

Space For Art Foundation 'Unity' Space-suit, worn by flight engineer Jack Fischer, August 2017



# Nicole Stott

*Artist, Astronaut, Earthling, and Founding Director,  
Space for Art Foundation*

**Lee Anderson (LA)** *You're one of the more visible advocates of the bridge between art and what is happening in space, and how these fields can merge together, whether it's the pure visual arts aspect of it or the creativity that can be infused into some of these processes. When you planned to bring the watercolor set up to the space station, for example, what was your thinking behind it, and did you see where it could go and the meaning that it could have?*

**Nicole Stott (NS)** I did not see where it could go, honestly, I wasn't thinking that at all at the time. And the way it all really happened was just in preparing to go to space the first time, which was going to be a long duration spaceflight.

As crew members, mostly we're thinking about "Okay, where are my checklists?" All the things we need to make sure we don't screw up while we're there; to be the one that's going the stuff that will help us be able to successfully do our tasks.

I remember getting to that last phase, the last few months before flight, meeting with one of my support people who was helping me put together this little bag that I could bring with personal items. At the time I was thinking, "I'll bring a T-shirt from my high school; I'll have pictures of my family and friends, my

son's little stuffed animal," stuff that I knew, just obviously, were the special things to bring.

We're getting all this stuff ready and she says, "you know, Nicole, you're going to be there for a couple months, you will have some free time." She said, "if there's anything that you enjoy doing down here on Earth that you might want to bring with you because you will be living there too, not just working there." And at that point, I really had only been thinking about the experience from the standpoint of: I'm going to be working there. I'm going to be on this mission. So long story short, I said, "Okay, well, I'll bring a little watercolor kit."

That's really all it was at that point. What's cool about it, though, when I think about it in hindsight, and when I look at others of my colleagues and friends and things that they've done in space, it's really like we're starting to bring the human into human spaceflight.

We hadn't done, or at least visibly done, a lot of that over time. A lot of it has gone on, we just never really talked about it or planned for it or felt like there was some reason to purposely

incorporate it and I think that's changing too.

I think people are starting to realize, "I want to take my flute with me," like Cady Coleman. My friend Karen Nyberg, who just retired, one of the most talented artists I've ever met in my entire life, she quilted while she was in space, she sewed. And the other musical instruments that have been up there from the very beginning of flying in space, and Alexei Leonov sketching with colored pencils and doing charcoal portraits of his Apollo-Soyuz crewmates... We're realizing this needs to be part of what we're doing in space.

I had always just grown up artsy craftsy. I never felt like I had to really distinguish between sides of my brain. Nobody told me "oh, Nicole, you can't do art or do ballet if you're studying engineering."

I think about it now, and most of those you would consider technical

**"...Alexei Leonov sketching with colored pencils and doing charcoal portraits of his Apollo-Soyuz crewmates...We're realizing this needs to be part of what we're doing in space."**

people, that I know, have some kind of creative outlet, whether it's playing a musical instrument or building something or painting, whatever it is.

I think it works the other way too, where a lot of the people you consider to be artists have a method; they have a process, they have techniques. There are technical sides that are blending in even when you don't think about it. So I think there's more of a mix than we give ourselves credit for.

**LA** *That's a cool thing about more teams becoming interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary, because you learn by working with people who think differently, how they're approaching problems. And it seems like that's what you're describing.*



