

Left, *Painting Name*, oil on canvas, 00" x 00"  
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## The Texture of Life

written by Brett Anningson

The art of Donna J Hall seeks to capture the imagination in vivid abstraction, while simultaneously capturing something of the defining feature of our human character. Her visual landscapes explore the marks left by elements eroding the surfaces and depths of our planet. The resulting patterns and textures are reflected in the archetypal symbols and motifs that appear in prehistoric art and artifacts. These forms are truly universal in nature and part of the visual language we use in defining our cultures, creating our myths and recreating our environment. By that token, it is easy to get lost in her paintings.

Donna is actually driven to create by a complex interaction of ideas and events. She is inspired by the visual richness of the natural landscape, her

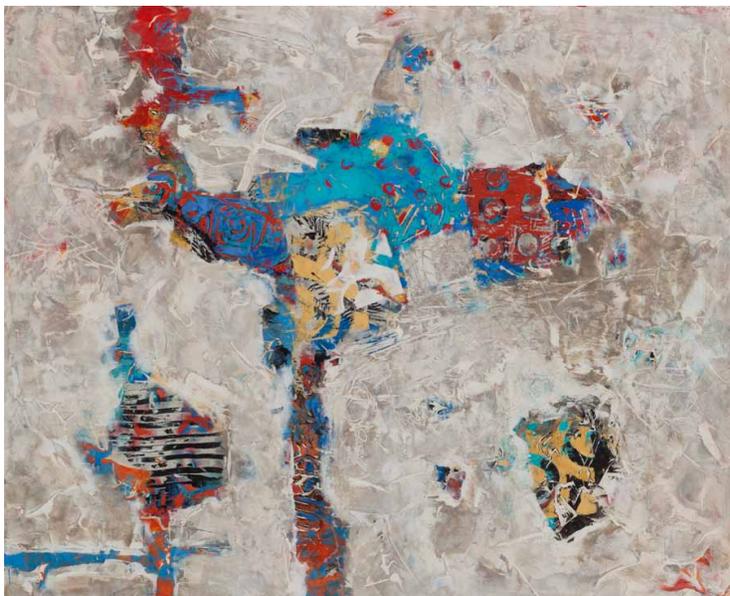
love of travel and the revealing experience of other cultures. She sees these textured slices of history as a type of archaeological dig, even the graffiti-covered walls of urban landscapes tell a story.

Donna often begins her paintings with a complex surface of marks in acrylic and plaster, collaged papers and textured materials. She continues layering with more paint and plaster – scraping and masking the surface to reveal glimpses of other layers. The painting becomes a history of its own development. She sees her process paralleling the natural forces of time that build, erode and decay. Donna's hope is that the resulting paintings will be elusive, yet suggestive of the interaction between natural and man-made environments.

Born in 1952 in North Bay, Ontario, her family moved to Ottawa in 1961, where she attended public school and blossomed in terms of artistic talent. The painting and drawing courses in high school helped solidify that, and in 1971 Donna moved to Toronto to attend the Ontario College of Art. After completing the two-year ground



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course, she left college and started working as a darkroom technician, going on to apprentice in photo retouching. This led to a freelance career and her own studio.

"I always assumed I would go into sciences after High School," Donna admits. "I really did not know what I wanted to do, and that is why I decided to explore beyond Ottawa. Toronto was an amazing city with a diversity of cultures and a lot of opportunities. I ended up with a range of jobs to pay my way through college, everything from waitress to darkroom technician. It was those skills that managed to get me a job in the retouching department of a large commercial photo studio. Four years later, I set up my own studio in downtown Toronto... painting was relegated to the status of hobby."

In 1990 she married photographer Ron Watts, who shared her love of travel and imagery. On one of their trips through the Southern States, in 1992, they visited Santa Fe for the first time. Inspired by the southwestern geography, iconography and

vibrant art scene, Donna returned to her painting practice that had been interrupted while working full time. "We were both ready for a change," explains Donna, "We each had successful but very busy professional careers in Toronto and we knew we wanted something else."

