
“ALL I WANT TO DO IS PAINT!”



3T Vakil: *Pluvialis spectratum*, 2024. Acrylics on Board, 20 x 44 inches

A Conversation between Gerard Houghton and 3T Vakil

...Paint the summit of a mountain surrounded by valleys, and on its sides depict the surface soil sliding away together with the rooted bushes, exposing great swathes of underlying rock...

Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519)

Gerard Houghton: 3T, I’ve been familiar with your paintings ever since you worked as an artist in London in the mid 90s. With hindsight, I can now see how your earlier work points towards some more recent paintings I’ve seen. But your latest series, *Spandrel Spaces*, comes as a complete revelation. Tell me something of how it all came about.

3T Vakil: In September of 2022 — just five years after the devastation wreaked by Hurricane *Maria*— Hurricane *Fiona* slammed into the southern coast of Puerto Rico, unleashing a deluge that ravaged the entire island. In the mountains of Patillas, where I’m based at Las Casas de la Selva, it rained non-stop for five weeks. That downpour was totally destructive, causing giant landslides that overwhelmed the electricity grid and ripped bridges and roads from the banks of swollen rivers. The main drive to our hilltop homestead collapsed, cutting off access not only to the surrounding forests but to the whole outside world. Cascading waters tore soil and vegetation off the slopes, leaving blood-red scars across the landscape, bringing catastrophe to our rainforest re-forestation project. In the aftermath, we looked out over an apocalyptic scene of landslides with red-clay rivers gushing down the mountains sweeping everything before them. Trapped on our unstable mountain summit, the abruptly exposed views of the distant coastline revealed the enormity of the disaster stretching everywhere in between.

GH: I remember talking to you when you'd returned to Santa Fe, post-*Maria* in 2018, physically and mentally exhausted and badly needing rest and time to recover.

3T: That much didn't change; after *Fiona*, I was again exhausted, and still shocked. But this time, there was something about the awesome power of the natural world that struck me differently, causing a profound internal shift. Yes! I was in shock, but I realised, this time, it was more a state of *awe* — in the absolute sense of that word. It's hard to describe, but a new realm of awareness seemed to spring open, altering my perception of reality. Rather than suffering

“Yet, even after long days outside, each night, all I wanted to do was paint — as though my very life depended on it!”

from *trauma* — I began to feel the indescribable grandeur of *awe-ma*, an experience unlike anything I'd felt before. I was filled with physical energy and in that I found both hope and the courage to resist this latest setback. In the depths of despair, I discovered something that enabled me to move forward, as if I'd stepped through a portal into a world where I could tap into the

transformative power of *awe*. Overcome by the intense beauty and complexity of the world around me, I sensed a connection to something much greater still.



Lignum laceratum, 2024. Acrylics on Board, 20 x 44”

GAH: What an amazing story! Did this *awakening* have any affect on your painting?

3T: During those weeks of rain, I hunkered down inside the small library, praying that my little shelter wouldn't slide down the mountainside along with everything else. I spent endless hours drawing and painting on paper, grappling with and trying to express my feelings, alone and feeling helplessly trapped in an unstable and dangerous universe. I've never shown that work — nor what came out of *Maria* either — but titles like *Premonition*, *Everything is Broken*, and *I Became a Landslide* suggest clues as to how I was feeling. Purely as a means of protection, I concentrated intensely on the physical act of painting and drawing: focussing on brain-to-hand coordination, practising strokes and gestures, repeatedly making marks in paint and ink on paper, all the while listening to the sound of torrential rain battering the land all around. After two weeks without power, I was extremely lucky to catch the electricity linesmen on the main road outside the project land, and managed to convince them to mend the broken line on our main drive. To my immense relief, they succeeded, freeing me from the generator I'd only been using to keep the fridge, with its diminishing food supplies, going. Many people in that region didn't get power back for another three weeks. Despite the still torrential rain, I was no longer completely isolated, but had internet contact with the world outside again.

The rest of 2023 and much of 2024 was spent clearing fallen trees, rebuilding trails, concentrating on erosion control, and generally cleaning up and rebuilding after the hurricane. Yet, even after long days outside, each night, all I wanted to do was paint — as though my very life depended on it.

GAH: You mentioned painting and drawing on paper. Yet these new panel pieces are much larger. Did you use those as sketches to be scaled up in size afterwards?

