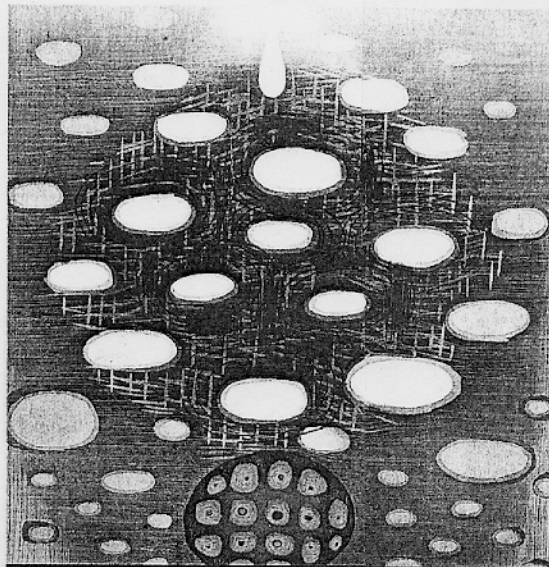
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sides and Waterston's images are intended to dissolve the legends of St. Francis in the crucible of modernity, distilling the sharp essence of a 12th-century spiritual brew in a climate less hospitable to the miraculous or the humble. This chemical or alchemical trope shades into another dominant theme — the late blindness of St. Francis and the eye disease he contracted in the last years of his life, one symptom of which was a constant weeping of milky fluid. It may be that the saint contracted trachoma in the Near East during a peace mission to the

heavy feel as it rises in three sections from a small reddish-toned circle. Long passages of curling, wave-like gray depict a thick beard of rain, flowing down from a curl of white and blue cloud at the top. Schematic in concept and related to strong Native American design motifs, Kunc's impact here and in other works sustains deeply persuasive linear rhythms and also has something of a figurative, anthropomorphic bent. One can sense the presence of Western visionary artists like William Blake, Charles Burchfield or William Sommer, persisting with rhetorical power just beneath the surface of Kunc's imagery.

"Dividing the Skies" could be a map of some kind, drawn on hide or carved in stone. Its overall hourglass formation describes a world divided into sky and land, connected

by a narrow neck. Concentric circles orbit and then puddle in a single blue eye toward the center of the upper half, while earth-green lines form around an empty shape like a dry lake at the bottom. In the narrow space between the sky and the earth a hot tube outlined in orange conducts some kind of energy between these two very different regions. In the background a series of horizontal stripes seems like dry corn rows, or possibly an allusion to the



"MORPHIC ORDER" Karen Kunc, 2008.

Sultan Melek-el-Kamel in 1219. But whatever the disease, weeping and the idea of seeing the natural world as if in a state of partial dissolution, often served in medieval accounts of St. Francis' life as a metaphor for mercy and redemption, and for a purer vision thought to succeed anatomical sight. Thus "Umbria" takes on even greater resonance: The floating object resembles a sultan's turban and also a gigantic eye, damaged by star-spots and bloated with as-yet unshed tears: an entity pregnant with the overflow of redemption.

Nebraska artist Karen Kunc's dramatic abstract woodblock prints also blend spiritual subject matter with the force and movement of natural occurrences. In a range of mid-sized colored works on shaped paper completed at various times between 1992 and the present, Kunc explores connections between the heavens and the earth. At almost 4-feet tall, "Thunderhead" (1992) has a looming, top-

American flag; there is also a blank square in the upper left corner, as if the stars and sky had been emptied out.

Whatever political or environmental allusions may inspire some of Kunc's images, the overall tone of her woodcuts is one of ecstatic animism, full of visual notes and tones that sing of the unities and inevitable divisions of nature. By contrast, a postmodern, corrosive pessimism colors the exquisitely nuanced images and writings of Waterston and Miller. Commenting on Rainer Maria Rilke's famous 1908 poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo," Miller writes, "We alone are responsible for filling the gap between a cold, dead block of stone in a Parisian museum and the living picture of a God." The task of art, to honestly, lovingly portray the incompleteness of the world, shares its burden with the viewer, whose understanding and response condense around the art object like a cloud.

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