#### **Deciding to Unplug**

The trip to Santa Fe had changed everything. The rich colours, the beautiful landscape, the artistic nature of the community – it practically screamed out a calling to both of them. While there, Donna began to paint again and the idea took hold that perhaps it was time for a change. The traditional photo business was evolving rapidly; revolutionized by technology, computer photo manipulation programs and new media, which was quickly making conventional retouching obsolete.

All these technological changes helped Donna decide that hands-on, hand-made artistic works were the most important to her. She wanted to focus on the original use of media in textural,





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non-reproducible ways, creating something uniquely her own.

With all this swirling in their subconscious, Donna and Ron left Toronto behind for the west coast. Their move was all about starting over, about remaking "self". In 2000, they settled down on Salt Spring Island and built their dream of a living / working studio in the midst of a very welcoming and creative community.

"I thought I would return to painting with a vision and sense of direction," Donna says, "but I soon found that I really had so much to learn. I applied myself to advancing my art skills by exploring different styles and approaches, taking workshops, learning and observing and doing, and mostly experimenting with different media. During this time, I also took a multimedia course in Vancouver with Margaretha Bootsma and was introduced to encaustic (hot wax). Although I mostly work in acrylic, encaustic continues to influence the visual look of depth and translucency I try to achieve – it continues to

lead to new directions in my work."

Travel and adventure, learning new things and creating new works all go hand-in-hand to create the artistic process behind Donna's work. The west coast of Canada offers hiking, camping, kayaking – and vistas worthy of any painting. From eroded rock formations and wave-battered beaches littered with driftwood, to the colourful shells and marine life washed up on shore. Donna sees the tidal basins filled with life, and is suddenly aware of the interconnection of all life and how we are shaped by our environment. That we are part of a community of species. It is these natural patterns resulting from erosive forces that often find their way into her pieces.

Travel is a huge influence. In 2006, Ron and Donna took a trip to the Greek Islands and she was blown away by the history and textures she found there. "You could see the excavations revealing the walls and mosaic floors of ancient cities, ancient homes. There were broken bricks and shards of pottery used in the mortar to fill



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the new walls. What I began to think about was how they were rebuilding using the remnants of the former cultures – appropriating the remnants. But everywhere there was beauty, peeling plaster walls revealing the colour and paintings of the previous inhabitants. These layers of cracked and peeling plaster showed the passing of time – the capturing of history."

Three years later, they went to Turkey, where Donna was never without a camera. She shot detail and reference photos rather than travel photos. Shots of the carved rock formations in Cappadocia, different walls and bricks and religious symbols, covered over or newly revealed. Donna saw the beauty in the textures she encountered, a world new and different again from what she had already experienced.