3T: No! Each painting I do is a unique piece. The fact that I painted this new series on panels happened almost by accident. In my limited studio space, I paint freely using rapid gestures, and paint and ink soon get splashed around. So, to keep things clean, I bought a white PVC panel as a drawing board. It worked fine, and I was producing lots of drawings on paper. One evening, working away as usual, I made an extravagant gesture with a large brush and noticed that the result, extending onto the white board beneath, was exactly the effect I'd been looking for on the paper. Eureka! I knew, instantly, I'd found a new medium. Then, once I began painting directly onto the boards, I discovered other advantages too. They're large, yet affordable, have interesting surface qualities and, given the humidity of the rainforest environment, they don't go mouldy over time. I have to admit I was quietly overjoyed.



3T Vakil: *Chartreusea malachitensis*, 2024. Acrylics on Board, 20 x 44 inches

GH: So, how many paintings are there in this new *Spandrel Spaces* series?

3T: Between April of 2024 (when I made that discovery) and January of 2025, I produced 71 paintings, 30 of which are in this latest exhibition.

GH: That's an extraordinary output in under a year. For a start, at 8 square feet per painting, you've covered over 560 square feet in many layers of paint! Another quick mental calculation shows you completing a new work every 4 days! How can you create unique pieces at such a rate?

3T: Well, life at Las Casas has its own relentless rhythms. People are always coming and going, so there's someone demanding attention all day long. I had a group of 23 lads recently who stayed over three days. I needed to prepare for their arrival, guide them around the forest, and make sure their

time here was meaningful, fun and safe. Those are tasks that require full-on mind and body engagement. Then, there's the badly scarred forest still recovering from *Fiona*, roads and trails constantly needing repair, and the clearing of ditches and drains to prevent further erosion. Did I mention restoring the homestead, rebuilding nurseries and tool-sheds, while hopefully making things safer than before, because we know that the next "weather event" may be stronger again. I'm responsible for all this, and I feel it constantly. So, for practical reasons alone, I can only paint at night, once things calm down.

GH: But with your busy daily schedule, where do you find the energy to paint?

3T: It's not about *energy* in the usual sense. It's the presence of a relentless muse, full of creativity. I've delighted in inviting in and nurturing this fantastical muse. She doesn't knock politely either; she leans on me insistently, all day long, unyielding. Even when I'm exhausted after a demanding day, she turns up, tugging at the corners of consciousness, whispering about colors and forms to try out, always pushing me to paint. After dark, when the world quiets down there's a tipping point where the outside, practical world fades and the internal, creative one takes over. It's a palpable sensation, like someone pulling back a curtain. I know she's there; and I show up at the board. Then, for just a few hours, I become the willing recipient of a universal download. I know that sounds strange, but how else to describe what happens? It's like surfing a gigantic ocean wave where I undergo this...I don't know the right word — let's call it "process" — the usual result of which is another one of these paintings.



3T Vakil: *Caelothrix umbrialis*, 2024. Acrylics on Board, 20 x 44 inches

GH: Hold on a minute! You mean you finish an entire painting in just one evening?

3T: Exactly! I finish most paintings I begin in a single session, and for this series, usually within 3 to 5 hours. That's not to say they're rushed; it's more that the energy is so concentrated and focused that I have to ride each wave gracefully to its final state. It's intense — like being in a current you can't step out of until the thing passes. I enter in and give everything I've got, but then I'm totally spent. That's partly why I don't paint every evening. First of all, the external conditions have to be just right; I need to be finished with all people and tasks. Internally, however, I also need to align my focus, because I clearly shouldn't enter that space unless I have the energy to follow all the way through to resolution. I trust myself to know when the body-mind is primed, because I honor the muse by not wasting her time. It's

more like capturing a live voltage than just crafting something. That's also the reason I don't paint every evening, because the kind of energy required isn't always available. Some nights are simply about bearing the weight of the day at Las Casas, and so are dedicated to recovery and recalibration.



3T Vakil: *Floraclysma refugea*, 2024. Acrylics on Board, 20 x 44 inches

in it, because I am totally free. If I were to die in that moment, that would be absolutely fine by me!

GH: I need to understand better what you mean when you describe this “process” as “taking over.”

