

## ART INTERVIEW ONLINE

**Nicholas Wilton:** I think it's really interesting what Art Interview Online Magazine is doing because you give access to in-depth information on artists, which normally is very difficult to find. Artists tend to work alone in their studios and it's really very helpful for them and patrons to understand the processes involved and the investments that are required to be successful in the arts.

**Art Interview:** Your initial investment was to attend the Art Center College in Pasadena and the College of Creative Studies in Santa Barbara. How did these schools compare to each other?

**Nicholas Wilton:** I felt there were talented teachers at the College of Creative Studies in Santa Barbara but there were huge gaps in the program. They were interested in purely conceptual ideas. They did not really provide a foundation in drawing, painting or color theory. It was almost as if they presumed that you would somehow figure these things out by yourself. Nothing was really taught in a way that was clear or made sense.

It takes years of hard work to learn how to paint and draw, which are crucial to making art. These basic foundations just weren't available there. So I ended up going to the Art Center and it was much more rigorous and regimented: there were a set number of years that you had to draw before you started painting.

I loved going to school and I loved experiencing the teachers, but there was so much baggage attached from the work they had done themselves. That information wasn't as useful as the principles and ideas they were teaching.

It was a lot of work in the beginning, but the hard work started paying off. In the beginning it was a bit stifling creatively, but after a few semesters, you got caught up with it and it became liberating in the end.

I learned so much technique that it was initially distracting. One can confuse technique for ideas. So you have to learn how to let go of that once it's been learned. I'm personally interested in paint, texture, surface and process. I still use a lot of the ideas and techniques I learned, but don't rely on them per se, as I did in the beginning.

**Art Interview:** How long did it take you before those concepts settled down and you began to find your own style?

**Nicholas Wilton:** I took my classes at school quite seriously. I wasn't one of the students that had a very clear idea of where he was going, but I worked hard and I tried to please all of my teachers, perhaps a little too much. When I came out of school I was skilled and I had an impressive body of work, but I didn't know where I was going.

What changed my work more than anything was that my wife and I traveled for a year around the world. I was moved by a lot of what I saw. I had a sketchbook that I used all through the trip to formulate ideas, communication principles, universal ideas and symbols that I kept seeing. Primitive work, from ancient cave drawings to Indonesian sculptures and carvings seemed very powerful to me and they have affected my work. When I came back I tried to re-interpret what I had seen with a contemporary view in painting. That was how I started settling into my style.

**Art Interview:** Did you work before you went on your trip?

**Nicholas Wilton:** Yes, we worked in New York for a year before moving back to California. I was doing illustrations for magazines and book covers, which is what I was trained in at the Art Center College. That was helpful because it provided me with money without my having to hold a second job. I was still making art, still finding my way, but I was getting paid for it. I never had a 9 to 5 job, so I was able to paint my own work, which was shown in the galleries, and I did commissions for people, as well.

**Art Interview:** Do you still do illustrating for publishers?

**Nicholas Wilton:** Occasionally, at one point I thought that I would stop illustrating entirely because my dream was always to paint for myself. Illustration is quite a different process because it's based on collaboration. But I realized that I really enjoyed making work that involved communicating ideas and found that one art form complemented the other.

**Art Interview:** Were you working as an illustrator while you were studying?

**Nicholas Wilton:** No, in school I had a highly enjoyable time just making my own work. It was harder when I got out of school, because I had to support myself, which limited how much artwork of my own I could produce. Forcing the time to paint into my life was a very difficult and slow process. I had to be really disciplined just to keep up with a pace that was productive enough to create artwork for galleries and collectives.

**Art Interview:** When was your first gallery experience?

**Nicholas Wilton:** When I started out I was showing my art in local coffee shops, furniture showrooms and various other places. I had my first solo show at the Olga Dollar Gallery in San Francisco about 15 years ago. That was probably the first real exhibition that I took part in.

