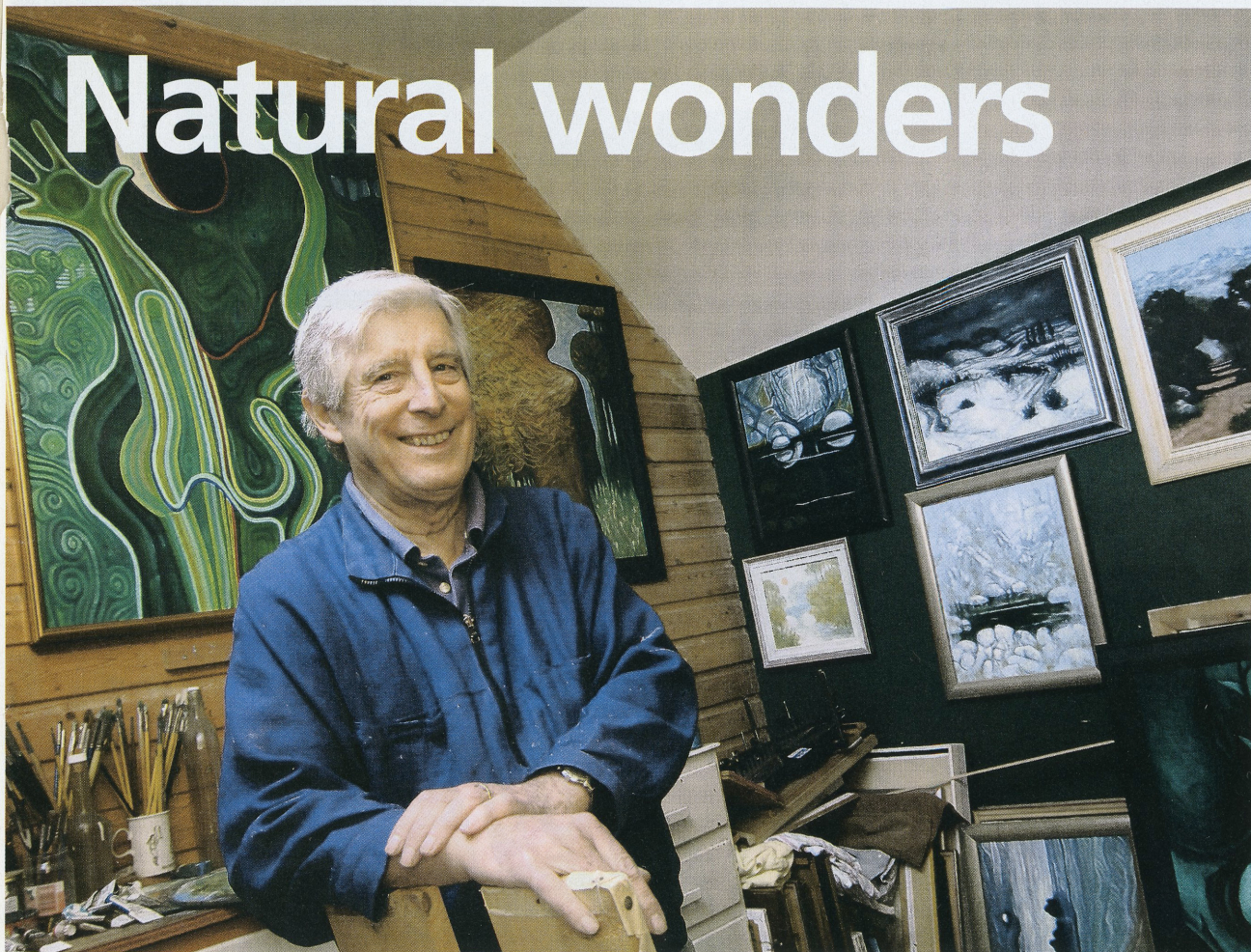


Natural wonders



Above, Brien O'Rourke in his studio. Below, *Winter*, where life hibernates underground

Tim Healey meets an artist with a passion for the symbolic drama of nature

The effigy of a man aflame, blazing torrents of brown and gold leaves, looks towards a young tree whose leaves are beginning to turn too — Brien O'Rourke's

Autumn is a striking evocation of seasonal change.

His *Winter* depicts a snowy landscape with the wood that splits prior to rotting, while fertility waits in the world underground: insect eggs; sycamore seeds — a human embryo too.

Spring Dance is a green riot with watching eyes in the veined wood. In this family of paintings, some as yet unnamed, the leaves and swelling fruits merge with emblems of human sexuality — phallus, womb and pudenda — to create scenes of mixed darkness and fecundity.

I met Brien at his Faringdon home, where paintings crowd the walls of house and studio alike. He has been painting since he was 15, and studied in the late 1940s at Salisbury School of Art.

"In those days, it was a nice little Victorian building, small and homely and unambitious. Next door was a little pub where you could get the worst beer in the South of England — very good for pickling onions. That was in the days of real ale."

In the hall of his home is the earliest surviving piece of his artwork — a sketch 'done on Basildon Bond probably' called *Between Shifts in the Picquet Hut*.