3T: A painting unfolds in different stages, beginning with an intuitive rush — wet, fast, and unfiltered. But at this stage, the only thing I direct is whether the piece will be of curves and circles, say, or of lines and angles

GH: Given your hectic schedule, I'm still struggling to imagine how you've kept this discipline going so long.

3T: Well, it's not so much about discipline, more like a necessary, though exhilarating, form of survival. Limited by my small studio space, I usually only work on one painting at a time, but ideas for new pieces percolate through all the time. Even at night, when I close my eyes and try to fall asleep, my brain begins concocting color sequences for the next one...and the next. Everything is rehearsed inside my head: palette knives chosen, brushes selected, even the sequence for adding colors or different gestures to apply or remove paint, they're all imaginatively mapped out beforehand. Yet, people don't believe me when I say things just come flowing out.

GH: Are you saying you dream the paintings up, and then transfer everything “mapped out in advance” directly onto the canvas/board?

3T: Maybe dream-mapping plays some part, initially at least. I might have fallen asleep visualizing palette knife gestures on the surface of the panel, but by the time the actual knife, loaded with paint, hits the surface, those ideas will have transformed. That's when, the process takes over and when that happens, the hand leads while the mind observes. Sometimes, I think I'm conjuring up a canopy of leaves, but what arrives is something subterranean — rhizomes and roots, perhaps; so not a dawn but a dark descent emerges. I follow along behind, because I trust the painting to tell me what it is about, not the other way around. It's almost an ecstatic process, and I know when I'm immersed

in it, because I am totally free. If I were to die in that moment, that would be absolutely fine by me!

full of tension and fracture. That initial decision sets an overall tone, but from thereon, the painting takes over, and I let the interplay of board, knife, and brush, provoke something into being. The first layers are all about mood and movement, and I'm half expecting (hoping for!) the kinds of accidents that reveal more than intentions ever can. Next comes tension — as forms begin to surface, often tentatively, but sometimes with surprising force. I respond in kind, either pushing back or surrendering, echoing and shaping as I go along. Then, as the painting develops, it becomes a dialogue — of layering and scraping, defining and erasing, cutting through one moment to reveal what's hidden beneath. The final stage is pure negotiation: what stays, what disappears, what sharpens into clarity. Acrylic paint's quick drying time suits this rapid rhythm, so I must work fast, knowing exactly when to intervene and where to manipulate the surface before it sets. Then, I return to the board again, adding new medium, subtracting, letting buried forms echo through. Some remain visible: others vanish beneath sequential layers. But, they're all still there and — like a palimpsest — their haunting presence adds depth to the work's multilayered, encrusted complexity.

GH: It's not just the multifaceted complexity of the physical works; I'm also struck by the varieties of themes you present; the broad range of ideas and the fluctuating color palettes you deploy throughout the whole series. But I'm still puzzled by the series title you've chosen. Where does that come from?

3T: I called it *Spandrel Spaces* because I became increasingly aware of how much of my work sits in that in-between — the accidental, the peripheral, the evolutionary byproducts of some other primary drive. I first caught sight of this when contemplating the way I've lived and worked to date: how I've journeyed around the planet, moving from land to sea and back again, always within shifting structures, forming *ad hoc* associations, temporary, half-way houses that provide spaces ripe with ambiguity.



3T Vakil: *Sclerisecantia serrulatae*, 2024. Acrylics on Board, 20 x 44 inches

Later, I recognised something similar within my own paintings. Maybe it goes much deeper still. Once I became aware of it, I discovered its presence within the rainforest, where accidental encounters between different life-forms — everything driven by chaotic chance — yield marvellous results. Yet, it's precisely in those inter-zones, where, for example, the tree meets the ground that something potent and unexpected emerges. The overarching branches create shade, leaf-litter accumulates and newly dropped seeds take root within the span of that protected space. That's a spandrel space. It soon becomes obvious that we should all pay more attention to these sheltered, interstitial zones that develop in the cracks and crevices