**Art Interview:** And how did you manage to get into that gallery?

**Nicholas Wilton:** Well, I started going to some of the gallery walks on Thursday evenings in the Bay Area of San Francisco where I live. I didn't like a lot of what I saw in the galleries, but I was impressed with the Olga Dollar Gallery and I felt that my own work would fit in well there. I sent them slides and they called me. They sold the paintings that I brought, which led to a few more paintings and then a solo show. Had the first paintings not sold, I don't think I would have gotten very far with that gallery. After a few sales they became confident in my work and it grew from there.

**Art Interview:** Had you experienced refusals from galleries before that?

**Nicholas Wilton:** No. I was very selective from the beginning about which galleries I chose to approach. I think it is really important for artists to understand what type of work they make and who will represent it. Once you have 10 or 15 pieces of work that you really like, you need to pay attention to where you can show it. It's important to research the best galleries for your art. Once you find out who the gallery owners are, you can try to meet them without revealing yourself before making a presentation. I sent very beautiful prints to a handful of galleries that I wanted to be in. I handwrote letters and did whatever it took to let them know that they were the right place for me. That way I was able to invest the time and money into making more impressive presentations, rather than sending out mass promotional pieces to any gallery in the hope that someone would call me.

I have been showing in galleries for the past 15 years, but it was a slow process. I continued dividing my time between illustrations and fine art. But now I'm primarily working with galleries.

Often my pictures take a fairly long time to produce, so I've never been able to take on too many galleries because my process is labor-intensive, which slows the production rate down.

**Art Interview:** How long does it take you to produce a painting?

**Nicholas Wilton:** I work an average of 4 hours per session. Sometimes I'll finish a painting in that time but other times if I don't like a painting I'll work on it for weeks. I'm constantly modifying as I paint, so it's a very explorative process. I'm able to spend more time painting now, so my dead ends don't take as long to find. I still hit them, but I turn around sooner.

**Art Interview:** What average size are your paintings?

**Nicholas Wilton:** Well, I do everything from 7 feet squared to 12 inches squared. I'm doing several paintings right now that are 4 feet x 5 feet and I really like that size.

**Art Interview:** Do complex paintings take longer for you to make than ones with open space?

**Nicholas Wilton:** Well, it's interesting that you say 'open space' because I've been working with that a lot lately. I don't make time-consuming, hard paintings of bushes with 400 leaves. My work does have references to nature in it, but I keep it pretty abstract. I focus on designing an arrangement on the canvas that is balanced and has potency. The overall design comes very quickly but to make a painting really poignant and substantial it takes time. There are many layers in my work and although it may look as if a whole section is empty the space was filled previously with marks before it was painted out. Exploration of the space is a very important part of my process and it is only afterwards that I give in to the temptation to fill, paint and be reckless. I try not to think too much about what I'm doing or planning initially; once the groundwork is done I can start to see what I want to take away. Then I start editing and I remove. I'm almost better at removing than I am at adding, so I tend to add carelessly and remove carefully: this is what I believe adds poignancy to a piece. I generally remove with sanders or scraping tools; I like the physical process of working on the painting, almost as if it's a sculpture, excavating different colors and enjoying the surprises that happen along the way.

**Art Interview:** Do you work on canvas or on panel?

**Nicholas Wilton:** I work on panels of door skin mounted on stretcher bars. Layering is very important in my pieces and I use a lot of fairly rough techniques and tools in order to achieve the final image: the beginning surface needs to be strong enough to take that. The idea of history and time is important to my work and by allowing the "history" of the painting to come through it creates a substance that is richer and more honest. Mood can be expressed with something that is smooth and delicately painted next to something that's torn up and rough. Sometimes I'll spend all day trying to control a painting and then I get frustrated and lose control. The painting starts to work then, because it becomes interesting due to that contrast. So, I allow for the loss of control.

**Art Interview:** Exploration is a large part of your process. Do you begin with an idea of what you are painting or do you allow accidental surprises to guide you?

**Nicholas Wilton:** I've done both. I will sometimes begin with no idea and other times make preliminary sketches of proportions and ideas. I've found the latter to be the most successful process. When I've made detailed sketches of what I want a final piece to look like, I have found that it doesn't transfer onto a larger scale. There is a huge difference between how an image looks on a small and on a large scale. An image may look very charming when it's small, but becomes overbearing on a larger scale. Although I enjoy being diverse with size, in my

experience I have found that the only way to control a large painting is to work on it. My work isn't defined by representation, my subject matter is the process, so I am limited as to how much I can prepare beforehand.

