

# Olga Nikitina



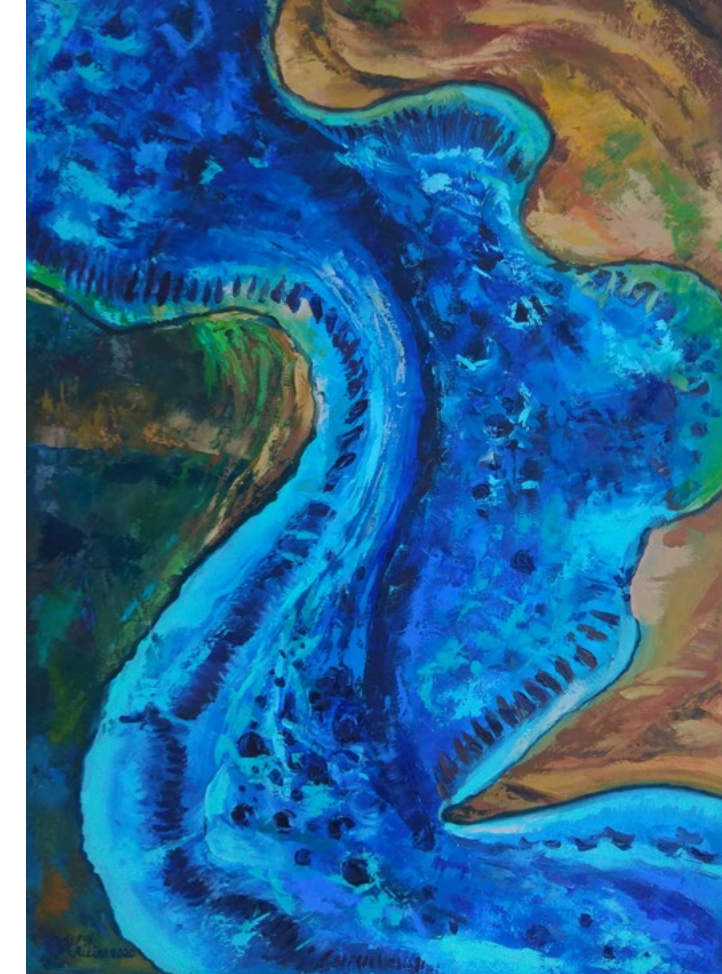
## P O R T F O L I O



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*Red Fish in the Red Sea*, oil on canvas, 20 x 25cm (right); and *Abstract Underwater Seascape*, oil on canvas, 50 x 70cm (previous page) by Olga Nikitina

Russian artist Olga Nikitina is an underwater painter with a degree in interior design and a dive instructor at the Egyptian Red Sea who creates brilliant and beautiful impressionistic paintings capturing the sublime light and textures of coral reefs and the dynamic energy of marine life. *X-Ray Mag* interviewed the artist to learn more about her creative process and perspectives on art and life underwater.



*Tobia Arba*, oil on canvas, 70 x 50cm (left); and *Milky Way*, oil on canvas, 70 x 50cm (top right) by Olga Nikitina

Text edited by G. Symes  
All images courtesy of Olga Nikitina

An avid painter since her childhood, Olga Nikitina took lessons at school in fine art and Russian traditional painting styles, such as Khokhloma, Zhostovo, Gzhel and Kudrina (which can usually be seen on Russian Matryoshka wooden nesting dolls).

She earned her degree in interior design from the Ulyanovsk State University in Russia where she studied drawing and painting for six years. However, after completing her degree, she took a break from painting—a break that

would last five years until, on a trip to Africa, she got inspired to take up her brush and start painting again. She said, “I was so impressed by whale-watching in South Africa during the sardine run event that my first painting after my long break was a breaching whale.”

At the same time, she said she completely fell in love with scuba diving and the underwater world. She had seen tropical fish before, while working on aquarium design, but seeing them in the wild, in their own natural habitat, gave her a new appreciation for marine life, saying that seeing them “in their real environment full of

colors, different species, and endless coral gardens, just blew my mind.”

Then in 2008, she got her open water certification in Marsa Alam, Egypt, and started going on dive trips to various locations in different countries and seas. In 2015, she became a dive instructor and went to work in Egypt on the Red Sea, where she regularly spent two to three hours underwater every day. She said that she drew so much energy and inspiration from the sea and marine life, “that I could not be silent—I had to express myself and my emotions in my art.”