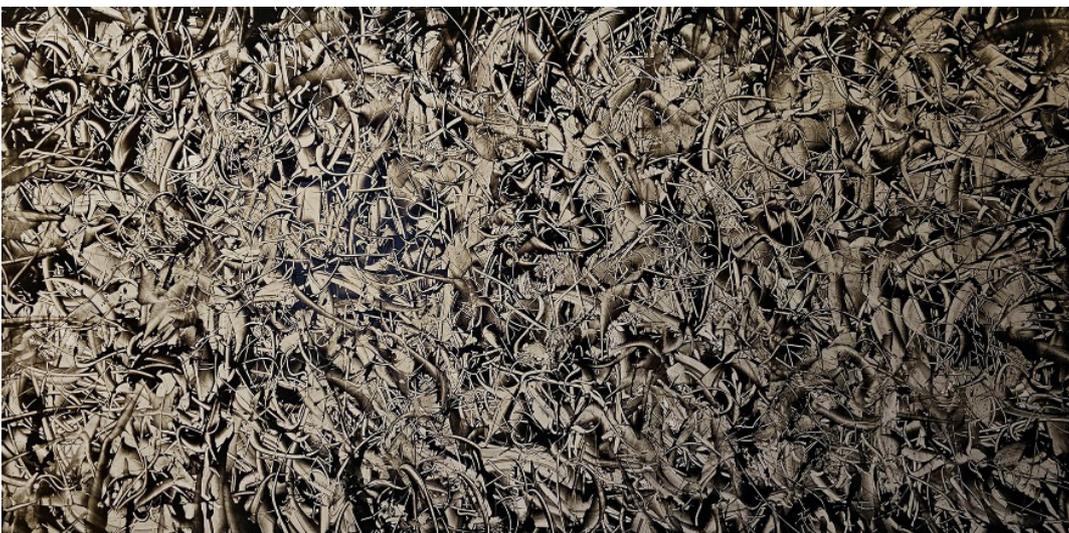
that exist between things, because these are important arenas where the marvelous begins to manifest. I should add that *Spandrel Spaces* isn't a break with what I was doing previously — say in my reactions to the *Maria* event — instead it's a deepening. It simply marks a shift from reacting to the collapsed ruins that surrounded me then to paying closer attention to what happens next. These works bear witness to the surprises that emerge when you let go of fixed structures — and allow for the arrival of those unpredictable things that spring up and flower spontaneously in between.

GH: I'm very aware that you keep suggesting you only have partial agency for these works. Firstly, there's your "fantastical muse," and then paintings that "negotiate" or engage you in "dialogue." Next you're talking about "accidents" and things developing "spontaneously." Obviously, at the speed you work, conscious direction gives way to something surfacing from deeper within, like in *action painting* where more automatic responses arise, which the Surrealists claimed channel the unconscious.

3T: If you're asking me what part of my mind does all this come from, then the honest answer is, I really don't know! Maybe it's the same part that hears the forest breathe. For me, the knife, the pigments, the motion are all things I think of as instruments of a kind of listening, an attentiveness towards what's out there: to what's just happened and, more importantly still, to the latency of what might happen next. In that *immediate* interface between hand, knife, paint, and presence, something else reveals itself.

GH: Fine! Yet there's also a continuity between the paintings, as though, despite the diversity of subject matters suggested by the titles, there's a formal set of underlying similarities between works representing forest scenes, deep sea visions, and even some seeming to address consciousness itself.

3T: Obviously over time I've developed an unconscious vocabulary, or call it a *calligraphy* of visual motifs: the serpentine tendrils, the spatial drift, the unstable grounds. It's like the way hidden roots orient themselves, pushing through soil long before any shoot breaks through the surface. I've always been drawn to interconnected forms, to systems that speak of entanglement — whether they be fungal, vascular, or neural. As for the constantly re-appearing vermiform shapes, partly that's dependent on motor functions, the way my hand gestures instinctively with the palette knife. But they are also more than just botanical shapes, like leaves or climbing tendrils: they're somehow remembered forms. They map memory and desire; invisible forces reaching out in search of gradients, responsive to the presence or absence of ... warmth, water, gravity, and light. It was a significant breakthrough for me when I realized I didn't have to "anchor" anything within some known framework. The emergent forms could exist in tension with themselves, suspended in a dynamic flux. The canvases didn't need a center or even a fixed orientation; they could breathe and develop like the forest does, full of interstitial life, coming into balance with itself — and *all by itself*. In that sense, the *Spandrel Spaces* paintings, each with its quirky flourish of a binomial botanical title, mirror those surprising architectures that emerge when you let go of fixed structures and inhabit the intervening spaces that are always opening up around you — if only you can take the time to notice them.



3T Vakil: *Umbracala sylvaticus*, 2024. Acrylics on Board, 20 x 44 inches