



EN

Everlyn  
Nicodemus

# Black Bird

25.10.2025  
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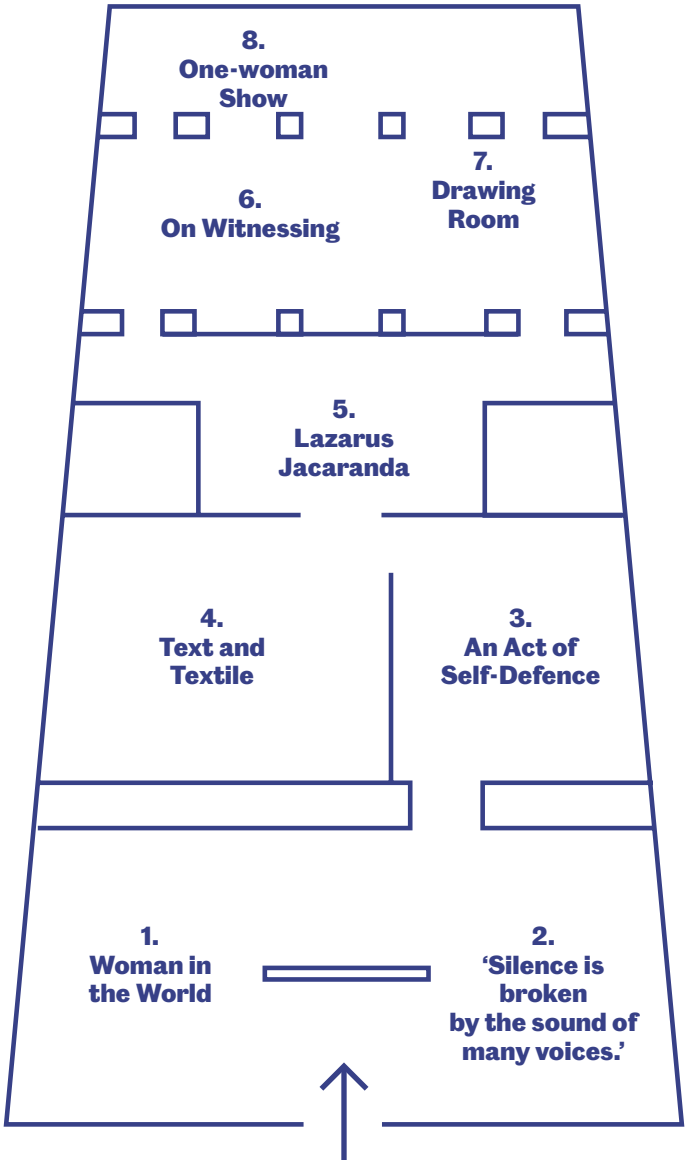
**A secret strength  
as two trees  
support each other,  
as wind whispers  
in the grass,  
as river  
caresses  
river's side  
so intimately  
woman to woman.**

Everlyn Nicodemus, 1986

***Black Bird* borrows its title from a yet-unpublished manuscript by Everlyn Nicodemus. It evokes the poetry and the rich imagery that her work invites us to navigate. Encompassing painting, collage, drawing, textile and poetry, Nicodemus practises art as a form of ‘visual speech’ capable of engaging relations of mutuality and solidarity.**

**Born in 1954 in Marangu, Kilimanjaro in the soon-to-be formed Tanzanian state, Nicodemus spent her formative years in a context of cultural, social and political effervescence. She moved to Sweden in 1973 and dedicated herself to the study of anthropology in response to the racism she encountered in the country. Refusing to objectify fellow human beings, she found in visual art a language that she could connect to and through which she could connect to others.**

# Floorplan



# 1. Woman in the World

Between 1984 and 1986, Nicodemus set out on the major tricontinental project *Woman in the World*. She met and exchanged with women in the rural Danish town of Skive, in various locations in Tanzania and in (sub)urban areas of India's megalopolis Kolkata. Starting from the question 'What is it to you to be a woman?', the project was less about gathering women's experiences as data than it was about sharing common experiences of joy, pain and trauma among women from different backgrounds, professions and ages, all living and surviving in patriarchal societies.