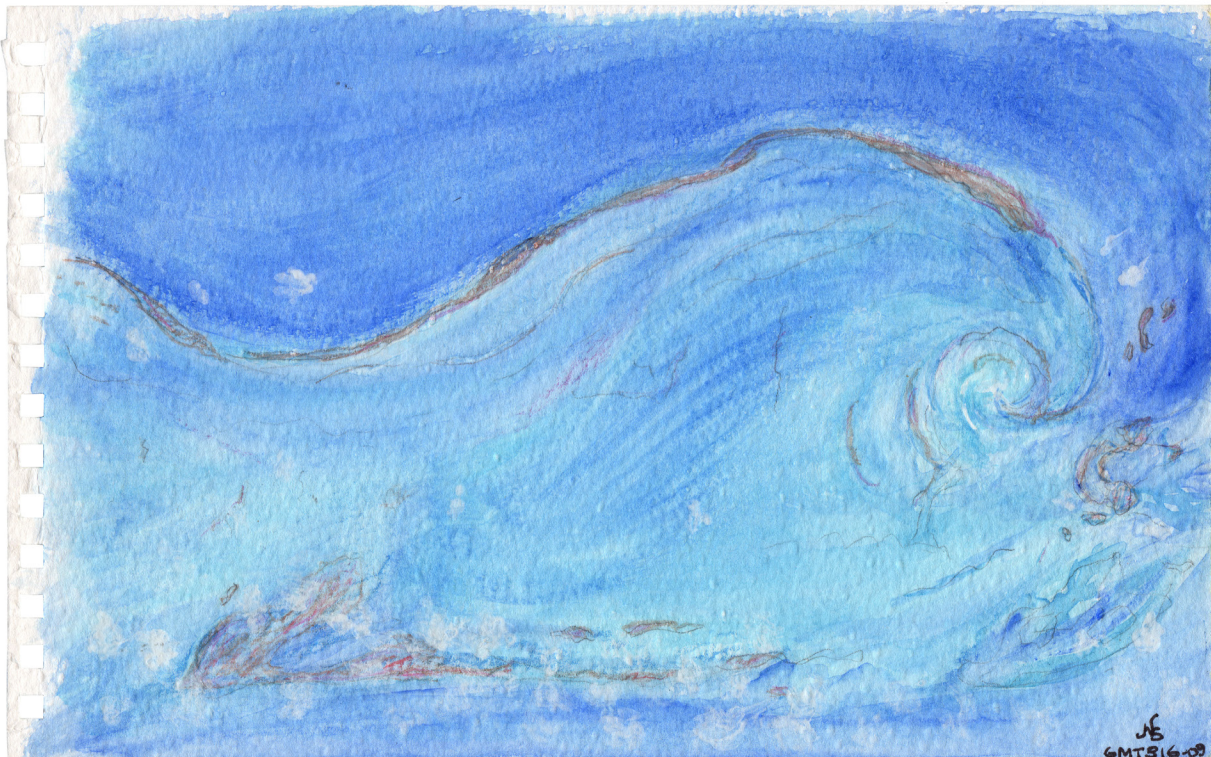
**NS** At JPL, at The Studio, that's what their whole premise is, that you have to get this mix of thought in there, regardless of whether you're trying to build a sculpture to represent something or you're trying to build the mission that you're trying to represent by the sculpture.

Whenever I do a presentation, I show kids this picture of my astronaut class, and it's kind of a goofy one. We're all wearing these bug antennas, and we've all got these dark shades on because our class name is "The

**"...when you look at that picture and think about the expertise, the experiences of all of these people, not one of them got to that place in the same way."**

Bugs." I show it because, while it doesn't really represent the best mix of racial or gender diversity, when you look at that picture and think about the expertise, the experiences of all of these people, not one of them got to that place in the same way.

I think it's kind of cool that there's not a checklist. In all of these areas, kids want to know: What are the five things I have to do to be an astronaut, to be a doctor, to be an artist to be, whatever it is. And what's so beautiful is that, for the most part, there are



Top: NASA Astronaut class of 2000, "The Bugs;" Bottom: The Wave, First watercolor painting in space, Nicole Stott, 2009



basic criteria but otherwise it's wide open. And that's where the diversity of ideas and thought can really come in. And for a crew in space, it's hugely important.

Can you imagine? I was there for three months on a mission. If my five other crew mates were just exactly cookie cutters of me, how boring that would be. And to solve problems and get out of emergency situations, working through something challenging; it would be so dull, and not as successful.

*LA Showing more of the human side of the astronaut corps is helpful in supporting that same message, because you're showing people that you can be broad-minded and that those interests are important to bring; you don't have to be singularly focused in order to get here.*

**NS** Actually, in the last few years that I was in the office, I had the opportunity to sit on the other side of the table, the selection side. And by the time somebody gets to be sitting in the seat as an interviewee to be an astronaut, the resume is good, the school is good, work experience, all that is good, but we're essentially talking to that person in a way like, Okay, would I want to be in a relatively confined space with you for six months? Do I think you'd have

my back when things are going bad? Is there a pleasantness as well as a professionalism to you?

