

PORTRAIT

Nils-Udo living and painting nature

German artist Nils-Udo is a tree. A tree aged 75, with a long, dry trunk, and ramifications as numerous as the ideas teeming in his brain when he works with nature or paints. We stealthily plucked this impressive form of plant life for a brief interview in Paris, just before he took temporary root in Hauterives in the Drôme for the exhibition of his latest piece, "Temple", and his photographs, paying tribute to the postman artist Ferdinand Cheval. Nils-Udo is not only a plastic nature artist, he is also a painter. "I can't be

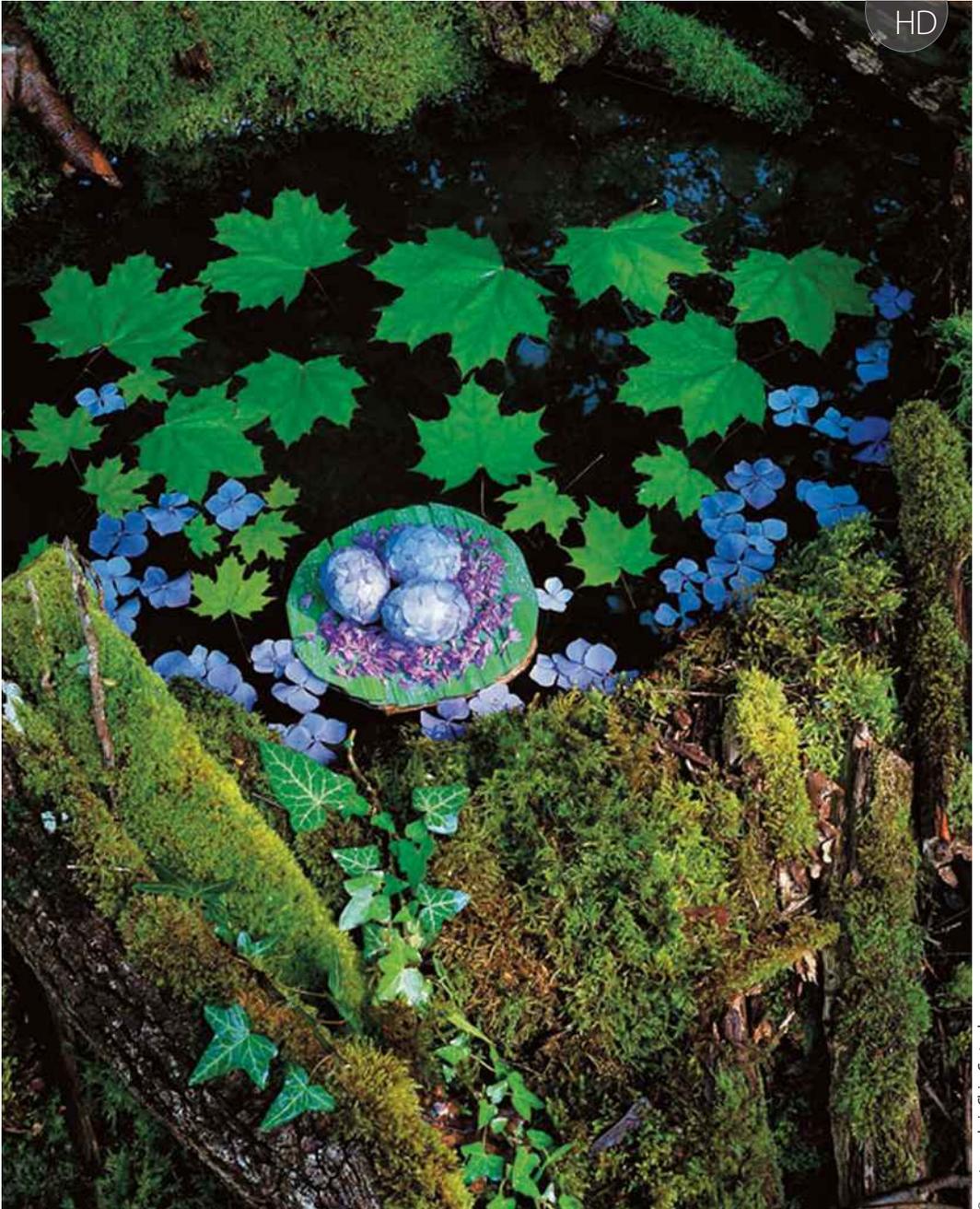
pigeon-holed in any way, and I've always been a painter!" he says. The silvan and aquatic landscapes of Lower Franconia were his first workshops. A childhood spent in the open, at a castle in the Main Valley, determined his future artistic career in and with nature. In 1960, the self-taught artist went to Paris, because "at that time, everything was happening in the French capital". He spent nine years there before returning to the Chiemgau region in Bavaria. In 1972, he abandoned the canvas for the countryside, using "only materials taken from the site. I was at a dead end with painting: its flat surface seemed too artificial to me. I rented some land from the farmers in my village and created some plantations." A year later, his installations were coming to life wherever he was taken by his commissions and residences. From Germany, he went to the French shores of the Mediterranean, where he planted a "Reed Tower" (1973). From then on until the present day, he has travelled to and stayed in over forty countries, including the United States, Asia, the African continent and the Old World. He seeks out the most appropriate inspiration whoever he is – in the middle of the Namibian desert, in the depths of Germanic forests, at the bottom of American canyons, at the foot of island volcanoes, by lakes, rocks and water courses. Nests ("Nest", 1978), altars ("March Altar", 1981, "River altar", 1980), entrances, rafts, houses and temples ("Temple", 2012) appear magically anchored to their source of nourishment: earth and water. To achieve all this, Nils-Udo has no design: he