It dates back to 1950 and Brien's time in National Service, showing two soldiers

reclining on their bunks, one of them reading a book. Later he reworked the scene in oils.

"It was Easter and everyone was on leave, apart from us few squaddies who'd been in the army, I think, about two months.

"They gave us all a pick-axe handle and sent us out on patrol singly, in the dark. Every shadow had an assassin in it! I was writing a letter home during the break between shifts. We rested in this dismal place. I just looked up and there was that little scene."

In the kitchen, I was struck by his surreal *May Morning* depicting a bowler-hatted, broly-carrying man surveying figures dancing around a Maypole.

Brien is a longstanding member of the Traditional Bampton Morris Dancers. He told me that the man in the bowler represents the legendary Bampton Morrisman Arnold Woodley, and the colours of the dancers' ribbons are those of Woodley's side.

They are dancing under the moon, a recurrent theme in Brien's paintings.

"There are various motifs I'm very fond of, which have been with me since I was a teenager really. The crescent moon is one of them".

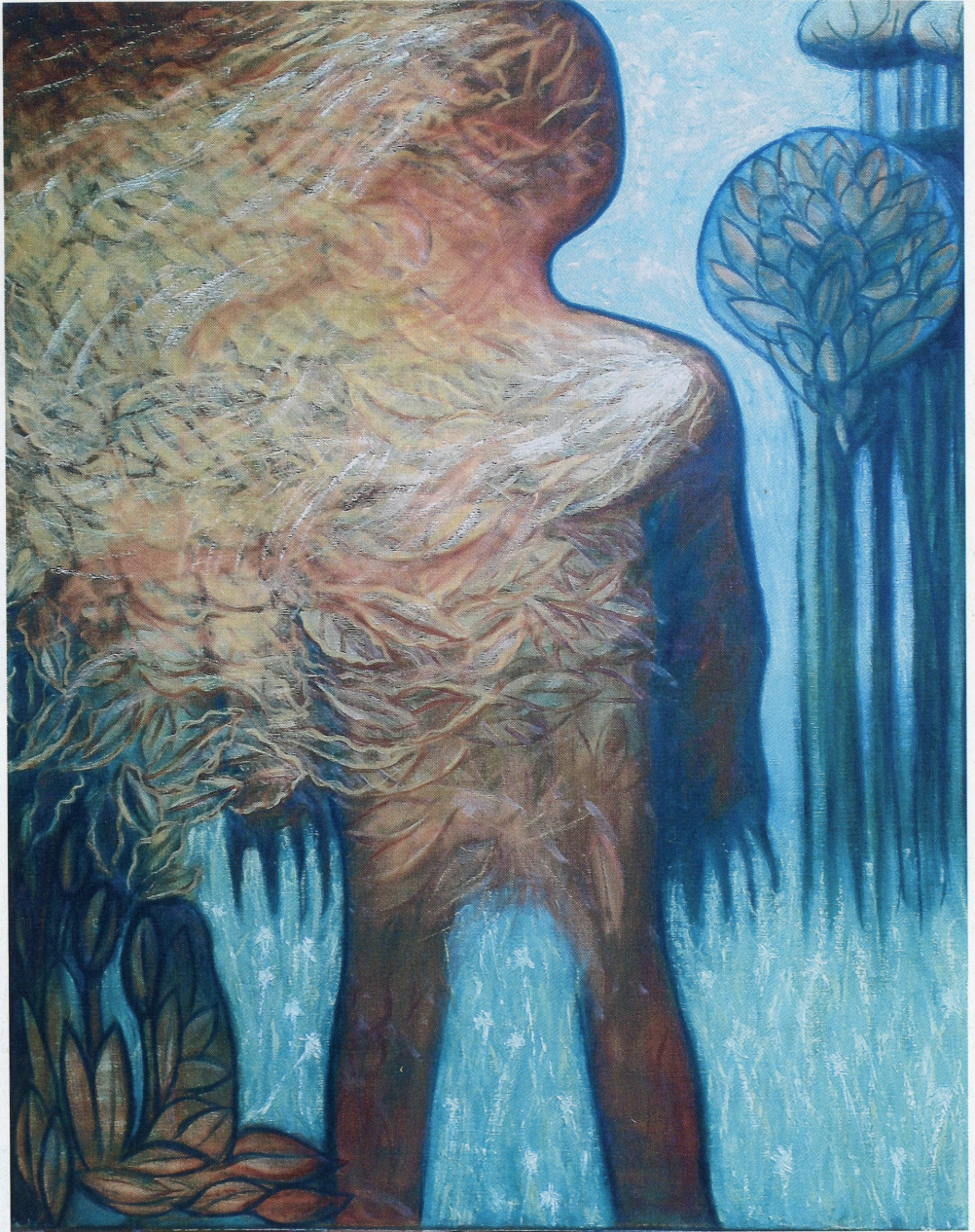
As for influences, he told me: "When I was



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The vivid *Spring Dance* and, right, the wicker man symbolises *Autumn*, when leaves turn to flame



"I've always done landscapes. I'm attracted to hills and water. And I'm currently in the middle of a serious love affair with Norway — that fantastic light at the time when the sun never quite goes below the horizon."