We're not spending a lot of time going down the resume. Instead it's, "what

do the human things when you're a human in space?

*LA Are there ever mornings when you wake up and think, "I want to put on my favorite t-shirt," or have some of*

**"You want to know about the rock climber, the house builder, the piano player, the chef, the water skier. You want to know all of those things, because that's what makes the person; that's what makes the human."**

do you like doing outside of what you studied in the books? How is what you studied in the books being applied in your life to real problem solving, to real life experience?" You want to know about the rock climber, the house builder, the piano player, the chef, the water skier. You want to know all of those things, because that's what makes the person; that's what makes the human.

NASA is even starting to do a much better job—social media has helped—crew members want to utilize that outlet to communicate, and we've seen so many different sides of people flying in space now that we never used to see. To find a video of somebody washing their hair, that's a big deal.

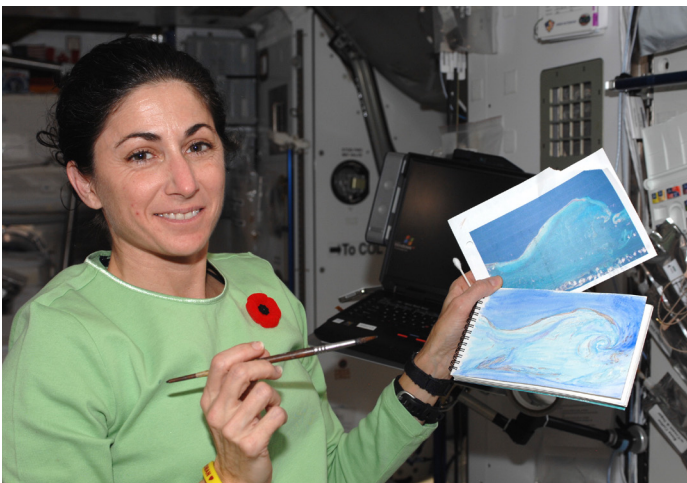
Those are the questions I get asked all the time: how do you

*the comforts of home in that way? Or is it more like you're happy to have a uniform to put on that reminds you of the purpose of being there?*

**NS** There's a mix. What's so nice about how we live on the space station is you can use the whole volume. You're not stuck on the floor. All three dimensions are available to you; you can use and get utility out of every surface, and that's really, really cool.

What's great about it too though, is that we'll put the uniform or the blue flight suit or our mission shirt or something on when we're together as a crew speaking to the ground when some special event is going on—but otherwise, we're pretty much free to wear what we want, within the limit of what we were able to take with us. And that usually ends up being the same thing over and over again, because we don't get a lot.

I had the same pair of pants for three months, and it was totally fine. That's because when we're down here with



Nicole Stott painting aboard the International Space Station, 2009

gravity, your clothes are hanging on your body, the oils from your skin, everything. Things get dirty faster. Up there, they're just kind of floating on you. Except for the clothes that you're wearing when you're working out, because those get really gross, the clothes you're just wearing throughout the day last a long time. There's no reason to have 12 pairs of pants.

But it was nice because I could pretty much wear what I wanted, when I wanted. That was a comfortable thing, that I got to get up and say okay, I'm gonna put this sweatshirt on today and this one pair of pants I have (laughing).

