

# Wildlife Art Journal

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An Interview with  
Laurence SAUNOIS,  
Tireless French Artist,  
Gardener,  
Conservationsist

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# An Interview With Laurence Saunois, Tireless French Artist, Gardener, Conservationist

BBC's International Wildlife Artist of Year Inspires By Thinking Globally, Acting Locally

*Written By Wildlife Art Journal Staff*



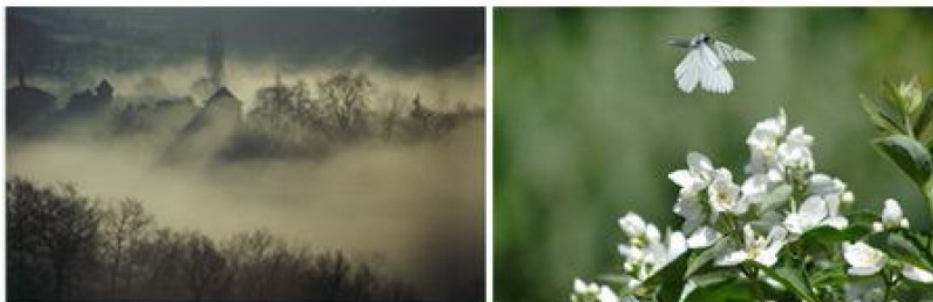
Don't Let Me Die, 20 X 27 inches, oil on canvas, Photo By: Laurence Saunois

Everyone in the world knows that the French savor their sophisticated tastes, be they visual, culinary, acoustic, or other expressions of the sensual arts. Painting, sculpture and photography are not approached as mere avocations or “hobbies”; those who engage in such pursuits are subject, after all, to centuries of accumulated philosophical reflection on what constitutes creative greatness and what does not. It is a high standard that forever looms over the careers of young artists aspiring to be true to themselves.

Laurence Saunois, an artist who explores animal motifs, is praised for making a contemporary statement with her work, having in 2010 earned special critical recognition in the BBC Wildlife Artist Of The Year Competition. Not long ago, Wildlife Art Journal had an opportunity to interview Ms. Saunois to discuss not only the evolution of her career but the challenges of being a wildlife painter in a country with highly refined artistic expectations. WAJ encourages readers to help Saunois promote great ape protection and restoration through the Kalaweit Project.

**WILDLIFE ART JOURNAL:** Let's begin, Laurence, with a question that many readers have: We know of the historic struggles artists in Europe have faced with representing animals in their work, including adherents of the Animaliers sculpture movement in the 19th century that included, among others, Barye, Bugatti and Rodin. What is it like to be a painter of wildlife subject matter in France at the dawn of the 21st century?

**LAURENCE SAUNOIS:** It's very difficult in France to be an animal painter and to live on sales of such work, unless one is very specialized in hunting scenes or painting horses, for example. There are no international wildlife art shows in France to exhibit at. Important Parisian shows are really centered on contemporary art. French museums reserved exclusively for animal art are very rare. And there is no magazine devoted only to the subject. Contemporary art could almost be classified as “unique art” that does not adhere to any earlier movement. Fortunately, thanks to Internet, it is very easy for an artist to broadcast her work in France and worldwide. It is a tremendous tool of communication.



Saunois founded Lou Pais to protect nature in her home region of France. She turned her own property into a refuge for birds, butterflies and other flora and fauna. Some of her photography [can also be viewed by clicking here.](#)



**WAJ:** What is your background as an artist?

**SAUNOIS:** Well, My mother had been brought up in the country and she always had very strong contacts with nature and animals. She bestowed me with the same love this kind of indispensable knowledge and appreciation for the natural world has benefitted me as a wildlife artist.

**WAJ:** How did you arrive at the point where you are today.

**SAUNOIS:** I was born near Paris, but I went very regularly to spend school holidays on my grandfather's small farm in the southwest of France, in Figeac. It's in this family house that I live now. As a child I stood in admiration of artists such as Ingres, Géricault, Durër, and Léonardo de Vinci. I tried to reproduce their works with a instinctive way because I had never taken formal drawing lessons. I spent hours at a time drawing.

**WAJ:** Looking back at the support you received from your family and your days in the country, what were some of the important influences?