**Art Interview:** What materials do you work with?

**Nicholas Wilton:** Right now I'm working with oil, plaster, remove, cold wax and chalk mixed in the paint to give it a thicker consistency.

**Art Interview:** How do you apply the paint?

**Nicholas Wilton:** I start with a squeegee to apply paint to the surfaces. I put down fairly thick layers of paint as an under-painting. After they dry and cure I paint on top of those surfaces with a brush. I put a lot of paint on the board and things start really happening when I start scraping through the surface to reveal the layers underneath. I have a whole array of tools, such as sandpaper, that I use to scratch and chip through the paint. I'll change a painting ten times in one session. The world of house painting has many tools. Tools to scrape baseboards, tools to take wallpaper off and tools that all leave a certain mark, or a certain signature, and these are what I use essentially. I only use the paintbrush for a third of the time and tend even then to be applying the paint in order to remove. Juxtaposing all those contrasts of thick paint, thin paint, transparent and opaque are the fundamental elements of my work. I work with both the additive and subtractive in unison, the paintbrush in one hand and the remover in the other.

**Art Interview:** You teach about process in a course called the ArtPlane Workshop. Is that correct?

**Nicholas Wilton:** Yes, I've become so interested in the creative process that I've started teaching about it in the ArtPlane Workshop: <http://www.artplaneworkshop.com/> It is a project I started when I was still in school. When people get out of school they gather their bits of experience and try to make paintings, but success rates are not very high. It's common that people will create something quite easily that is really great and then spend the next 3 weeks working on 5 paintings and not come anywhere near as close as the first one. I could always see that in my own work, but I didn't entirely understand why or how the first one could be so successful. At first I wasn't even sure if what I'd thought was good actually was, so I entered my better work into competitions and sure enough the pieces did well. Getting objectivity and achieving distance helps you to see if the work is really good and why something is strong or why it is not.

So, I began to take notes and pay attention to how I was feeling when I made images. I was interested in learning what it was in the process that made certain paintings work. Why would one work when another very similar one would clearly not be as strong? The results of my analysis are what my wife and I now teach.

A process that I actually use in my workshop is working on 10 10-inch square panels at the same time so you aren't just obsessing on one painting. This is how I work myself. It's really an exercise I developed when I got stuck. I started doing a series of small paintings and it really worked for me. I've seen the results with myself and with the students in my workshops over the years. Often when you are painting you will hit a point when it starts to get a little difficult or you start getting bored. Working in a series allows you to move on to other paintings. Talking about your emotions and paying attention to how you're feeling when you're making art is important.

**Art Interview:** How long did it take you to fully develop the style you have now?

**Nicholas Wilton:** I would say my work has matured the most in the last 5 years. When I came out of college I had learnt to paint realistically and that brought me a lot of attention. The problem was that I found people would commission me to do paintings that I wasn't interested in, paintings of their grandmothers, which was the complete opposite of the work that I was doing. As a result of this, I veered away from painting images in a photorealist style and began to start stylizing my work with my own individuality. From very early on I focussed on creating my own imagery to communicate my thoughts and ideas. I really picked up on the use of simplicity to communicate a message on my travels. The style of primitive cultures to use symbols rather than a realistic representation was a huge influence on me.

I've been in pursuit of expressing and stylizing myself, creating my own language of symbols since I finished college. In recent years it has developed a lot but I can trace some parts of my work back to school. I made an early decision to codify in order to communicate and people have recognized my work for recurring images that I've developed throughout my career. That was a real upside, having parts of my work recognizable and traceable: people would approach me and comment on recognizing what they believed to be my work just based on the style. I've avoided allowing myself to be influenced too much by other artists. I would say that I have appreciated when other artists have been brave enough to follow their own path. Richard Diebenkorn, for example, has this incredible arc of amazing work that is very personal and strong. He really inspired me to achieve the same strength in my own work. I strongly believe that as an artist you have to have individuality, and that is essentially what is noteworthy and what sells. I can see this from my own exhibitions: viewers always gravitate to the strongest most unique pieces.