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about 16, I saw my first Samuel Palmer painting and I was absolutely devastated by it. I thought 'this is marvellous'. And it has stayed with me ever since.

"Oxford has a got a collection of some of the best Samuel Palmers, in the Print Room at the Ashmolean. Lovely brown and white, or sepia I suppose, with this gluey surface. Quite fantastic.

"Also, I suppose everybody at some time or other has been influenced by Cezanne, because he was such a ladder up into modernity. And I was influenced by Willem de Kooning. I liked the way he used paint — quite violent — and I went through a phase of attacking work with just a palette knife.

"They were big paintings. I would do a whole 6ft x 4ft painting, and just let the thing evolve on the canvas.

"I still work straight on to the canvas,

usually drawing in charcoal and then using thin oil paint on top of that. Then you alter as you go along, changing the balance and getting rid of things which are surplus to requirements."

Besides the symbolic nature paintings, Brien's exhibition includes many more tranquil landscapes and seascapes, especially from the bays and glaciers of New Zealand's South Island, and from the Aegean, where he showed me a quietly powerful scene depicting a sacred route down from one of the Hellenistic temples, the road passing through the deep shade of trees.

"There is a curiously flat sunlight, and the landscape is mainly very pale rock. A lot of dust breaks off the rock and you get shining footpaths.

"I've always done landscapes. I'm attracted to hills and water. And I'm currently in the middle of a serious love affair with Norway — that fantastic light at the time when the

sun never quite goes below the horizon."

Like many artists, Brien paints chiefly from feeling and lets the painting grow. As a result, finding titles for his work is a last-minute affair, as problematic as explaining them in words. Nonetheless, he was able to give some account of his inspiration for *Autumn*.

"Many, many years ago in my earlier folk days there was a ladies' clog side called the Corn Dollies and they were very creative in the way that they evolved their own step dances and knitted them into set dances.

"And they had an end-of-season hooley and asked if I would make a willow man — basically a wicker man. At the end we burnt it. It didn't burn terribly well — willow is not great for that.

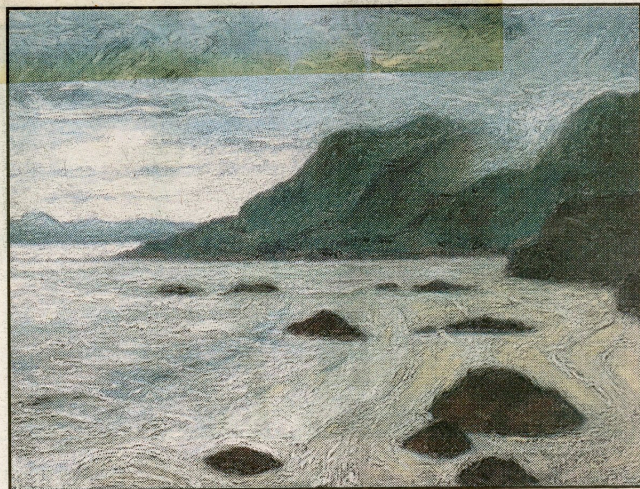
"But the memory must have remained with me. The painting expresses the theme that things are born, they live and they die. This is the end, autumn, when leaves turn to flame — and off they go."

Art

Brien O'Rourke West Ox Arts

From New Zealand to Turkey to Oxfordshire this artist captures light in its transience and radiance especially with his paintings of water in all its different manifestations. Take Brien O'Rourke's two pictures of the beach at Steward Island, New Zealand, *Ulva 1 and 2*, with their sense of isolation, or the *Path up to Rob Roy Glacier* with its frighteningly steep incline — one feels one might be washed away. And there is the threatening and darkly grey Tolkien country of Greymouth on the West Coast of South Island. All are beautifully framed by O'Rourke himself.

He sold his first painting when he was 17 and has worked as an illustrator and teacher. Sometimes accused of having too many different styles, it is rather how he handles his paint to suit his subject matter that is unique. He can layer thick, textured slabs with a knife or use light brush work, as in *Cap Blanc*, with the lighthouse perched high on



TRANSIENT LIGHT: A beach in New Zealand

the chalky hill overlooking a pale sea in this altogether more gentle, Victorian-like picture.

In a different mood the light changes from moment to moment over the dull landscape of *Faringdon Field*, while in the small, deep Mediterranean blue painting of a sun-filled Steward Island the towering tree trunks are silhouetted in the foreground.

A formidable part of the exhibition is the series on "The Green Man", the archetypal ritualistic and elemental figure based on folklore and

fairy tales. It coincides with research being done by Tim Healey on both the Green Man in Oxfordshire and the cult film *The Wicker Man*, now remade and on general release. In O'Rourke's compelling paintings he includes abstract symbols of fertility and reproduction, as in *Winter* whose soggy liquidity suggests a foetus in the womb, and from Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* he transposes vegetal forms and idea of the green woman. The glory of these later pictures is manifest in the many shades of green from vivid emerald to lime and jade.

Jan Lee

Oxford Times

3 Nov '06