

# D A N E S E C O R E Y

Landes, Jennifer. April Gornik, Inspired by the Light, The East Hampton Star, June 18, 2008.



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## April Gornik, Inspired by the Light

(6/18/2008) Not much changes in the landscape environments of April Gornik, except when everything changes. Audiences who see *Inspired by the Light*, opening at Guild Hall on Saturday and also featuring paintings by Jane Freilicher and Jane Wilson, will see the type of Ms. Gornik's work to which they are accustomed —South Fork-inspired seascapes and fields that conflate a personal, surrealistic interpretation with a more universal emotional punch.

Audiences who see a show at the Chelsea gallery Danese this fall will find, instead, sweeping vistas inspired by Botswana, Namibia, and the Serengeti plain. Yet they too bear Ms. Gornik's unmistakable style, generalized in depiction but specific in personal expression.

The global shift in Ms. Gornik's art *was an accident*, she said in her studio last Thursday. *I was concerned about species extinction and biodiversity*, she said, *and I wanted to see animals in Africa, which are disappearing at an alarming rate.*

She chose Botswana for the strength of its anti-poaching laws and good wilderness areas. *I thought it deserved support because of its environmental and wildlife preservation policies.*

The sand dunes that she saw in Namibia gave her the first inkling that her experience in Africa would come into play in her work. These landscapes are entirely different from ones she did that were inspired by the South Fork or even China. Dramatic and broad, with a palette that relies on much warmer tones than are usual, they are monumental — big landscape, big sky — and barely contained even by overlarge canvases.

The Serengeti paintings have the added drama of being transformed by the clouds before the storms of the rain season. Moody and seemingly backlit, they have both intensity and equanimity.

*It's the beautifully strange character of Africa*, Ms. Gornik said. *You get this jolt of recognition even while looking at completely alien scenes. It's something that did happen to all of us traveling there. It's extraordinary.*

Back in Sag Harbor, where Ms. Gornik lives with her husband, the artist Eric Fischl, she has hosted an annual fund-raiser for Planned Parenthood and worked to preserve the character of the historic village through the new organization Save Sag Harbor.



April Gornik in her Sag Harbor studio in front of *Storm Sea*, 2008, left, and on right a work in progress

Concerned about a large development on Ferry Road, and searching for someone in charge of organizing dissent, she said, *I found out it was basically two women, community activists who had been doing it for something like 60 years, and only those two.*

*You realize if it's not you it's not going to be anybody else,* she said. Meanwhile, she said, *there was something subtly transformative* about several proposals for residential and commercial development, including for a CVS drugstore.

She has a number of concerns such as light pollution that she hopes the village board will address as it updates its zoning laws. *Really, there are all sorts of useful things that impact this village that can feed out into other parts of the world,* she said.

And while she is concerned about the extinction of animals worldwide such as cheetahs in Africa, here she worries about the habitats and migration of songbirds. *I'm searching for a balance between acting locally and reaching out to the rest of the world,* she said.

Her paintings in the Guild Hall exhibit will be a mix of recent and older works drawn exclusively from the South Fork.

*The very first time Eric and I came out to the East End was in August 1979,* she recalled. *We took the train out to Montauk on a very sultry Friday afternoon, and by the time we got to Montauk the sky was insanely black with vertical clouds.* It rained all weekend.

*I think of the painting 'Fresh Light,'* which she completed in 1987 and which is included in the Guild Hall show, *as the first painting I did that was directly influenced by being out here, that steamy thing that happens in fields in the morning,* she said. *It seemed charged, magical, and matter-of-fact all at once.*

Christina Strassfield, the curator of Guild Hall show, said that all three painters — Ms. Gornik, Ms. Freilicher, and Ms. Wilson — incorporate light and emotion into the landscape that each has adopted as a theme.

Ms. Wilson looks at climate, she said, and Ms. Freilicher focuses on place. *April is the most ethereal and wide-ranging,* Ms. Strassfield said. *Her landscapes are serene in an agitated, unique way.*

*People think of landscapes as all the same, but these are masters, she said of all three painters, who are unique in their approach and work together well when comparing and contrasting them in an exhibition.*

Talking about her own inspiration, Ms. Gornik once said that landscape paintings *were other ways of evoking light.* Last Thursday she described the light here as *effulgent* in the way it refracts from the ocean, harbor, and north shore. *It refracts off the land and itself,* she said.

Ms. Gornik said she likes the feeling of living on the edge of a continent, whether it's the South Fork or Africa. She grew up in Ohio and didn't like the inland light, she said.

A recent work, *Storm Sea,* was inspired by a northeaster and features waves she describes as *aggressive and peculiar.* Also to be included in the Guild Hall show, it is based on a photograph she took during a storm. *It's slowed-down wave behavior. It feels to me like it's weaving itself together,* she explained.

*I'm not a great photographer,* she said, but taking pictures helps her recognize and remember images to use in her paintings. *It is never the case that I can duplicate it,* she said. *It doesn't work for me on that level. If it's not imaginary, it's not artistic. You can't use a photograph without reimagining or positively interfering with what the image represents.*

While some artists struggle to find a sense of completeness that tells them a painting is finished, *I don't usually find it that complicated,* Ms. Gornik said. *You achieve a feeling of separation when you are done.*

Before a painting is finished, *there are millions of doors you have to walk through, things that have to be corrected.* The process keeps instructing you, *now go here, now go there.* When you are done, *the cohesion removes you from entry back into the paintings.... There's no place left to go with them.*