**Art Interview:** Do you think your experience as an illustrator has helped you as a fine artist?

**Nicholas Wilton:** It's an extremely difficult task to determine the differences between an illustration and a fine art painting. It's also something that is very personal. I have my own ideas about what those two areas of art are. I think there are many fine lines of distinction between illustration and fine art. There are illustrators hired for publications and creative-based projects who make incredibly personal pieces that are almost indistinguishable from paintings you would find hanging on gallery walls. The kind of illustration I am interested in is in the field where there is a lot of freedom and your own direction is the basis for your being hired. You have been selected to apply your style of art to the project so you keep hold of your creative license. The images that I generate are compelling, exciting for me to make and they aren't dictated to me. I have re-licensed a lot of my work in different places and because of the access that is available to images now with the Internet people will apply your work to what they are doing rather than the other way round. In the beginning I struggled to find a clear voice, but I have since acquired a strong resonance in my work. I try to keep it at a very strong level and although my fine art is very obtuse and less marketable than my illustration, there is now a very blurred line between the two.

**Art Interview:** Have you ever experienced being pigeonholed as an illustrator?

**Nicholas Wilton:** No but I've suffered paranoia about it in the past. The difference between illustration and fine art is a subject I've given a lot of thought to. But I came to the conclusion that people essentially want strong work and that's what's important. I believe it to be a misconception that an artist's work is not "pure" if they have commercial work and are not coming from a "starving artist's" reality. Poverty does not deem an artist more "authentic". If a collector is persuaded not to buy my work because of these factors, then I am not interested. I'm not interested in categorizing myself, or anybody else for that matter, and there are enough collectors out there for it not to be a problem. Actually the fine art world is a lot more commercial in terms of selling than the commercial art field. The reason why I was able to stay on at my gallery was because I sold. It's sell, sell, sell in the art world and for my gallery to call me back

and want another show I need to sell. I am not preoccupied with sales when I am making my fine art, but it's a Catch 22 situation. The only way I can successfully carry on with what I love is if people buy my work.

**Art Interview:** Do sales affect the work that you create then?

**Nicholas Wilton:** No, not really. If I make strong work, it will sell. The difficult part is making really strong work and that's a huge responsibility. I have to make sure my work is in the right market and I have to put it out there in a professional way. But, at the end of the day, if it's strong it will move people and they will want it. They will want it and they will buy it, in whatever form it is. It helps me sleep at night, because all I have to do is keep working, paying attention and striving to improve and the rest will take care of itself. You do have to market your work, which I do do, but if the painting is strong then you're two-thirds of the way there.

**Art Interview:** What are your average prices?

**Nicholas Wilton:** My average price, for a two-foot square painting, is around \$3,000, maybe \$4,000. A four or five foot painting is about \$7,000 to \$10,000 somewhere in that range. I don't have extremely high prices at this point; I'm a mid-career artist.

**Art Interview:** How many pieces do you show in your exhibitions?

**Nicholas Wilton:** I just had a show in Santa Fe and I showed 20 paintings. That was a lot for me, some were large and some were small.

**Art Interview:** How long does it take you to prepare for a show?

**Nicholas Wilton:** I do most of the bulk of the work in 3 to 4 months.

**Art Interview:** And on average, how many paintings do you produce in a year?

**Nicholas Wilton:** I have two young children, a house to run, and lots of distractions at the moment. I would say, 30 to 40 right now, maybe a little more like 45.

**Art Interview:** How many hours do you work a day?

**Nicholas Wilton:** I try to paint every day. I don't always manage to, distractions come up, but when I'm working towards a show I'm painting every day. That's normally 3 to 4 hours of solid working and then the rest of the time I'm focusing on business. Occasionally I will work uninterrupted for 6 to 8 hours, but I generally find this too tiring and less efficient.

**Art Interview:** How do you go about budgeting your time to fit in other responsibilities as an artist? What aspects are encompassed in your career as an artist?

