



Springs Invitational Art Stories: Students of Janet Jennings Trace Her Influence on Their Process

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by Dakota Arkin Cafourek

“What gives life meaning? Where is regeneration? It’s about learning,” said Kate Rabinowitz, one of [Janet Jennings’s](#) painting students whose work has been selected for this year’s Springs Invitational at Ashawagh Hall. Since 1982, Jennings has been guiding art students on the East End. They come to her for a variety of reasons at different stages in their artistic careers, be it for a sense of community, for peer learning, or for the thoughtful syllabus that guides artists on their individual creative paths.

“I don’t really plan or force it, it just happens. The flow always comes,” Jennings said of her method of teaching. Each week’s lesson examines an art virtuoso, both to demonstrate technical skills and impel students’ energy onto the canvas.

Janet Jennings hadn’t planned to become a teacher. Rather, she agreed to fill a role at the Parrish Art Museum per a friend’s request—that was 35 years ago. She took to it and has had some students coming to her oil and watercolor classes for nearly as long as her teaching career, at establishments such as the Parrish, the Art Barge, Guild Hall and the Golden Eagle.

For Jennings, teaching is rewarding. She loves her students and the second family she has created with them over the years. “It’s exciting to see the light go on in everyone’s head,” she said, describing how she teaches her students about process, while also dismantling the rules to channel their expression.

Janet Jennings and several of her students—Kate Rabinowitz, Kurt Giehl, Kirsten Benfield, Barbara DiLorenzo, and Lesley Obrock— will be recognized in this year’s 50th annual Springs Invitational. They all recently sat down for an interview in Jennings’s large, bright studio tucked away near Cedar Point County Park in East Hampton, NY.

[Kurt Giehl](#), whose seascape *Grace Point* is on display in the Springs Invitational, said Jennings’s message to the class is this: “Get movement and action, get energy out and immediately onto what you’re working on.” Jennings likes to begin her oil classes with prompting a timed sketch. “This is usually everyone’s best work,” she said, “that energy is what you want to have all the time.”



“Grace Point” by Kurt Giehl, 2017. Oil on canvas, 12 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Giehl had been a hobbyist, spending most of his adult life yelling on a Wall Street trading floor. It’s only been one year since moving full time to the East End that he’s given his art full attention. “After that class, I’m motivated,” Giehl said. “Afterwards, it’s when I want to paint. It’s been an amazing introduction into technique, color, and expressing myself through art.”

Giehl’s work is influenced by the beauty he finds at sea when he accompanies his husband fishing. “Fish are beautiful,” he said with wonder and excitement as he imagines his next canvas series. At the dawn of his artistic career, he is experimenting with mediums and enjoying the movement of paint on the canvas. “You don’t know where it’s going to end up,” he said.

“Art was always around me. I’d sit and paint, travel and paint,” said New Zealand native [Kirsten Benfield](#). A student of Jennings for 10 years, she said, “Art has become my soul food.” *Bright Day Pines*, Benfield’s painting selected for the Springs Invitational, was begun in Jennings’s class.



“Quartered Series - Bright day pines” by Kirsten Benfield. Watercolor, Karandach on paper, 14 x 10 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Echoing lessons in abstract expressionism, Benfield used a cell phone as an icon to drive her painting. Inspired by the object that has engrossed so many of us, she breaks it down into shapes, then horizontals and verticals. Through painting it over and over again, she steps further out from the cell phone and its meaning is recontextualized as shape and object. “It’s a big deal,” Benfield said of being included in the Springs Invitational, “this is my first time in a curated show.”

Stepping Lightly, Kate Rabinowitz’s painting of a racehorse, is as much a study in form as in negative space. From the feeling of emptiness in life from loss, her work aims to make negative space as valuable as shape and form. A lifelong student of art, Rabinowitz recalled that her painting professor at Massachusetts College of Art and Design had led students to his native Japan. Enthralled by the culture, she stayed on to learn woodblock printing in Nagano. Life then steered her to India, where she was a student of yoga.



