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INTERVIEW WITH ARTIST NICOLE ISABELLE



Nicole Isabelle is an NYC-based artist and art educator. After a long career in contemporary dance, Nicole shifted her artistic focus to visual arts and has been painting ever since. Her most recent work has focused on her “Magic Leaf Paintings” that integrate abstract watercolor painting layered with prints of actual leaves. In late June, we sat down to chat about her art and the “Magic Leaf Paintings” that will be the focal point of the Dye and Bleach House Gallery show opening Friday, July 28.

How did the Magic Leaf Painting Series begin?

Before the Magic Leaf Paintings, I was mainly doing two different series. I was making these hyper-realistic oil paintings of the desert. Oil painting takes forever— it’s like painting with butter, a very slow process. I was also doing my homescapes™, commissioned home portraits, which can be rather meticulous. So, I’d sort of been hungering for another arm of my work that could be faster, looser, and more abstract. But just trying to make some abstract, messy art is kind of tricky if that’s not where your practice is. So that was in the background of my head. At the time, in 2018, I was also taking courses in Theta Healing meditation at this center located near the flower markets in Manhattan. The center had this amazing plant that was basically like a tree in the mediation room. One day I was looking at it and thinking, wow, those leaves are amazing. There was one that had fallen and I took it and I had the idea of doing something with it. So that is where the first magic leaf painting was born. I took that leaf home and I thought, oh okay, what if I meditated in this technique I’d been learning, and then let myself paint and experiment with the leaf in some way. So the process started that way.

Not a lot has changed in my process since then, though it has refined itself. At first, the idea and the reason I called them Magic Leaf Paintings, was because I felt that if I gather leaves from plants in different healing spaces, then these leaves would be infused with healing energy and

magic properties. People have plants in their offices, so in addition to the meditation center, I got leaves from acupuncturists, massage therapists, sound healers, and more. At first I was making the paintings just with these donated “magic” leaves and felt like the paintings made with them could be a talisman, like a healing piece of art. I gifted some of the first ones to friends who had cancer in hope that there was some kind of magic that would help in their healing. (And I still do that, I just gifted one to a friend who has MS).

Then it changed to finding leaves in the places that I visited. I went to Sedona and gathered leaves there and was interested in the idea of matching the color palette of Sedona itself in the paintings. And that kind of kept happening. I had a residency in 2019 in Gyula, Hungary, so I used a Hungarian color palette for those series. (At least one from that series will be coming with me to Connecticut.) When I go to the Catskills, I gather leaves. A friend sent me leaves from Portugal and I sent her back a painting I made with them. It’s become a way to connect with the places that I visit, and sometimes I mix them with leaves from Brooklyn. I’ve noticed now that there are a zillion kinds of leaves I can find just going on a six block walk around my Brooklyn neighborhood, and because everyone only has like a foot of cramped garden space, everything’s always spilling onto the sidewalks and it doesn’t take much to find a leaf on the ground.



What has been your journey to where you are now as a visual artist?

So for me, I always made art as a kid, but the last time I made art in any studious way was the first semester of college at 17. I took an art class thinking I would be an art major and then one conversation into that class two days later, I was like, “When are we going to get to use color because we’re just drawing pots and pans with a graphite?” And the teacher replied, “Maybe in your junior year” and I was like, forget that.

After that experience, I decided I’d be a dance major and I didn’t make any visual art from 17 to 30-something while I was in the midst of my dance career. Then in 2012, I was working with a dance company in NYC and I was creating a group piece in response to my experience living in Louisiana at the time of the BP oil spill. For the show, I created little house sculptures as props. I made these little homes from tea boxes and tampon boxes, and the Louisiana house even had little stilts. After we’d been rehearsing for awhile, the director said, “These houses are beyond props. These could be in a gallery.” And it did plant a seed in that moment, and I did start making more art again. That shift felt very refreshing because I had been in the dance world and

that holds joy but it had also been my career path so it had a real feeling of work. Art for me lacked that pressure –lacked the pressure to sort of niche yourself and fit in a box – and I really enjoyed that. It just kept growing and now I feel that it's my main mode of expression in the world.

Why do you want to do a workshop that trains other people in the magic leaf painting technique?

I've done many workshops all over the world showing people how to create artwork using the processes that I work with. People always ask me if I worry that others will profit off my innovation or "steal my style." The answer is no. I am happy to share the process and I delight in seeing the outcomes that others have working through the same steps. The process is always more important than how it turns out. I'm not worried about mimicry, it's more of an offering.

When it comes to Magic Leaf Paintings, you can make beautiful artwork anywhere in the world where you can find leaves. I like the universal nature of that. For me, especially living in the city and being a person who wishes they lived in a forest, the fact that I can source so many leaves in such an urban place that I live is wonderful. We forget in the city that nature is all around us. Also, it's a formula that works. A 5-year old or a 105-year old can always come out with something that's eye candy.

Why should people take part in the Magic Leaf Painting workshop?

I think it's fun to try something that's a little bit codified once in a while. If I gave you a bunch of materials and said, "Make something," it sort of terrifies you, but with the guidelines, it's less scary to create. After the under-painting (the abstract watercolor painting that you paint first), I'll show you how I print the leaves on top of the under-painting. I think there's something in trying a formulaic process, the constraints are actually where you can make discoveries because you don't have to worry or think along the lines of "I'm not someone who's good at drawing." You don't have to be concerned with the outcome of creating something representational or realistic. It's an open process, there's a lot of trial and error. And it has a lot of applications like figuring out how to use natural materials in artwork.

What in nature most inspires you?

Color and light. I think the particular beauty of light in the desert is why I fell in love with Death Valley. It's the most remote place you can think of, there isn't much water or vegetation. But there is a vastness once you're way out and there are otherworldly things like salt flats, dust devils, and road runners that don't even seem real. And the light, that's what does it for me. As

for color, it is really my main motivation as an artist. I think that's why I love flowers so much. I wonder at the diverse forms different plants and flowers can take, but more than the shapes it's the colors that "wow" me. I draw when I need to, but it's more of a foundational "eat your vegetables" task for me. Playing with color and selecting a color palette for a painting intuitively is truly my passion. I love the freedom to make those choices when creating a Magic Leaf Painting.

Sarah Moon is an Artist-In-Residence (Theater discipline) at EC-CHAP; Director of the Dye & Bleach House Community Gallery; and Assistant Professor of Humanities at Massachusetts Maritime Academy. Sarah can be reached at: communitygallery@ec-chap.org.