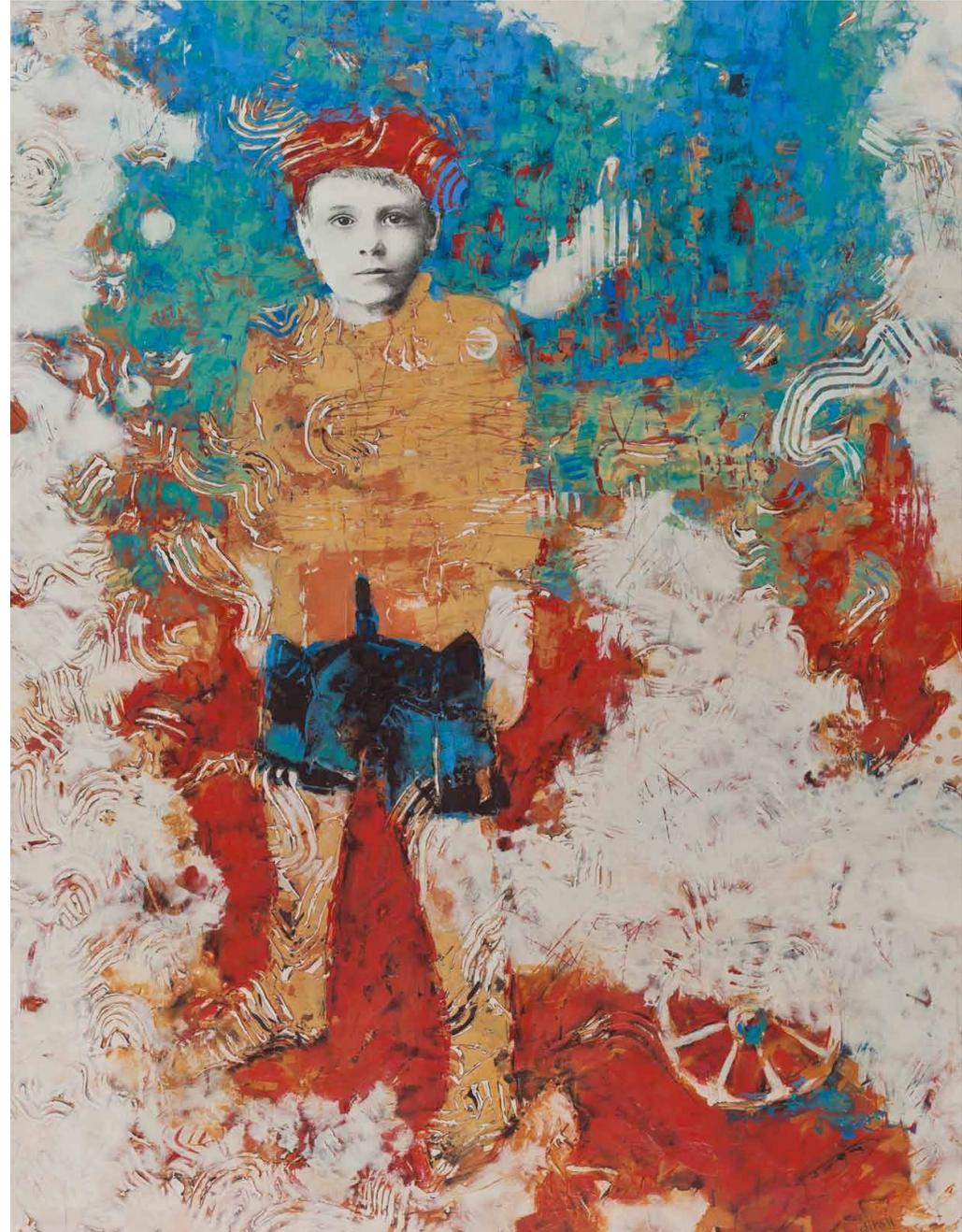
"My travels really are an important source of inspiration for me," she explains. "They are new experiences filled with chance encounters and the excitement of exploration. You witness the adaptability of other cultures, the assimilation of

crafts and techniques throughout the generations and the commonality that each culture has within itself. It is a chance to see the world in a new way."

#### **Assembling the Pattern**

Although Donna was reluctant to embrace the new technology in her photo studio, she now sees Photoshop tools as useful in terms of planning and visualizing. The effects are different than what you get with paint and brushes, so playing with the images can lead to approaches and ideas she might not otherwise have stumbled upon. That is where her process often begins. She will start work on a board and then copy and import it into Photoshop where she can manipulate it in different ways without the risk of ruining the work.

"Though my art practice over the years has ranged from representation to abstraction," Donna says, "I continue to return to the visual richness and complex textures of the natural landscape and graffiti-covered walls of urban cityscapes, as sources for inspiration.





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I am fascinated by the patterns formed on weathered surfaces, archaeological digs that reveal the evidence of varied cultures and the fossilized traces of vanished lives. Also, my love of travel and the experience of other places provides much of the raw material that inspires my paintings.

"I usually begin working intuitively and without preconception, creating a complex surface of marks in acrylic and plaster, sometimes including prepared papers and found materials. I continue layering, sanding and scraping, balancing randomness and chance against the compulsion to organize and resolve. There is always excitement and trepidation at the start of a new piece and I feel compelled to see where those challenges might take me."

To see more of her signature works, check out Donna J Hall at [www.donnajhall.com](http://www.donnajhall.com)

Donna J Hall is represented by:

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