

“For living water”: eco-artist painter Nicole King unveils her ecological commitment

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Eco-artist painter Nicole King, with a background in environmental engineering, launches her art book “Pour une eau vivante”. The result of a collaboration with art critic Christian Noorbergen, this beautiful work offers a unique fusion of art and science, aimed at raising awareness of environmental protection and the urgent need to act in the face of current ecological threats.



With a degree in environmental engineering and management, Nicole King worked in the oil industry and as a water and pollution expert before devoting herself entirely to art. Renowned for her deeply moving works, she uses her canvases to echo the beauty of nature while alerting us to its fragility.

The book, with 90 reproductions, explores themes such as oceans, pollution, coastlines, freshwater and climate change. This plea for living water is a celebration of water in all its forms, inviting reflection on the links between art, science and nature conservation.

After graduating in environmental engineering and management from the University of Paris VII in 1981, Nicole King criss-crossed the globe working for the oil industry (1981-1990). Then, as “Water and Pollution” expert at

WWF** international (1990-1992), she prepared the 1st Earth Summit, launched their marine program and found herself spokeswoman during the Gulf War (300 oil wells had caught fire), before turning to art.

From 1994, she studied watercolour with Martine Frébault at the Atelier d'arts appliqués in Le Vésinet, then with Hélène Legrand in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, passing on her love of fine craftsmanship (techniques of the old masters of oil painting combined with contemporary mixed techniques).

In 2021, as the only artist invited to a 35-painting solo show at the IUCN** World Conservation Congress in Marseille ("Plea for Living Water"), she became a member of the IUCN*** Education and Communication Commission.

A member of the Salon d'automne de Paris, she takes part in numerous group shows and art fairs (SA de Paris and international from 2012 to 2024, Salon national des beaux-arts at the Carrousel du Louvre from 2014 to 2018, Art Capital at the Grand Palais from 2010 to 2022...) and regularly presents solo exhibitions: in 2023, on the subject of oceans, "De l'écume aux abysses, écologie des profondeurs" (Paris 8e town hall), then on the theme of freshwater, "Eau habitée, eau menacée, eau rêvée" (cloître des Récollets in Metz), the full list of which can be found on his website.



In connection with her exhibitions, she offers conferences to share her journey and her work on the interdisciplinarity between art and science.

**World Wildlife Fund

***International Union for Conservation of Nature

About the book :

Technical specifications

23.5 x 28 cm

96 full-color pages

90 reproductions

Soft cover with flaps

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Partners

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Interview with...

What is your background?

My first emotions of nature were those of my childhood summers on a farm in Mouxy, a village near Lac du Bourget in Savoie, where I spent my childhood summers in the heart of nature, in the mountains... This farm, which I adored, was destroyed by a freeway. That was the catalyst.

After graduating from Paris VII with a degree in environmental engineering, I started working for the oil industry in 1981, travelling the globe to carry out what were then the first impact studies on offshore oil fields. The methodologies, the team (in which I was the only woman)... everything had to be created! I wanted to change things from the inside. Those were exciting but exhausting years; the oil industry is destructive not only for the environment but also for human beings.

I then worked as a water and pollution expert for WWF International from 1990 to 1992. I prepared the 1st Earth Summit and launched their marine program. As spokesperson during the Gulf War, I denounced the oil industry's laxity and failure to comply with regulations, which led to 300 oil wells being left to burn for months on end.

For health reasons, I had to leave the field. So I turned to art to raise awareness.

Since 2010, I have taken part in numerous group exhibitions and art fairs, and I regularly present solo shows (in 2023, on the oceans, "De l'écume aux abysses, écologie des profondeurs" at the Paris 8e town hall, then on freshwater, "Eau habitée, eau menacée, eau rêvée" at the Récollets cloister in Metz). In 2021, I was the only artist invited to exhibit 35 paintings at the IUCN World Conservation Congress in Marseille. Today, at the age of 65, I am continuing my artistic research, which draws on my experience as a scientist.

Who are your mentors, your cultural references?

Among the mentors of my scientific career, Professor Bernard Dussart, eminent limnologist at the CNRS, with whom I worked closely. I would also mention the Belgian botanist Paul Duvignaud, who was my professor at university. More broadly, the career and writings of pioneering American biologist and activist Rachel Carlson are a huge inspiration to me.

