

The cuts and complexities of Nikki McClure

From Riot Grrrl to calendar girl, McClure re-emerges on the Northwest art world with a new book and works

BY ROBIN LINDLEY
STREET NEWS SERVICE

With an X-Acto knife in hand, Nikki McClure deftly cuts from a single sheet of black paper each of her iconic images that celebrate community, nature, sustenance, parenting, and activism. At a Ballard Library event in June, she displayed the focus of a brain surgeon and the skill of an expert drafter as she cut a beautifully intricate image in minutes for a throng of attentive admirers.

In her new children's picture book, "Mama is it Summer Yet?" — inspired by a question raised by her toddler son during a long, cold spring (sound familiar?) — McClure movingly depicts clues of impending summer and a warm relationship between mother and child.

The book has been praised for its poetry and, as noted in Booklist review, artwork that "is captivating, capturing both the subtle seasonal changes as well as the love and shared joy between mother and son. Just when you wonder if summer will ever come, read this and make your heart happy."

McClure grew up in Kirkland, Wash., and earned a B.S. in natural history at Evergreen State College. A self-taught artist, her work is fueled by her knowledge of nature and her skills of scientific observation.

Her first published book illustrations were bold linoleum block prints of nature scenes for "Wetland Tales" in 1991, a publication of the Washington State Department of Ecology. She published zines and small books after that, and embraced the art of paper cutting in 1996. McClure's art became increasingly popular with her beloved calendars that have found an international audience.

In addition to her new picture book, McClure made a lavish book of her calendar art, "Collect Raindrops" (2007), and she illustrated "All in a Day" (2009) by Newbery-award winning children's writer Cynthia Rylant. Her illustrations also have appeared in numerous publications, from The Progressive to Punk Planet.

McClure also was a prominent visual artist with Olympia-based record labels K and Kill Rock Stars, as well as a performance artist during the Riot Grrrl movement in the early '90s.

McClure recently discussed her art from her studio in Olympia.

Robin Lindley: Did you like art as a child?

Nikki McClure: I'd draw all the time, or watch ants march in the grass. I'd spend all day drawing fantastically huge, complicated scenes. I didn't think you could actually be an artist because I didn't have role models for that.

I didn't know about an art major. At Evergreen there are no majors. I was in science, and knew you could do that as an

occupation.

It may be a limitation to not have an art education, but I feel I understand art in a way that's not so "arty." My pictures are for people to enrich their daily lives, to provide nourishment. And (provide) hope for them for a positive future, and help get them there through positive action.

R.L.: The early prints in "Wetland Tales" are very strong graphically considering your lack of art education.

N.M.: That was my first illustration assignment for a friend with the state, and she was very helpful. She said don't illustrate the big part of the story - leave

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that for people to imagine — but illustrate the minor parts.

Most of my work is intensely personal and autobiographical, and also [incorporates] a common memory that all people have. I like it to be mysterious. Like my son often draws things on the edge that have emerged or are leaving the page. The story is (off) the paper, not on the paper itself. It might be a footprint, a drop of blood, or an animal hunting. I'm inspired by that perspective where it's not all you see that's happening. Maybe (in) his visual language, things are in motion (like a film) and not static like a picture.

R.L.: Do you see art as a form of communication?

N.M.: In my work, I began with writing, then moved to performance art, and I sang.

Then I moved into the visual realm, which was much different than standing in front of hundreds of people in performance. I like how quiet it is. It doesn't demand attention like performance where you bully people to listen to you. But with a picture on the wall or a book, people are drawn to it willingly.

I make a calendar every year that people put in their kitchens, and it's part of the dialog in the "kitchen community." The kitchen is where life happens — the meals and the nurturing in the family — and the art is part of that. It's a quieter way to communicate, but it's a part of daily life. A poster or calendar on the wall is welcomed into the home — not like a performance.

Books also are satisfying. I like the smaller scale: the child sitting on someone's lap and reading aloud, and being a part of that intimate scene.

R.L.: When did you begin your performance art?

N.M.: About the same time as the "Wetlands" book, but as I made more pictures, the desire to express myself that way was replaced with this other expression I found satisfying.

R.L.: And you performed with bands like Nirvana and groups in the Riot Grrrl movement?

N.M.: I never aligned myself completely with Riot Grrrl. It was a zeitgeist moment where young women found a way of

expression that was lashing out at male-dominated music. Women began picking up drumsticks and guitars and microphones and expressing themselves.

I was finding that energy at the same time, so I was in a way part of it without calling myself part of it. Riot Grrrl gave me opportunities to express myself that probably would have been harder to come by if it hadn't happened when I was finding a need to roar as well. So it was good timing, and it was fun. I'd sit in my room and make up a song, and hear that Bikini Kill, a Riot Grrrl band, was playing a block away, so I'd run down the alley with my ukelele and ask if I could play this song before they started, and they'd say yeah. I would, and then run back home. It (was) spontaneous combustion with talent exploding.

R.L.: What were you singing about?

N.M.: I was doing fieldwork as a scientist in the North Cascades, out in the woods all week and home on the weekend. So lots of bear-chasing songs, or needing a coat of armor if I encountered a person because (it would) likely be a man with a gun. I was this female biologist with a pair of binoculars in the woods, so I'd sing about that. I had one (song) called "Omnivore," and one called "Godzilla." That's me as an all-powerful beast who'd be bigger and badder than you. My self-esteem song.

R.L.: I read that you had performed with Nirvana and other groups.

N.M.: I danced onstage with Nirvana and Fugazi, and toured with Kicking Giant and Bikini Kill.

R.L.: Did you know Kurt Cobain?

N.M.: He was a neighbor.

R.L.: And wasn't he also a visual artist?

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IMAGE COURTESY OF NIKKI MCCLURE