Nils-Udo (b. 1937).

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Nils-Udo (b. 1937), "Black Pond", 2000, maple leaves, duck eggs, hydrangea flowers, iris leaves, Vallery, France. 125 x 125 cm.



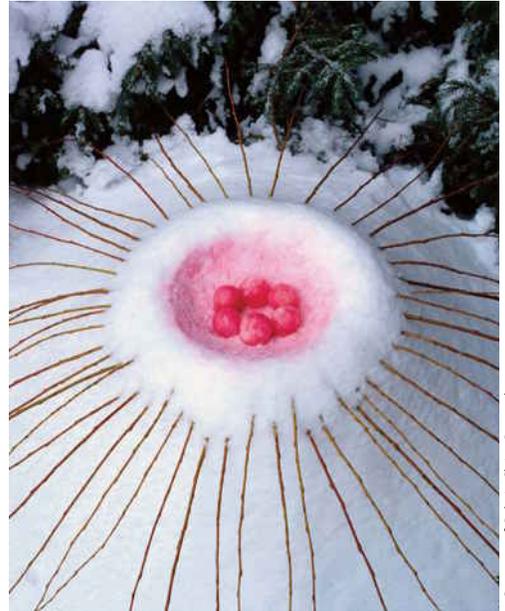
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Nils-Udo, "Untitled", 1986,
chestnut leaves, vetch flowers,
Vassivière Lake, Limousin,
ilfochrome, 100 x 100 cm (detail).

simply looks around him. Then, using what he finds and a few tools, he carries out his project, alone or with the help of a few assistants. "I re-arrange natural elements and stage their living force," he says, with passion. This can go very quickly, or take several weeks, because the "project manager" constructs pieces that may be small – even minimalist, often – or monumental. Photography provides proof of this ephemeral art, which can be reduced to nothing by a breath of wind. The artist waits for the best light to fix the eternal instant of reinvented nature. Environmental installations, immortalised in his shots, are often chromatic, worked as a painter would with his brushes. He also stresses that the nature surrounding his arrangements is just as interesting as they are. "What I show is not so much a nest or an altar, but everything around it!" The moss and tree trunks in the Vallery site, in France, are just as significant as his "Black Pond" (2000), a nest of hydrangeas, maple leaves, iris leaves and wild duck eggs. "I am neither a sculptor nor a photographer, and I do not decorate nature with artefacts. My work is only a pretext for revealing the reality of nature." We get the message. Since 2004, at the same time as his work in situ, he has rediscovered painting, which often keeps him shut away in his house at Riederer, in Bavaria. What is his subject? Nature, always nature, through gleaming puddles, chaotic and almost unreal tree trunks with arbitrary colours. Works treated in solid tones, heirs to his in situ arrangements, but now detached from them and almost abstract ("Sans titre", 2007, 2010, 1995-1997). Great art, which would never have emerged in such visionary form without his experience in the field. His work, internationally recognised, expresses power, grace and poetry all at once. But be warned – never tell him that he creates beauty: that makes him angry. "My approach is poetic, but I do not seek beauty, because nature is simply beautiful in its virginity. And the basis is a fundamental contradiction, because I destroy it, I damage it through what I do. This