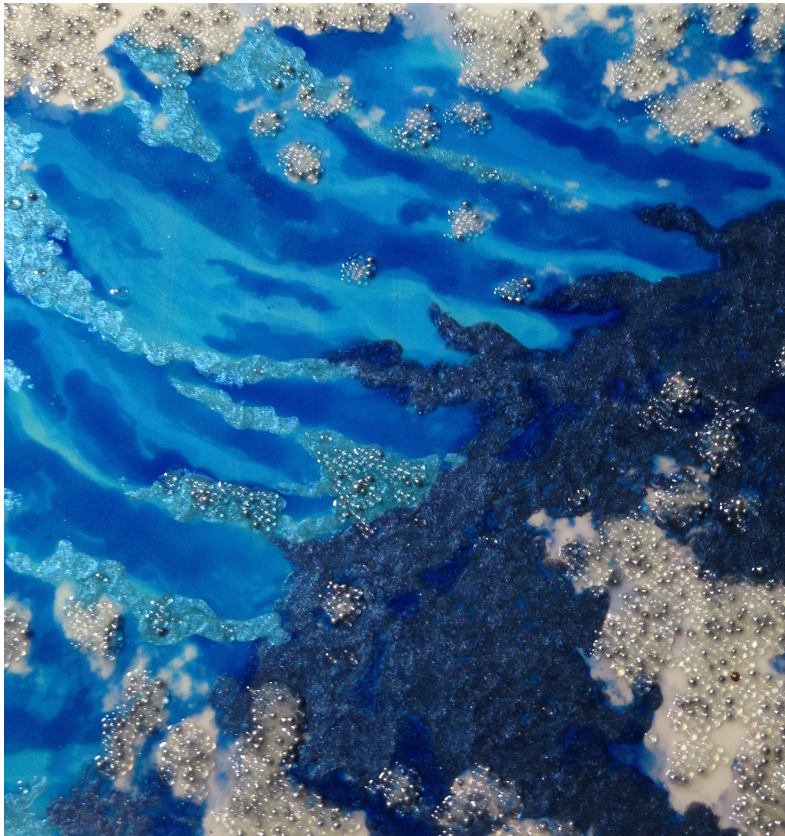
**LA** So, basically what it's like to work from home (laughing).

**NS** If there was any uniform it was khakis and some kind of t-shirt or collared shirt, but I never felt like somebody was telling me, "Nicole, when you get up in the morning, thou shalt wear this uniform." There was none of that, which is nice because there's so much that is scripted, choreographed, scheduled. Things like being able to wear what you want during the day, listen to whatever music you want to listen to, those are nice to have flexibility around.

**LA** As a retired astronaut, you can now appear in advertisements, and it was awesome to see you in the recent Olay ad. The Super Bowl is probably

*the biggest place that you could be for advertising. What do you think that means for broader culture and the relationship to space? To NASA?*

**NS** I think it's about helping people establish a relationship with space in some way. Right now, for me personally, when I retired from NASA art was this thing I was going to do no matter what.



Bahamas, Nicole Stott, 2015

But as I was starting to think about, how do I communicate the experience in a way that lets people know, first of all, for those who don't know that there is a space station, people need to know that all this work we're doing in space, it's all about improving life on earth. And then for them to establish their relationship through that messaging somehow of, "oh my gosh, I live on a planet.

I'm an Earthling," thin blue line, those kinds of things. I wanted my art to help with that.

It's all about that relationship, and getting them to make a connection to something that they might not have known anything else about before. And if my art could be the way to do that, if I can get the message to them, then that I'm succeeding in my mission.

I can't speak for all of my retired astronaut colleagues, but what I've seen is that when we're deciding to endorse or support something, there's always an underlying mission there. For

example, I would not have done the Olay ad, if it hadn't been for the Girls Who Code campaign that they had going on.

And I'll tell you, I did a lot of research and questioning with the Olay folks and the Procter and Gamble people about their whole methodology, their process, how they make their products, those kinds of things that

**"...people need to know that all this work we're doing in space, it's all about improving life on earth."**



gave me at least a better level of comfort in engaging with them.

The same is true for a thing I did with Hello Bello. They do diapers and baby products, all plant based, and it's a really cool product line. They did this Rocket Box and they combined this fun artistic activity in the box for the parents and the kids that they're helping, and then their art will be used in our current Space for Art Foundation project. Their platform is very positively engaged with their Hello Bello customers and community.

I think for a long time we're going to be seeing—or at least I hope—that kind of decision making when it comes to what kind of product or activity an astronaut will support.

Robert Pearlman, with Collectspace, wrote a piece on this Olay commercial. And his very last question was something like, "Alright, Nicole. So you flew in space twice, and those NASA missions get pretty decent coverage and stuff." "But," he said, "what do you think about the fact that the audience you will have for this one commercial for a Super Bowl ad in a fake spacesuit about a fake space mission will probably get more visibility than any NASA mission does?" (laughing)

What I was really thinking was, "oh my gosh, they chose space." They chose space as the theme for this. And they chose it with a positive message behind it.

