

# Olly & Suzi:

**'A collaborative, mutual response to nature at its most primitive and wild'**

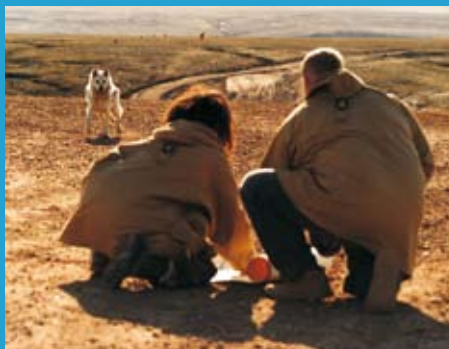


Interactive wildlife artists **Olly & Suzi** take time out of their busy lives to talk to **START** Editor **Michèle Kitto** about their work, inspiration, passions and travel, and how their unique approach to making art can work in the classroom.

Perhaps you have never heard of art duo Olly & Suzi, known outside the art world as Olly Williams and Suzi Winstanley, or perhaps you, too, watched the insightful documentary entitled *Wild Art: Olly & Suzi Paint Predators* on BBC 4 in February, or have heard that a shark once took a bite out of one of their drawings. Olly & Suzi are passionate about predators, and about species and environments that are under threat. In their work, a mix of pencil sketches, acrylics and watercolours, they attempt to look beyond outward appearances, however beautiful, and highlight the plight of the vulnerable and the importance of conservation.

Olly & Suzi have been making art together since they met as degree students at Central St Martins College of Art and Design in 1987. In 1993 they decided to leave their studio in search of direct,

first-hand inspiration and started creating their artwork on location in the wild. Since then, they have completed over 50 expeditions across the world – into the jungle regions, the Arctic, the desert and the ocean – searching out the predators and prey that occupy some of the most fragile and endangered habitats on Earth. They are about to embark on work with tigers, a species on the verge of extinction. Closer to home, they held a year-long retrospective exhibition and residency, *Olly & Suzi Untamed*, at the Natural History Museum in London in 2001–2002. They exhibit regularly in galleries, most recently in New York.



Olly & Suzi paint and draw together, often hand over hand on the same painting at the same time and often with the same brush, responding to the wild animals that they are tracking and their habitats. They work on location, in close proximity to the animals, but also back home in the studio. When they create work in the wild, they use the animal habitats as their studio, creating immediate responses to the events that unfold in front of their eyes, capturing the moment. Presenting the animal as icon, they aim to also raise an awareness and understanding of their subject, often allowing it to represent itself by incorporating the odd paw print, bite mark and track into their work.

'We show our painting and drawing in installation alongside photographs and film to communicate and document the art making, and our subsequent interaction with nature, as an ongoing process.'

I am interested in how you could sell this concept of making art together – the idea that it is OK to draw on each other's work – to teachers, and am reassured that Olly & Suzi have put this into practice a lot with schools and teachers. With teaching blood in their veins, and each with children of their own, they seem very comfortable in the classroom. Olly describes their recent work with primary school children: 'We get kids collaborating and ... encourage them to let go and respond to each other's marks in a non-competitive way.' Taking the competitive





edge out of working together, and making it a meaningful experience for children, is the essence of what they do. To promote collaboration, Olly suggests that instead of giving a group of children a piece of paper each, they are given one piece to work on together. They should then be encouraged and enabled to respond to one another's marks and not think that any one is better than the other. Although he concedes that this collaborative practice might not suit everyone as a lifelong way of working, he is quick to point out that as an experimental process or classroom activity it is very powerful.

Olly continues: 'Look, you don't have to go to the North Pole to have an adventure; you can go out into the park, grab a twig, some leaves, see what happens when you push that into the paper, see what happens when you grab some graphite, look for a sparrow, look for a starling, look for a worm, look at it and draw it.' He wants to inspire children in urban environments to sit down and slow down and respond to each other and, importantly, respond to their environment. In a nutshell, this is what Olly & Suzi do in the wilderness: 'We go into the wilderness ... from our mad busy urban lives.'

'...performing art, music, acting, all these things are collaborative events. You can't put on a play on your own ... but somehow painting [and] drawing [are] viewed traditionally as a sole event, and we are quite up for challenging that'. Olly

Among the artists and people that have inspired them, Olly & Suzi list Joseph Beuys, Hockney, Rouseeau, Picasso and Rothko – artists that have worked from life, that have a sense of history and the natural world, and a sense of humour. The second group that inspires them includes people like the naturalist and broadcaster David Attenborough, and they have been honoured to work with some of the top cameramen, conservationists, trackers and polar explorers.

Olly & Suzi feel strongly that it is important for children to understand the extent of the problems in the natural world and, rather



than being apathetic and thinking that you can't make a difference, realise that actually a small contribution can be key. They are doing their small bit of the larger jigsaw of global conservation by combining art and conservation in a subtle, low-key kind of way – looking at animals and interpreting them unsentimentally, stressing their plight and importance – and encourage you to do your bit too.

You don't need to go on a school trip to the Amazon or the Arctic to make the world of animals and conservation exciting. Try your local park or school grounds. Get hold of some mud, find a worm, take time out of your busy school day to stop and actually look at it, then draw it. It's quite simple really, perhaps old fashioned, but often the least complicated ideas are the best and most fun!

## Resources

Book: *Olly and Suzi: Arctic, Desert, Ocean, Jungle* (published by Harry N. Abrams). Available second-hand on Amazon, from £6

Film: *Wild Art: Olly & Suzi Paint Predators* (Storyville BBC4). Warning: this film contains strong adult language, but gives you, the teacher, insight into how these artists work. Cost £10; email [info@arcanepictures.com](mailto:info@arcanepictures.com)

[www.ollysuzi.com](http://www.ollysuzi.com)



## Interview with Arthur Morris, age 11, from Chilton Cantelo School, Young Pavement Artist of the Year, 2008

### What has winning the competition last year meant to you?

It has really boosted my confidence, and has given me lots of opportunities that I wouldn't have had – like drawing at the foot of the dinosaur at the Natural History Museum, and visiting Pinewood Studios to see film and television production.

### When did you first become interested in art?

Ever since I can remember, I have loved doing all sorts of art. When I was much younger, I did a lot of collage work and finger painting; now I do more painting and drawing, working with watercolours, acrylics and gouache, oil pastels, pencils, charcoal, even mud!

### Have you met Olly and Suzi? If so, tell us about them.

Yes, I did meet them at the launch of this year's competition at the Natural History Museum.

They really inspired me and were very friendly and fun to be around. They obviously really care about the animals they work with, and go to every extreme to get close to them. They have huge respect and faith in the people who help the animals that they want to paint and draw. Just like they want the animals to join in with their art,

they also really wanted lots of children to get involved in the Muscular Dystrophy Competition and think about the plight of endangered species. I think it is amazing that they can use one brush together at the same time to get such great pictures.

### Why should teachers encourage their pupils to enter the Young Pavement Artists' Competition?

Because it is an amazing experience, which anyone can enjoy, and because it is important for young people to think about endangered animals. It gives you the chance to enjoy art, help raise awareness of individuals who have muscle disease and help raise money for the Muscular Dystrophy charity.

The Muscular Dystrophy Campaign Young Pavement Artists' Competition is the first major art-based initiative to explore the relationship between using the pavement as a canvas and chalk as the medium. This year, the environmental and conservation theme is Endangered Species. See page 2 for details.

[www.muscular-dystrophy.org/pavementart](http://www.muscular-dystrophy.org/pavementart)