*The Silence*, 1984.

Courtesy of the artist and Richard Saltoun Gallery, London, Rome, New York.

## **2. 'Silence is broken by the sound of many voices.'**

Since her first paintings, Nicodemus has envisaged her artwork as a place where she could move beyond the typical distinction between the self and the other. Her conception of identity as a complex, fluid entity surfaces in her compositions alluding to community, love and self-reflection. Eluding conventional classification, her artwork seamlessly moves through multiple knowledge systems and visual references: between abstraction and figuration, portraiture and geometric forms, the pulse of community and introvert self-reflection, African and European art histories, and theory and practice.

### 3. An Act of Self-Defence

Shortly after completing *Woman in the World*, Nicodemus moved to the Alsatian village of Still, spent a year as a guest student at the Art Academy of West Berlin and then settled in Antwerp in 1989, where she painted her iconic series *Silent Strength* (1989–90). Created in the aftermath of a mental and physical breakdown, the paintings emanate a vibrant orange light, as if embodying the resilience of imagination, even in facing hardship. The figures seem to be stuck in an oppressive space – alluding to a sense of physical and social isolation.

The artist's near-death experience left an indelible trace in her life and work. *The Wedding* (1990–94), totalling 84 paintings, portrays 'The marriage / between dreams / and nightmares', life and death. With a lighter colour palette, *The Wedding* introduces motifs such as the grave symbolising death and blooming flowers symbolising rebirth. We witness the artist's struggle in facing what would later be diagnosed as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and her path towards recovery.



*Silent Strength I*, 1989.

Courtesy of the artist and Amir Shariat.

## 4. Text and Textile

The assemblages, collages and textiles grouped in this room point to Nicodemus's continued experimentations with language and abstraction in relation to trauma. In the late 1990s, she developed a technique called 'internetting' – a wordplay on the technique of netting that typically serves to create fences and the experience of being interned or imprisoned. These trapped objects were a way of translating visually what seemed to exceed representation, such as the grief ensuing from repeated miscarriages expressed in the series *Birth Mask* (2002). This assemblage technique echoes the artist's interest in how cultures, art forms and crafts travel the globe through trade, exile and other routes. Motifs like textile-inspired grids and geometric abstractions, rather than confining the work in pure formalism, invest the visual field with expressions of shared humanity through the 'mutual appropriation' that connects cultures to each other.



*Text Textile Linguafranca One*, 2003.

Courtesy of the artist and Richard Saltoun Gallery, London, Rome, New York.

## **5. Lazarus Jacaranda**

These paintings represent the artist's retrieval of long-ago memorised passages of scripture and return to childhood lessons in her Lutheran Sunday School. Jacaranda is a flowering plant native to the tropic and sub-tropic Americas. Nicodemus remembers its beautiful purple flowers abundant in the Kili-manjaro capital of Moshi during her childhood, a reminder that plants travel as much as people do. The series does not depict the biblical story of Lazarus rising from his tomb. Rather, it foregrounds female figures, both archetypes and named individuals, in relaxed and restful poses, their feet supported by flowers and petals that spring powerfully to life.

## 6. On Witnessing

*Reference Scroll on Genocide, Massacres and Ethnic Cleansing* (2004) is a major turning point in Nicodemus's research into art and trauma. Engaging with scholar Israel W. Charny's *Encyclopedia of Genocide* (2000) as its primary source, the work is the result of a meticulous, patient process of editing, printing and stitching together accounts of innumerable horrors that have marked global human history. 'Slowly', she says, 'I moved by stitching and stitching along the frightening tales.' This deep gesture of collective mourning also applies to the act of witnessing embodied in the figure of the bystander that appears in the ensemble of *Spaces* (1996–1997). The anonymous, shadow-like figure passively watches the theatre of violence. These two works in conversation highlight the question of an ethics of bearing witness, which echoes feminist calls for a politics of empathy and solidarity.