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Nils-Udo, "Snow nest", Upper Bavaria, 1993, snow, willow wands, snowballs dyed with guelder rose berries. 100 x 100 cm.

is the paradox of Man on Earth." The pruning shears cut; his hands weave clematis stems with sawn trunks; tools pierce: so much is evident. He creates astonishing splashes of flowers in the trees, constructs nests with bamboo, reeds, oranges and limes ("Red Rock Nest", 1998), and streams bright with service tree berries. To listen to him, his fairy-tale world is a misunderstanding. He denies that he is a land artist: "During the Sixties, I used to know several artists affiliated to this movement, but their discourse is different, because they do not make nature's vital energy a theme. I am the only one who lives in it and works in it every day! Even farmers have lost touch with it." His sharp blue eyes suddenly seem to mist over with sadness. Nils-Udo is a pioneer artist in ecological art, who returns his works to their natural elements once they are finished. He shows with delicacy and metaphor not only the inexhaustible richness of our world, but also its fragility, its transient nature, doomed to wither and disappear through man's misuse. His arrangements, often imbued with sacred meaning,

READING

"Nils-Udo, l'art dans la nature", by Nils-Udo and Hubert Besacier, published by Flammarion, Paris, 2011.

speak of life, from birth to death, and are devised as shimmering pictures stamped with the mark of historical colourist painters like Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, the idols of his youth. While evincing a contemporary French-style Romanticism through the subtlety of his pieces, he remains firmly German, Schopenhauer's heir, with a touch of pessimism or even Expressionism when he speaks of his work: "When I paint, I struggle. [...] I have fought all my life to show the materials with which I create." In 1996, the artist created the constructions on water in the tropical forest that appear in the video clip "Across the river" by Peter Gabriel, made for the WWF campaign "The living planet". In 2010, his "Summer Eruption", the appearance of a float vibrant with flowers on a lake commissioned by Champagne Nicolas Feuillatte, enriched the contemporary collection of the eponymous winemaker. With regular exhibitions at the Pierre-Alain Challier Gallery in Paris and the Claire Gastaud Gallery in Clermont-Ferrand, the artist showed his double-faceted work in the retrospective at L'Adresse Musée de la Poste in Paris in 2011. Open to educational and supportive projects based on art and nature, he travels all over the world, wherever he feels the cause is a good one. His new State commission, a 17-metre "Autumn Raft", will set sail in late October 2012 on Lake Eguzon, in the Creuse. Straightforward, stubborn, impassioned, and as simple and elegant as his works, Nils-Udo works in the earth's crust and on its canvas, revealing the evidence of what is sometimes invisible to our eyes, according to Saint-Exupéry, namely... the essential.

Virginie Chuimer-Layen

"Nils-Udo", paintings and photographs, Château de la Trémoillère, 15380 Anglards de Salers - Until 30 September.

www.claire-gastaud.com

"Nils-Udo", Campredon art centre, 20 Rue du Docteur Tallet, 84800 L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue - Until 7 October.

www.islesurlasorgue.fr

Galerie Pierre-Alain Challier, 8 Rue Debelleye, Paris 75003

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Galerie Claire Gastaud, 5 Rue Terrail, 63000 Clermont-Ferrand,

www.claire-gastaud.com





Nils-Udo, "Red Rock nest",
bamboos, reeds, earth, oranges,
lemons, limes, Red Rock Canyon,
California, 1998, ilfochrome on
aluminium, 100 x 150 cm,
3 copies.

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