In artistic terms, I follow in the tradition of the great old masters, and my references are vast. If I have to name just one, it's Leonardo da Vinci, a great scientist and an immense artist who has fascinated me since childhood. The fact that a single man could master such far-flung fields - art and science - at such a brilliant level is a tremendous source of interdisciplinarity! Other artists who inspire me: Turner, Aïvasovski, Zao Wu Ki, Rauschenberg, Cremonini, Salzmänn... I would also like to mention Hélène Legrand, a naturalist painter, one of only five women to have received the distinction of Peintre de la Marine, who has been my painting master at Atelier 43 in Saint-Germain-en-Laye for over fifteen years.



Why this interest in the wild?

Ever since I was a little girl, I've been very sensitive to beauty. But today's society is no longer interested in beauty as such. For contemporary conceptual art, the only kind supported by public authorities, "beauty" is considered "old-fashioned".

In ecology, the focus is on figures and data, which are of course indispensable, but I regret that no one is talking about the beauty of living things. Sensitivity isn't emphasized enough. I'm fascinated by the beauty and richness of wild life, by the complexity of interdependencies, which we've barely begun to study and understand. We want to go back to the moon, but we'd be better off trying to understand the links between living beings. I've tried to do my best as a scientist, I've - literally - broken my back in the process, and since I can't go around the world any more, I've turned to art to express this message.

You're reincarnated as a critically endangered animal on the IUCN list, with the knowledge of what needs to be done to save your species. Which species?

The striped grouper, or Nassau grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*), in the Caribbean Sea. A victim of overfishing like all other groupers and countless other species, it has been classified as critically endangered since 2018. Its population declined by 60% between 1980 and 2016. I have painted another grouper species, the Mediterranean, in a painting entitled "The Eye of the Reef". We absolutely have to be concerned about the dramatic consequences of overfishing. When you think that 6500

Chinese industrial fishing vessels are scouring the oceans, it's terrible!



One or two of your best wildlife encounters?

Off the coast of Tierra del Fuego, in 1984, during a mission to carry out a “point zero” (a study establishing the baseline state of the environment) on the site of a future offshore oil field, I took a small motorboat to an isolated island where hardly anyone had ever set foot before. I approached some seabirds that had never seen a human being before: absolutely unfazed, they came to peck at my shoelaces without fear... I'll remember it for the rest of my life.

I also lived my dream of seeing a primary forest. In Borneo, in 1983, as part of the impact study I was carrying out in the mangroves, I travelled up the Mahakam River in East Kalimantan. It was quite a journey, but what a wonder! The forest was rustling with life, a concert of songs, swarms of insects... It was an extraordinary emotion. But it was already under attack from the Japanese timber industry, which was opening up the roads and taking the precious giant trees. Today, Borneo's primary rainforest has almost completely disappeared.



Your favorite nature spot(s)?

In Balagne, a region on the northwest coast of Corsica, there's a nature reserve, a magnificent protected area emblematic of my work: it brings together wetlands rich in biodiversity, the sea, human activity in tension with the nearby Bay of Calvi. Unfortunately, this natural area on the tourist coast is not sufficiently protected, and is being damaged by over-frequentation.

The mythical place you dream of going to?

The primary rainforest, and I've been incredibly lucky enough to go there. Otherwise, I'd dream of diving with tanks on a coral reef in the Red Sea to observe this immense wealth of marine biodiversity... while they still exist.

What equipment and techniques do you use to encounter wildlife?

In the field, I take photos and produce sketches and watercolors on paper. In the studio, I paint on canvas, using a mixed technique combining water-based paints and oils. I work exclusively from my own sketches or photos. In some of my paintings, I use the report-photo technique: the black-and-white photo is transferred to canvas to evoke anthropic activities, then the ecological gesture of painting in color allows me to integrate natural elements.

Any advice for beginners?

To progress artistically, I recommend drawing every day, practicing every day. And go and see the great masters in museums.

What are your current and future projects? Priorities?

Since 2018, I've also been developing a very important axis for me: education, using art to raise awareness of the ecological emergency thanks to Récup'Art. This involves transforming waste into artistic works. I teach art and ecology in schools and to the general public. Since 2019, I've been lucky enough to have my own workshop at the Internat d'Excellence in Marly-le-Roi: "Nicole's Eco-School" open to middle and high school students.