**SAUNOIS:** As a child, I lived kind of a solitary life and I was always contemplative in the face of nature. I had places I would go where I would spent long moments observing insects and birds my grandmother, who lived in a Parisian suburb, had a farmyard, a magnificent garden and cats. I had my own small square of earth where I grew flowers and vegetable from seed. I think that it's from there that my love of gardening emanates.



My Baby, My Love!  
Charcoal on paper  
50 X 70 centimeters

**WAJ:** You obviously love horses and domestic animals in addition to wildlife.

**SAUNOIS:** When I was 12, Candy, a female German shepherd, came into my life. She was my confidante and my friend. And then, there were also horses. I had passion for nature, it seemed, without limit! I drew horses in motion and still positions. My first animal painting was of the horse with which I had made my rides, an animal named Jason.

I began to ride at 9 years old. My professor was an ex-instructor of the Cadre Noir of Saumur. He taught me much more than the simple basis of horseback riding. He taught me to become one with my horse, to understand it. I practiced many riding disciplines: show jumping, training, cross, and American horseback riding. Nothing gave me more pleasure than to explore nature with a horse.

**WAJ:** It isn't easy in France to declare that one plans to be a professional artist and support oneself commercially, is it?

**SAUNOIS:** No. I followed studies of secretarial work and obtained my diploma at 17 years old. I wanted to go to the School of Fine Arts of Paris. I'm grateful that my mother encouraged me. My artistic file of works earned me acceptance, but unfortunately, as I wasn't yet 18 years old, I was not allowed entrance. Very disappointed, I gave up totally drawing in pencil because, during this period, I didn't paint. I only drew. So I carried on with secretary studies. Then I worked at various companies on Paris before establishing my own company.

**WAJ:** Many artists who later become known for the ability to paint the human figure and those of animals have a foundation of drawing in graphite. What served as the catalyst for you moving to an easel?

**SAUNOIS:** One day around Christmas time when I was 28 years old, a friend offered me a gift with oil tubes and stacks of canvas. It was a revelation. I discovered colors, matter and lighting effects. I knew nothing about the artistic techniques but I instinctively knew how to approach a subject because of my drawing. It was cathartic and I wanted to try all of the techniques for painting. As I experimented, I felt like a child discovering new gifts under the Christmas tree. Then I developed my own technique and way of working.



Artist and conservationist Laurence Saunois was the  
2010 BBC International Wildlife Artist of the Year

**WAJ:** You are known today for your work in a variety of mediums. How did you start to narrow your focus on animals?

**SAUNOIS:** In 2003, while participating in an animal exhibition near Figeac, I had the idea that I wanted to become exclusively an animal artist. And, five years later, I started focusing on animals in my work as a painter, sculptor, and photographer.

**WAJ:** Last year, your artwork garnered praise from the BBC competition in Britain.

**SAUNOIS:** BBC's prestigious Wildlife Photographer of the Year contest, rewarding the best animal photographers worldwide, had already been in existence for several years. Then, in 2009, BBC launched its first "Wildlife Artist of the Year" contest which is broken down into several categories. For that first edition, three of my paintings were finalists and one received a "commended award". It was an oil portrait of a wildcat on canvas.

**WAJ:** You didn't stop there.

**SAUNOIS:** In 2010, I wanted to participate again and I sent five of my works, two oil paintings and three charcoal drawings, representing a gorilla mom and her young. I was pleasantly surprised to have all of these 5 works selected. And one of my drawings of apes won me the title of International Artist of the Year.

**WAJ:** Tell us about the winning piece.

**SAUNOIS:** This drawing represents a gorilla with her baby in her arms. It required several dozen hours of work with over 10 different charcoals. While doing it, I experienced many feelings. As the work progressed, a title occurred me with increasing force: "I have a dream".



I Have A Dream  
Charcoal on paper  
50 X 70 cm



**WAJ:** Americans associate that statement with the Reverend Martin Luther King and civil rights movement. Did you have a conservation context in mind?

**SAUNOIS:** Yes, "I have a dream" is a famous phrase, packed with symbolism, that perfectly encompasses all that this charcoal drawing means to me. These gorillas embody the powerful love of a mother for her infant, and the sense of peace and safety it feels in her arms. I wonder what the little one is dreaming about. I put a lot of emotion into this drawing, as I couldn't help reflecting on the future of our planet and that of gorillas and all other endangered species: A dream of freedom, a dream of hope for survival of the species, a dream of a better future.