*Napoleon*, by Olga Nikitina. Oil on canvas, 40 x 30cm



*Middle Reef*, oil on canvas, 50 x 70cm (right); *Between Two Worlds*, oil on canvas, 80 x 100cm (far right), *Between Two Worlds, Revival*, oil on canvas, 51 x 61cm (below), by Olga Nikitina



**X-RAY MAG:** Why marine life and underwater themes? How did you come to these themes and how did you develop your style of painting?

**ON:** While scuba diving, I always look at the underwater marine life through the prism of my artistic lens. Or the opposite happens, and what I see goes through my eyes first, then into my heart, soul and brain, creating images in my mind. Very often, if I do not have the opportunity to immediately start my artistic process after scuba diving, I take some notes in my notebook of what I want to reflect on canvas, as well as some memories and ideas. The underwater world is so rich with different colors, shapes and patterns. The only way to capture it is to feel free to play with paints on canvas. I did not want to represent the underwater world with realism. I would say that my style gets close to underwater impressionism. I use a palette knife to paint, which makes the painting more abstract, with heavy texture and bold strokes.

The best way to feel inspiration is to

be there underwater, to be a part of the marine life, to be immersed in the underwater environment. That is why I got the idea to paint right underwater, while scuba diving.

**X-RAY MAG:** Following in the footsteps of artists who pioneered and developed underwater painting—such as Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez and Zarh Pritchard in the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as André Laban who worked with the undersea explorer Jacques-Yves Cousteau in the '50s—can you describe your own artistic method or creative process? How is the process different when you create paintings underwater?

**ON:** Usually, images of underwater scenes just come about in my mind after a day in the sea, diving. Sometimes after a dive, I make notes of what impressed

me and what I would like to paint at home, and I use my underwater photos if I need to see specific details of underwater life. With normal painting, I create, over a few days, several layers of colors on a canvas, and very often I get the feeling that I dive too deeply into the details and overpaint the artwork.

With underwater painting, it is a different story. I recreate the present moment, based on feelings and the mood of the surrounding atmosphere. It is more intuitive painting. I am limited by time, decompression limits and air consumption. But I prefer to finish the artwork in one underwater session, because on every following dive, there is a different environment and mood. Another specific thing about underwater painting has to do with colors. With depth, colors disappear. We lose red colors, and it is always a surprise returning to the surface and



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CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: *Bait Ball*, *Sardine Run*, *South Africa*, oil on canvas, 50 x 50cm; *Sardine Run South Africa*, oil on canvas, 50 x 60cm; *Firework*, oil on canvas, 40 x 40cm; *Hurry Up*, oil on canvas, 25 x 25cm; and *Ocean*, oil on canvas, 25 x 30cm by Olga Nikitina

seeing how an artwork looks. For underwater painting, I use only palette knives and my fingers.

**X-RAY MAG:** *What is your relationship to the underwater world and coral reefs? Where have you had your favorite experiences?*

**ON:** Underwater, I feel like it is my second home. I love the feeling of no gravity so much. I fly like a bird above the coral reef, or along a wall, and gaze into the deep blue abyss. Coral reefs, at

various dive sites, remind me of big cities, with their own architecture and inhabitants. And what makes the atmosphere even more magical is the sunlight—everything shines with bright colors.

My favorite experience was on the house reef at Safaga, Egypt. An underwater painting session usually lasts from 60 to 120 minutes. On this particular dive, I sat in the same place, and all the fish got used to me and came very close to see what I was doing. I also had several nice experiences with





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a lionfish and a green sea turtle called Henrietta. The lionfish looked at my artwork like a professional art curator, and it felt like Henrietta was posing like a model in the 60 minutes she spent around me. Triggerfish liked to play with my color tubes like dogs with sticks. I always had to watch that they did not steal my paints!

*X-RAY MAG: What are the differences in painting underwater scenes in South Africa and the Red Sea, or other locations?*

ON: Even though I have dived many different locations, the opportunities to do underwater painting are mostly in the Red Sea. Conditions are most appropriate here for it; the water is warm and there is great visibility, colorful reefs, and lots of brightly colored fish. In South Africa, the ocean is more tough, and diving conditions are much more difficult. There is strong current, very often bad visibility and cold water. But for creating shark, whale or seal masterpieces, it is the right place.