Finally, this year sees the birth of a major project: my first monograph will be published on June 13, 2024: "Pour une eau vivante - Plaidoyer artistique au service de l'écologie scientifique" by Editions Lelivredart (<https://www.lelivredart.com/project/king/>). This interdisciplinary book between art and science, co-written with art critic Christian Noorbergen, presents 90 of my paintings and warns of the urgent need to preserve living organisms.

To mark the publication of this book, I will be present at the Assises nationales de la Biodiversité in La Rochelle in September, with an exhibition, conference and book signing.

An initiative taken or to be taken in favor of wildlife?

That protected areas really are! The national strategy for marine and terrestrial protected areas sets a target of 30% of the country's surface area under protection. But protection on paper is useless if you can bring in industrial boats and raze everything to the ground. It's a trick! We absolutely have to set up real, strong protection zones, backed up by financial and human resources.

As a geneticist, you can bring an extinct species back to life. Which species?

A Central American frog. There are countless species, all so beautiful and colorful, but they're disappearing fast, mainly because of a disease called chytridiomycosis. In 2020, three of them (*Atelopus chiriquiensis*, *Atelopus senex*, *Craugastor myllomylon*) were declared extinct on the IUCN Red List.



Global wood shortage: Noah's Ark will be smaller than expected. There's only room for 5 species. Which species?

I find it hard to answer this question: there's no point in saving a few species in isolation, without the ecosystem they're associated with. I suggest we take an entire wetland aboard the Ark!

You win the lottery, no heirs: which conservation association(s) are you going to protect for good?

The Société nationale de la protection de la nature, (SNPN), of which I've been a member since I was a teenager and which works in particular to protect wetlands; as well as the association HOP - Halte à l'obsolescence programmée (www.halteobsolescence.org) which has been fighting against Programmed Obsolescence and for

product durability since 2015. This is a very important action because we urgently need to put an end to waste and overconsumption.

Career options: wildlife photographer, environmental scientist, head of a conservation association, or... ?

I've already made quite a few career changes along the way! Field scientist, activist artist, with teaching as a third profession, that's enough for now! But in the future, why not create an association linking art and ecology?

To conclude, you're disappearing tonight, what would you like to leave as your last message?

Read my book, it's all there! My slogan: Art and ecology, action and contemplation. As Jane Goodall says, every action counts.

Awards & Publications

Awards

2019 : Elected Sociétaire du Salon d'Automne
2018: 32nd Salon de La Rochelle, Prix d'Excellence de Marine
2016: 60th Salon des Arts (Taverny, 94), Silver Painting Prize
2015: 55th Salon des Beaux-Arts (Chatou, 78), 1st Painting Prize

Exhibitions

Solo exhibitions (from over 100 exhibitions) :

2023: Cloître des Récollets, Metz. "Eau habitée, eau menacée, eau rêvée", 50 canvases.

2023: Town Hall, Paris 8e. "De l'Ecume aux abysses, écologie des profondeurs", 100 canvases.

2022: Centre Culturel A. Malraux, Le Pecq. Au fil de l'eau, un parcours d'art et d'écologie", 60 canvases.

2021: World Conservation Congress (IUCN), Marseille, 35 canvases: "Plaidoyer pour une eau vivante", with two lectures. Subsequent appointment to the IUCN Commission on Education and Communication (CEC).

Group exhibitions:

2010-2022 : Art Capital, at the Grand Palais (Paris), Salons Dessins et Peinture à l'Eau, and Artistes Français.

2021-2022-2023: Salon de la société Versaillaise des Artistes d'Île-de-France, Versailles, 78.

2012-2024: Salon d'Automne (SA) de Paris and SA international: Luxembourg, Israel, Russia, Brazil, Spain, Japan and China...

2014-2018: SNBA (Salon National des Beaux-Arts, Carrousel du Louvre, Paris).

2015: Art! We Can (Cannes).

Publications

- Monograph "Pour une eau vivante", June 2024, éditions Lelivredart. Art et science, co-written with C. Noorbergen.
- 2 exhibition catalogs: 2019, "La Mer est ton miroir", "one woman show" - 2023, "De l'Ecume aux abysses, écologie des profondeurs".
- Le Courrier de La Nature N°339, 3 pages in the special issue on oceans (2024)
- Le Courrier de La Nature N°316 "La Poésie des objets abandonnés", photos and text by N.K. (2019)
- Some lesson to be learned from the environmental consequences of the Arabian gulf war. A WWF discussion paper, prepared at the request of the UNCED Secretariat. King-Volcy N. (1991).