Ultimately, it was a very uplifting, positive thing. And if some percentage

of that audience became interested in what we're really doing in space after seeing that, more power to it. Not to mention the support to Girls Who Code and that kind of campaign activity.

*LA Everything on the ISS is meant to benefit our lives here, as well as*

**NS** That's this whole taking gravity out of the equation thing. It is so cool. You take one factor out of the equation and it's like you're having to go back to the basics to look at stuff in a whole new way. And it's why I love showing the classic astronaut portrait done in the ball of floating water with your picture upside down,

## **"It's all about that relationship, and getting them to make a connection to something that they might not have known anything else about before."**

*enable us to go further. So if we're more aware of what is happening, then maybe we can find better spin-offs, and co-create more between these two environments. And in microgravity, there's so much we don't even know yet about what could benefit from being researched there. But people have to know that it's a possibility.*

because that's *it*, that right there shows you, things are going to be totally different here.

It's so cool, that whole motto, "off the Earth for the Earth." I love it. It's so perfect. I think my friend Kevin Ford is the one who came up with that when he was figuring out something to put on his patch for a space station mission, and they just latched on



*Pink Flower, Nicole Stott, 2015*

to it. It's such a great simple way to describe what we're doing.

**LA** *We hear about how astronauts come back to Earth as philosophers and then pick their medium to share this experience. How did it click for you that your art was a tool for communicating?*

**NS** As I was thinking about retiring, I thought, how could what I do perhaps be unique in the way I share the story. And I kept coming back to the painting in space, to having that experience of seeing Earth that way, wanting to express it, and share it.

It was something I knew, personally, I was going to do. And my subject was going to be those views I'd seen out the window, I was already going to do it. So how could I use that to share the experience with others? Especially those people that don't already know we have a space station.

I think art is this universal communicator; it allows us to speak

to anyone about anything. And not mattering whether they like my artwork or not, but just, how do you engage them in the story of it, and then they end up knowing there's a space station and "oh, my gosh, what do you mean, we're working with 15 other countries?"

**"How do we complement that with these psychological, creative ways to express ourselves that fundamentally allow us to live better, too."**

So I knew I wanted to do that. I didn't know how it would work. I definitely wasn't setting out to make a living off of artwork. It's purely experimental for me. I've had no training. It was really meant to be a complimentary thing.

Where I think it really took off in the most positive direction for me was when I started getting involved with space-themed art therapy projects which evolved beautiful into the Space for Art Foundation. All of a sudden it felt like I had gotten to go to space, and do those things so that I could come back to Earth and do this. It was like, oh my gosh, it's all just coming together the way it's supposed to, like I'd found my next mission, and my place.

For the most part we're working with children

in hospitals. We are primarily in pediatric cancer centers and refugee centers, and places where these children are going through what you hope is the worst thing they ever have to deal with in their entire lives. And somehow, you bring space exploration into the mix, you bring

art into the mix, and next thing you know they're sitting up straighter. They're wanting to do the artwork, they're talking to the kids next to them about their futures; talking about spaceflight, whether they want to go to space or not, why they would or wouldn't.

They're not focused anymore on where they are. It's like they're transcending it.

In the end, this discovery that I made through them, and I have a perfect memory of where it first happened, is a beyond their years, philosophical conversation from these kids.

One young girl, probably eight years old, she's painting, we're talking, and she says, "you know, Miss Nicole, what you do as an astronaut must be a lot like what I'm going through here in the hospital when I come in, doing my treatments."

I'm thinking, "hm, what could she possibly mean?" How do you compare this thing I dreamed about doing with what you hope is the worst thing she ever has to experience in her entire life? And so you smile and you keep painting like, "Oh, what do you mean by that?" She goes on effortlessly to say, "you don't get to eat the same kind of food, and you don't get to see your mommy and daddy and friends the same way. And your



Nicole Stott painting with a young girl at MD Anderson, Space For Art Foundation



body's changing and they're doing all kinds of tests on you, and I think you have this radiation thing. You know, I had to do this radiation thing..."

