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**Darren Waterston at the Hoffman Gallery,
Lewis and Clark College, Portland, Oregon**

By Sue Taylor

In addition to a selection of Darren Waterston's ambitious abstract paintings, this exhibition introduced "The Flowering (The Fourfold Sense)," 2007, a suite of prints and broadsides that the artist created with writer and literary critic Tyrus Miller. The paintings, such as *Threshold* or *Gravity* (both 2006), present mysterious spaces haunted by translucent emanations, floating orbs or clouds of mist. Adept at a myriad of fluid effects, Waterston is a virtuosic colorist as well, enlivening the palest mauve and powder-blue fogs with passages of burning orange or hot pink. In these apocalyptic dreams, he imagines flashing, otherworldly realms at the brink of consciousness. Waterston is steeped in Eastern and Western artistic traditions and, like Kandinsky and Kupka before him, puts abstraction in the service of a visionary project.

In Italy in 2005, Waterston became interested in the cult of another visionary – Saint Francis of Assisi (1181-1226). "The Flowering" alludes to the 14th century hagiography, *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*, that inspired the print collaboration with Miller. Known for his voluntary poverty and brotherly love, Francis also exemplifies spiritual passion and mortification of the body. The stigmata marked him as a living avatar of the Savior he worshipped. Waterston's 13 hand-colored digital images and Miller's 13 printed texts – the Christlike Francis had 12 disciples – constitute a Blakean meditation on mystical experience, but in this case fully embodied. The texts feature vividly sensuous descriptions of Franciscan ordeals and miraculous cures, as the devoted band of believers wander preaching through the countryside.

Waterston's prints inject figurative motifs into his otherwise abstract vocabulary. Clustered black wings in *Seraph* conjure the angel that delivered the stigmata; rocks and trees in *Mount Verna* suggest the legendary site where the miracle occurred; the skull in *Body* and *Dome* repeats the *memento mori* upon which Francis meditated. His deprivations and empathic tears are said to have driven the saint almost blind, while intensifying his inner vision, a concept exquisitely articulated in *Umbria* and *Eye as Moon*, where Waterston treats the organs of sight as heavenly lights. Most poignant is *Wounds*, whose title reveals that the gorgeous pink, red and warm-brown abstraction is in fact an evocation of festering lacerations of the skin. Indeed the saint did not shrink from the sores of lepers and warmly embraced those afflicted by the disease. It may be well that "The Flowering" offers the medieval mystic, a model of male bonding and compassion in the midst of contagion, as the perfect patron of San Francisco, Waterston's home.