## 7. Drawing Room

Drawing has remained a constant thread throughout Nicodemus's practice. Returning to motifs such as the double and the shadow, these works reflect ongoing explorations of grief and the struggle to overcome isolation. *The Widow and the Shadow* (2018) emerged from a period of mourning, while the more recent series *Folie à deux* (2024) suggests a search for balance and connection. In psychiatry, 'folie à deux' designates a psychosis that is transferred from one individual to another. Here, two seated figures mirror each other in varied colour palettes. Their silhouetted bodies are marked with a circle on the chest – as if the space of the heart had been hollowed out – evoking an emotional spectrum that spans from pain to love, and that circulates from one to the other.



*The Widow and the Shadow*, 2018.  
Courtesy of the artist and Richard Saltoun  
Gallery, London, Rome, New York.

## 8. One-woman Show

'I paint, I write, I scream. I can't shut up.'  
—Everlyn Nicodemus

The earliest works in Nicodemus's career are already steeped in a profound engagement towards the recognition of women's struggles in patriarchal societies. She returned to Tanzania in 1979. While working as a Swahili teacher in a Scandinavian aid organisation, she joined a group of expat women who got together to paint and draw. The connection to the medium was immediate, and Nicodemus started painting on every support she could find at local markets: cardboard, bark-cloth and baskets. Six months later, in 1980, she succeeded in staging her first one-woman show at the National Museum of Tanzania in Dar es Salaam. She presented paintings and poems addressing topics such as reproductive rights, pregnancy and childbirth, responding, in her own way, to the call of Senegalese feminist Awa Thiam, who wrote in 1978: 'Women have to regain power of speech, the true one. This will not be done without difficulty, because the privileged ones who use it – men – want to keep it.'



*After the Birth*, 1980.

Courtesy of the artist and Private Collection, Belgium.

## About the artist

Everlyn Nicodemus lives and works in Edinburgh. She moved to Scotland seventeen years ago, after having lived in Antwerp then Brussels between 1989 and 2008. She is the recipient of the 2022 Freelands Award for her retrospective at the National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh (2024–25). Her work has been presented in various solo and group exhibitions internationally since 1980, and her academic work circulated through numerous conferences, symposia and publications. Between 1996 and 2000, she served on the editorial board of the international journal *Third Text* alongside its founder Rasheed Araeen and editor Jean Fisher. Nicodemus is represented by Richard Saltoun Gallery, London, Rome and New York, and Andrew Kreps, New York.

### Quotes:

- Jean Fisher, *Everlyn Nicodemus: Between silence and laughter*, *Third Text*, 1997
- Everlyn Nicodemus interviewed by Lia Gorter in *Vrouwen* Maandblad van de Nederlandse Vrouwenbeweging, 1985
- Awa Thiam, *Speak Out, Black Sisters. Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa*, 1986

## Public Programme

- 24/10 19:00-20:00**  
Opening Talk with Everlyn Nicodemus,  
Stephanie Straine and Sofia Dati <sup>(EN)</sup>
- 25/10 15:00-16:00**  
Lecture by Catherine de Zegher <sup>(EN)</sup>
- 03/12 19:00-20:00**  
Lecture by Zoé Samudzi <sup>(EN)</sup>  
in partnership with KASK Curatorial  
Studies
- 29/01 19:00-20:00**  
Lecture by Osei Bonsu <sup>(EN)</sup>  
in partnership with KASK Curatorial  
Studies
- 05/11, 03/12 & 07/01**  
**18:00-21:00**  
Nocturnes with guided tours, talks  
and workshops.

Stay updated on the exhibition programme  
or book your guided tour via [wiels.org](http://wiels.org).

## Credits

The exhibition is organised in collaboration  
with National Galleries of Scotland.

It is made possible thanks to the generous  
support of Richard Saltoun Gallery, London,  
Rome and New York. With special thanks to  
Amir Shariat and all lenders.

**Curator:** Sofia Dati

**WIELS interns:** Flora Vanclooster & Pau-  
line Boudaoud

**Today you are a shadow  
 Tomorrow a mirror  
 Broken into thousands  
 of splinters.  
 Heavy with fear  
 Surrounded by an  
 impenetrable forest.  
 The day after...  
 Perhaps a human**

Everlyn Nicodemus, 1985

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La 1ère



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MUSIC<sup>3</sup>

RICHARD SALTOUN