*X-RAY MAG: What are your thoughts on ocean conservation and how does your artwork relate to these issues?*

ON: Dive instructors are servants of the sea. We introduce other people to another world, another reality, and teach them how we should care about the ocean and respect marine life. My art is just one of the tools to do this effectively.

*X-RAY MAG: You were recently quoted in the press saying that art is your language, that you would*

*Delight*, oil on canvas, 50 x 70cm (above); and *Underwater Rain*, oil on canvas, 35 x 45cm (right) by Olga Nikitina



*Pink Coral*, oil on canvas, 50 x 70cm, by Olga Nikitina



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*Sunny Day*, oil on canvas, 60 x 70cm, by Olga Nikitina (right), was created underwater at a depth of 8m for 120 minutes.

*Happiness*, oil on canvas, 60 x 80cm (far right), was created underwater by Nikitina at a depth of 10m for 120 minutes.

*Underwater Firework*, oil on canvas, 50 x 70cm, by Olga Nikitina (bottom right), was created underwater at a depth of 7.1m for 100 minutes.

*Dream*, oil on canvas, 60 x 80cm (below), was created underwater by Nikitina at a depth of 8.1m for 106 minutes.



like to help viewers of your artworks “find their soul, love and kindness through the reunion with nature,” and that you would like to introduce the underwater world to art lovers, and conversely, divers to art-making—to encourage people to protect the oceans for future generations. What are the challenges or benefits of being an artist in the world today? Any thoughts or advice for aspiring artists?

ON: Being an artist is a big gift as you have an additional language in which to communicate with nature and society. But the modern environment is quite aggressive and stressful. It is not easy to stay relaxed and inspired, and this is the challenge. However, communication with nature really helps one to reach a



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*Stream*, oil on canvas, 30 x 40cm, by Olga Nikitina, was created underwater at a depth of 6m for 80 minutes

meditative state and be creative. I would recommend spending more time outdoors, while painting—and for all artists, especially beginners, to trust yourself, believe you are special, and work from your heart with love!

**X-RAY MAG:** How do people respond to your works?

**ON:** I have had good feedback from both adults and children about my art. Each painting is a little story of mine, and everyone



can find one of my artworks that speaks to them and creates some nice memories for them or reminds them of an exciting experience. Divers want to try for themselves how to make art, and artists want to try diving. It is the best reward for me if I can get people interested in both: diving and art. I have had students who have tried underwater painting with me, who had never tried to make art before, and they created great artworks. That was a wonderful interaction.

**X-RAY MAG:** What are your upcoming projects, art courses or events?

**ON:** At the moment, I am developing a series of masterclasses for all levels of oil painting with underwater themes. In 2019, I registered a distinctive specialty with PADI: Underwater Artist. Now this course is available on a few liveaboards and during

daily dives too. There are two options: The first is an underwater painting introductory dive, in which we create artwork underwater on one dive; and the second is a full course, which takes two to three days. After completing the course, the diver-artist will receive a PADI Underwater Artist specialty certification.

I am also working on a new series of paintings related to ocean pollution and mass fishing, and I hope to soon be able to exhibit some of my artworks.

**X-RAY MAG:** In recent press coverage, you said

that when you began underwater painting you tried to capture underwater scenes, coral reefs and sea life, as well as the mood of the environment, but now you focus more on tapping into your subconscious and your feelings in a more intuitive type of painting,

which is more abstract. You have plans to experiment with diving depths and canvas size, as well as a project bringing a group of divers together to create one big artwork underwater, showing the diversity of the underwater world on canvas. Is there anything else you would like to share with our readers?

**ON:** I am happy to share my passion with you, my dear friends, and I am open to any projects related to art and the ocean! ■

For more information about artworks and courses, visit the artist's website at: [olganikitar.com](http://olganikitar.com).



*Abu Soma Garden*, oil on canvas, 60 x 80cm, by Olga Nikitina (above), was created underwater at a depth of 10m for 120 minutes; *Soft Corals*, oil on canvas, 80 x 60cm (left), was created underwater by Nikitina at a depth of 10m for 120 minutes