**Nicholas Wilton:** It's really important to figure out the things that can help you that don't need your constant attention. I look for ways that can help me that don't take all of my energy. The big one is the Internet. People can look at your work, they can find out about you, they can see everything you've ever made and you don't even have to talk to them. I love talking to people, but the most effective way for people to see my work is through the Internet. Having a website and having your work displayed and updated is hugely beneficial to an artist. I almost think it's more important than a gallery. It is your gallery. It's the one place that will be consistent - galleries come and go - and creating a reliable source of your work is, I believe, almost as important as making the work itself. I will invest the same amount of my time into updating my

website as I will into doing my actual painting. I'm always searching for new ways to advertise my artwork and reach out to people. For several years I did a Monday morning painting, a small 6-inch square painting that I then emailed out to a huge list of people for them to comment on. At one point I had hundreds of people that were viewing my works and then in turn coming to my shows to see what else I was doing. It was a perfect way of communicating and networking with people and the Internet was doing the majority of the work.

**Art Interview:** Did you build your website yourself?

**Nicholas Wilton:** No, I design all of the promotional material but I hire people to do the back end for the web. I've drawn the line there because I don't want to get too involved. I have a lot of computers, scanners and printers, and way too much of that stuff as it is. I enjoy that, but I don't want to be doing HTML code instead of my paintings. I make sure I scan and photograph all the work and put it into a database so the work is able to be re-used if need be for something, a promotion, or a calendar. I don't ever let the painting go without having a very good reproduction scan made. Every painting I've ever done has been archived and coded with an image number so I can track them all without problems. I think that's been really helpful, to have a strong backup of all my work for reference.

**Art Interview:** Do you take the photographs of your work yourself, or do you have someone else that does that?

**Nicholas Wilton:** When they're small I scan them, but when they are larger I have an assistant that is a wilderness photographer who takes care of my color work on the computer. I also have an 8 x 10 camera and we photograph the work ourselves.

**Art Interview:** Do you do that outside or in your studio?

**Nicholas Wilton:** No, it's done in the studio.

**Art Interview:** So you have all the lighting set-ups?

**Nicholas Wilton:** Yes, we have the whole set-up. It's an expensive and tiresome activity, but I feel it's really important to have good reproductions of your work; you're never going to see it again after you sell it.

**Art Interview:** That must have been quite expensive, to buy all the equipment necessary.

**Nicholas Wilton:** Yes, it was a big investment. The problem was that the process of dragging these paintings to a photographer and then getting the chromes back and being unhappy with the quality was too time consuming. I'm not sure if it's something that everyone should take on. I'm fortunate to work closely with a person who's experienced in photography, which makes it a lot easier. It takes a lot of time and it's not a cost saving but we get a better product in the end. I may not be able to see a particular painting again, but if I need the image for reference of any kind I have it immediately available, which is important.

**Art Interview:** Do you contract the re-licensing of your work?

**Nicholas Wilton:** Yes, everything is written out.

**Art Interview:** Is this inclusive of your fine art?

**Nicholas Wilton:** Yes. I have some paintings that have appeared on book covers. The work that I produce tends to apply itself. I don't make literal images; my focus is more mood-orientated so people can apply my work to a larger variety of things. My work doesn't limit itself to a select part of the market. The last show I had in Santa Fe I put the images on the website the week before the show and I sold 2 of the paintings to a book publishing company before the show even went up. It's not so much that they have been re-licensed but rather that it's a way of creating revenue that can help me to continue with my work. I will sell the original and then the same image for a book cover down the road. It's an exception, it doesn't happen all the time, but often enough to be an added support of my painting endeavors.

**Art Interview:** Illustrators often have contracts for re-licensing images, but these are things that a lot of gallery artists are not familiar with. Many fine artists are not aware that they can continue to sell their work even after the original piece has been sold. In fact it is illegal to publish art without the copyright holders permission.

**Nicholas Wilton:** Exactly. One thing with being trained in the illustration world early on in my career was that I learned business skills that have been invaluable. A lot of artists really don't have business sense and it's an invaluable commodity to aid survival in the fine art industry. If you are working in the studio and you have a painting that you might sell, it's still important to have other ways of generating income from that work. It isn't selling out, it's just smart. You need to move a certain amount of art and be able to keep that a constant.