**WAJ:** It obviously resonated with the judges. What did they tell you?

**SAUNOIS:** The jury said, "This sensitive pencil study of a gorilla mother and her baby is beautifully executed. It invites the viewer to explore the folds and crevices of fur and skin, and depicts the animals almost as a landscape in themselves."

**WAJ:** How has winning the award affected your career?

**SAUNOIS:** I became a professional wildlife artist 5 years ago. It is a tremendous distinction to be noticed and be rewarded by BBC. It has made me better known in France. I received a lot of messages of congratulations.

**WAJ:** In a way, you've become a new ambassador for wildlife art. How would you describe the attitude toward wildlife art by the public and those in the French fine art community?

**SAUNOIS:** Many French people like animal and wildlife art. I see it every day thanks to the messages which I receive. The interested public can, thanks to Internet, discover the artists and their exhibitions. Shows dedicated to nature conservation or to hunting often include art. I think that curators and those involved in the politics of art still consider animal art to be minor art. It is really extremely rare that French animal artist is displayed during his lifetime in a French museum.

**WAJ:** There have been stories written about you, but what is taking priority in your life these days?



Rouge Queue  
oil on board  
30 X 40 cm

**SAUNOIS:** One of the drawings here is part of a "Great Apes" project which I am assembling to help an association: Kalaweit. [The Kalaweit Project](#) was created in 1999 to help rescue the captive gibbons in Indonesia. The objective is to return those gibbons to the wild after a necessary rehabilitation work. This is done through a comprehensive approach, with protection of the gibbons' environment (creation of wildlife reserves, struggle against deforestation) and integration of the local populations at all levels of the project. Kalaweit manages two centers in Borneo and Sumatra. It currently is rehabilitating 300 gibbons and siamangs, and the facilities employ 50 people, veterinarians and other staffers.

**WAJ:** From an artistic standpoint, the project sounds ambitious.

**SAUNOIS:** The "Great Apes" project consists of making 40 to 50 portraits of gorillas, chimpanzees, orangutans, siamangs, and bonobos—all done in charcoal. These drawings will be exhibited in 2011 in Paris and offered for sale to collect funds for Kalaweit. Fifty percent of the sales will be donated. A limited edition of fine art prints are already for sale in the artist's online shop ([www.wals-shopper.com](http://www.wals-shopper.com)). From every art reproduction sale, 5 Euros will be donated to Kalaweit.

**WAJ:** What are your feelings about giving back to nature as an artist?

**SAUNOIS:** I find that it is really very important for an animal artist to get involved in the nature conservation. In 2010, I helped create an environmental association [Lou Pais Environment](#) because sometimes, grave problems connected to the environment are just beyond our front door. To fight for nature conservation and biodiversity is really the challenge of everybody, all of us, together. My association was born because the politicians of my city, Figeac, want to destroy 16 hectares of classified natural meadow and forests to realize an industrial park in a quite small valley very rich in biodiversity. Several families will be touched by heavy metal pollution, noise, etc. and their house will have no more value. They will lose their quality of life, their inheritance, their heritage. I welcome readers to visit our website.

**WAJ:** You have a lot before you as an artist and yet you still find time to be involved in conservation at the local and global level. What are a few of the things near and dear to your heart?

**SAUNOIS:** I was involved with my own garden, Les Jardins de Jammery. It became an official refuge through the French League of Birds Protection and is affiliated with the "Gardens of Noé" set up by the Natural history museum of Paris. To date, I have listed 60 species of birds and more than 80 species of butterflies in my garden. I cultivate it in a natural way. It has especially a peculiarity: I never water it. Nevertheless, 800 varieties of plants prosper there. This year, a book dedicated to my garden and my biological way of gardening will go out. Educate people on new gardening manners is also very important.

**WAJ:** Anything else that you care to mention?

**SAUNOIS:** For the Earth to endure, we must find a reason to have hope in the future.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Saunois' work also can be viewed in a WAJ story on French and Belgian artists titled [Wildlife Continental](#).