

Genocchio, Benjamin. "An Eye for Landscapes That Transcend Nature," The New York Times, May 22, 2009.

# The New York Times

## An Eye for Landscapes That Transcend Nature

One's lasting impression of the April Gornik exhibition at the Heckscher Museum of Art in Huntington is the sheer virtuosity of the pictures. They glow with mystery and grandeur. Landscape painting of this quality is not often seen on Long Island.

Assembled by Kenneth Wayne, the museum's chief curator, the show focuses on the artist's powerful, large-scale oil paintings. There are a dozen pictures, created roughly from the late 1980s to the present, nicely displayed in two of the Heckscher's newly renovated galleries. The removal of a false ceiling in them has allowed the museum to accommodate much larger works than it could before.



New Horizons. The large-scale oil paintings by April Gornik on display at the Heckscher include "Sun Storm Sea" (2005).

At 56, Ms. Gornik is already a painter of eminence. She has had shows around the world, and her work is in several major museum collections, including those of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art. I would place her among the top landscape artists working in America today.

That this is Ms. Gornik's first major solo exhibition on Long Island in more than 15 years seems an oversight, especially given that she lives part of the year in Suffolk County. But better late than never, for there are probably dozens of artists living and working on Long Island who are deserving of shows.



April Gornik's "Rising Moon" (1991).

As you enter the exhibition, your eyes are riveted on the scenery — dusk in a red desert, marshy waterways, sun showers over the ocean, a mirrorlike lake, and a twilight dawn seen from an elevated vantage point over a savanna. Diverse locations like New Mexico, Africa, China, the Caribbean and, of course, Long Island serve as inspirations for these awe-inspiring visions of nature as sublime.

They are not copies of nature. Ms. Gornik relies on photography to help create her imagery, selecting and combining elements from different photographs that are then melded and manipulated on a computer. Further changes take place when she paints, as Ms. Gornik makes decisions about scale, volume, color, contrast and style.

Ms. Gornik has clearly studied past masters, especially those artists who painted nature and light, among them the English Impressionist J. M. W. Turner, the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich and, most obviously, Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church and Asher B. Durand of the Hudson River School.

Part of what makes Ms. Gornik such a fine artist is the way she combines a striking clarity of line with expressive beauty. Take "Fresh Light" (1987), in which she explores the silent world of coastal marshland in a way that is almost mystical, depicting an ethereal light burning through cloud cover above a vast, surreal, carpetlike landscape of grasses. It is exquisite.

I was also taken by "Sun Storm Sea" (2005), with its minimal use of color. It is a masterpiece of tonal Expressionism, the artist largely restricting her palette to blue and white to depict swirling and throbbing storm clouds over the ocean. It sets a standard for cloud paintings that many artists will emulate but few will attain.



April Gornik's "Mirror Lake, China" (2004).

Rarely have I seen such precision and concentrated calm as in "Twilight Dawn" (2009), completed in January and showing publicly for the first time. It is a composite made up of photographs of the American Southwest that Ms. Gornik took in 1979-80 and only recently rediscovered, showing the soft pink-purple light of daybreak over an open landscape. Or is it dusk? We don't know, but it doesn't really matter, for the picture seems to transcend time.

The same temporal ambiguity permeates "Red Desert" (2008), based on the artist's photographs of deserts in Namibia, and "Mirror Lake, China" (2004), in which the water reflects the surrounding mountains and trees. Complex shadows and other subtleties hold no terrors for this veteran oil painter.

"Rising Moon" (1991) is one of the more unusual paintings in the show. It is darker and more abstract than anything else here, or anything else I can recall by this artist. It shows the moon's pale yellow glow rising behind clouds at night, or that is what it looks like to me. I was also reminded of the eerie skies in the paintings of Charles Burchfield.

Paintings like "Rising Moon" are for serious landscape aficionados, making no concession to popular taste. But over all, this is a show that everyone will love, for Ms. Gornik is the sort of painter who wants her work to be accessible to interpretation and, yes, beautiful. There is nothing wrong with that.

"The Luminous Landscapes of April Gornik," Heckscher Museum of Art, 2 Prime Avenue, Huntington, through July 5. (631) 351-3250 or [heckscher.org](http://heckscher.org).