**Art Interview:** I assume there are companies that are looking for artists to market materials, whether it's calendars, or t-shirts or whatever. How do you become aware of those places?

**Nicholas Wilton:** You have to be careful that your work doesn't appear in places that lower its quality. For example, you mentioned t-shirts: I won't sell my work to be put on a t-shirt. I'm very conscious of where my work appears because I don't want it to be devalued. I don't want it used on something cheap and not produced to a high enough quality. For this reason I don't actively seek out those companies. I've made a website and got my work out there and entered award annuals. Advertising is what gets people to notice your work. You don't need to search out companies: they will find you. I work with publications and find other ways besides galleries to exhibit my work. Right now I'm doing a U.S. stamp that I am generating ideas for and this is great because they're going to produce hundreds of thousands of images of my work and it will be out all over the country.

**Art Interview:** How did you manage to get that contract?

**Nicholas Wilton:** They contacted me. I've recently redone my website and I had made a series of thumbnail images that looked good at that size. I know that the woman whom contacted me saw the images on the website and must have been interested in their quality at postage stamp size. There are 4 or 5 designers that have contracts to produce stamps for the United States and they come up with the initial ideas and then hand it over to the artist.

**Art Interview:** So, they act as art directors for the post office?

**Nicholas Wilton:** Yes. If I were an artist that wanted them to notice my work, I would be on the lookout for companies that could use my work without demeaning it. I approached an institute in Southern California that was making really beautiful brochures and reproducing the artwork very well. They have used my work and that's completely different to having your work in a gallery. These brochures are being made in the hundreds of thousands and in turn are a huge magnification of your reach to the public. I would spend my last dime on advertising and I believe it's absolutely essential to have your work out in publications.

When I have a show coming, especially if it's a solo show, I will spend the money on advertising. It doesn't necessarily pay off right away, but it gets your work to people. They need to see your work and they need to see it again and again and again. After about the 4th or 5th time, they will start to remember you and this recognition isn't achievable from having an occasional show in the city. I'm constantly thinking about how to gain awareness on a national level.

**Art Interview:** How often do you have exhibitions in a year?

**Nicholas Wilton:** Normally, 2 or 3 times a year. So far this year I've had one solo show and I'm set for a group show in the next couple of months. It depends on how big the show is, a solo shows is a lot of work, and if the group shows are big then they too can be very time-consuming. Right now I'm enjoying having the luxury of focusing on creating and developing. I'm working on some commissions. I get a lot of insight into my work when I finish a show and I'm in the process of going through changes right now.

**Art Interview:** How do you keep yourself visible to the art market while you are preparing an exhibition for a period of a year or more?

**Nicholas Wilton:** There are two factors here, art making and art business. There's a great misconception amongst artists that if they work hard and produce a great show this will be noteworthy. The reality is that your work needs to sell out! In order to do that you need the exhibition to be written about and that needs to coincide with other articles about your work. The show, or the work, needs to be seen by a great number of people. From my experience in the art world your success isn't related to what you are doing: it's the perception of what people think you are doing. I want complete freedom to be able to make my work and the only way I can accomplish this is if people buy my work. I cannot do one with out the other, so you have to take part in the game. If a gallery asks me to send them my resume, they aren't interested in my previous work: they want to see what I am doing now and, more importantly, who is buying it, and exposing myself to other people is something I take incredibly seriously. If, say, Madonna buys one of my paintings, it will speak volumes about the value of my work to other collectors. This is, of course, meaningless and is absolutely no gauge as to how good my work is, but it's all about others perceptions.. Few people lead, the majority follows, and in that sense having a commission on the scale of making a United States stamp gives your work outside validation. In most cases when a show sells out it happens because of a "feeding frenzy" taking place. It has perceived value and this is, sadly, how the work is sometimes valued. I don't like this process, but projecting the "perception" that your work is strong and important is half of the process of being a successful artist in terms of sales. A lot of people hate this side of the business, but it's as essential as pushing yourself through your studio time and time again to create.