And these two things you would think couldn't be any more different, she's making this very thoughtful comparison of. And not complaining about what she's going through, just stating it as matter of fact. And it made me realize even more what we're doing with this work, with them, is so important. It's important in that clinical setting with these kids, we will continue to do that forever. I mean, that will be what we always do.

But she made me realize, in this idea of spaceflight, we're really fortunate where we are right now. We have this beautiful view of Earth out the window, this work of art, for us to float in front of and ponder and

paint, or create because of, or just be absorbed in.

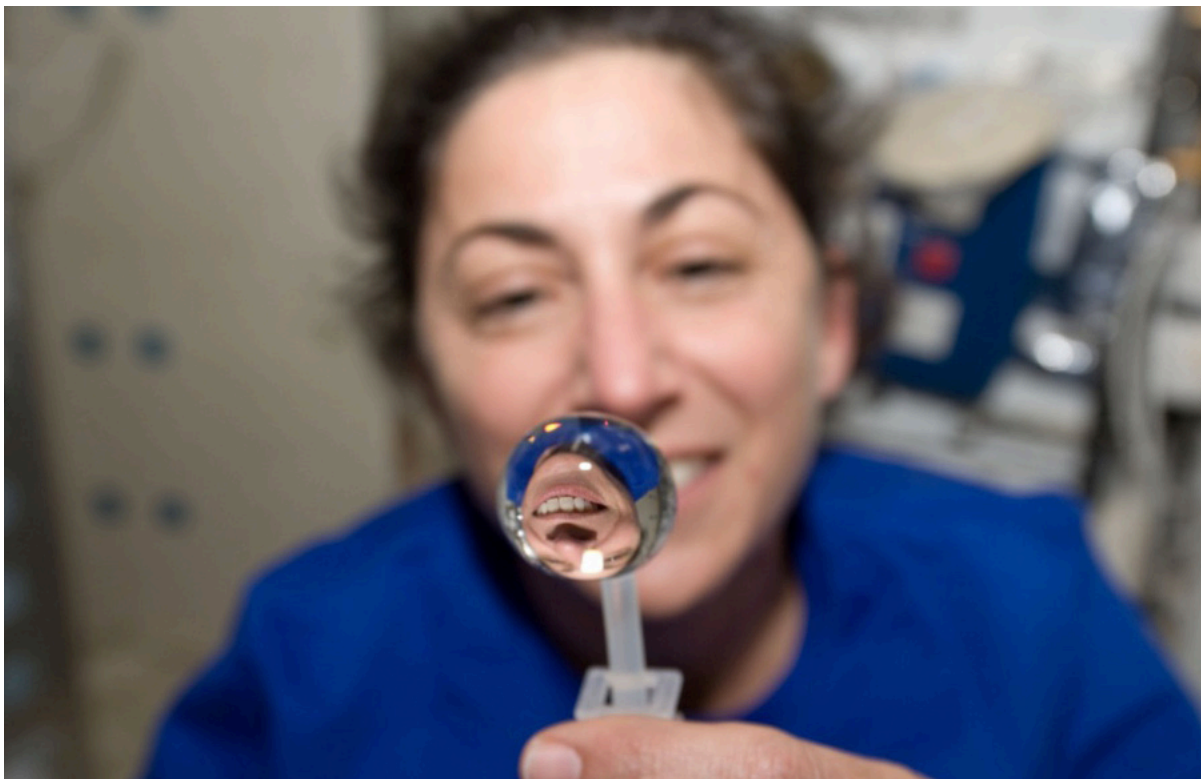
And when we start talking about kids her age, who at some point may be the ones that are traveling to Mars, and all of a sudden you don't have that view out the window anymore, you're going to need something similar to what we're doing with them in the hospital with the art. So is it playing your musical instrument on the iPad? Is it the Start Trek holodeck? What is it?

Whether it's a technical, scientific mission and exploration of space, or it's living here sustainably on Earth, how do we complement that with these psychological, creative ways to express ourselves that fundamentally allow us to live better, too.



#### LINKS

Space For Art Foundation  
Nicole Stott the Artistic Astronaut



Zero-gravity water portrait. Courtesy of Nicole Stott



Nicole Stott during a spacewalk, 2009