“Stepping Lightly” by Kate Rabinowitz. Watercolor on paper,
14
x 11 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

While raising a family on the East End, Rabinowitz admired Jennings’s art and attention to physical health. Jennings’s longtime yoga practice and artistic approach reminded Rabinowitz of her studies in Asia, where she learned the connection between breathing and art to prepare her body to create.

Rabinowitz’s world came to a devastating halt when her young daughter was killed and she was plunged into questions about the meaning of life. Her daughter always encouraged her to become an artist, she said, noticing how happy it made her.

“Going to the canvas was like crawling uphill. Life waited like paper for the brush,” Rabinowitz said of restoring art to her life. Returning to Jennings’s watercolor class has been a part of her healing. “I’ve drawn horses my whole life, I feel like I’m in them,” she said of the subject in *Stepping Lightly*, and here, it feels like the horse is coming out of that space. Inspired by Alice Katz, Rabinowitz used watercolor for the piece to find its own dimensionality. “It’s the feeling of space in yourself where you’re not trying to do it,” she said, “it’s just happening.”

[Barbara DiLorenzo](#) had always been in touch with her artistic side, but since retiring as an Art and Creative Director in advertising she has developed a relationship with the watercolor medium as a student of Jennings. “I have always been fascinated by the fog out here, how it simplifies and quiets the landscape,” DiLorenzo said of the subject of her watercolor, *Fog at Accabonac*, selected for the Springs Invitational.



“Fog at Accabonac” by Barbara Dilorenzo. Watercolor on paper, 17 x 21 inches.
Photo courtesy of the artist.

“Janet and the other artists in the class all respond to the beauty out here, each in their own unique way. We like and admire each other; we’re generous with each other so it’s very joyful to be a part of this show with them,” DiLorenzo said. She described her teacher as “an artist who is personally always stretching, growing and exploring,” and loves to be a part of that. “Go off the rails, then bring it back,” Jennings tells her students. In the classroom, deep dives into the masters and the camaraderie and shared passion of the other artists create more substantial learning and influence among the group. “It’s a dialogue with brushes,” said DiLorenzo.

[Lesley Obrock](#), an encaustic painter, uses her time in Jennings’s watercolor classes to explore new ideas for her work. Her artwork is rooted in her background as a landscape designer. In class, Obrock can gather her own ideas and channel Jennings’s experience to create. “I love it,” she said,

"I like to experiment a lot."



"Balance of Leaning" by Lesley Obrock. Encaustic, 14 x 14 inches.
Courtesy of the artist.

Obrock's *The Balance of Learning*, selected for this year's Springs Invitational, grew out of a lesson on painter Giorgio Morandi. "A peculiar man," as Jennings described him, he lived with his sisters and housekeeper, and painted bottles that represented his family. Somewhere between object and personification, his still life household subjects interact and such was the inspiration for Obrock's painting. Hers is an interaction between colors divided into distinct groupings that are having a conversation. For Obrock, it harks back to a feeling in her youth of not being accepted, a release of pent-up angst.

Ever since the United States entered into the Iraq War, Janet Jennings's art has been infused with this concept of "What if," specifically, "What if we fought wars on our own soil, instead of on faraway lands?" Her painting *Plume*, selected for the Springs Invitational, is set in this theme, drawing on the smoke plumes of war and an underwater image that struck her during the 2010 BP oil spill—a plume-like flow from the underwater explosion.

"I keep putting it in my work," she said, which has become more abstract since her early landscapes. She is thrilled to have had her piece selected for this year's show. "I'm always glad to be invited," she said, "it's an honor."

As far as her classes go, Jennings remarked, "People learn off each other." Each one of her students gleans something from the class that allows their process to move forward. Obrock comes to class with a great trust in her peers and teacher. "I'm learning from what they're doing, saying and making myself vulnerable," said Obrock, who welcomes the constructive criticism and surprises in Jennings's classroom.

Kirsten Benfield said, "I'm not locked into a single painting style," and uses Jennings's classes to explore and learn. Kurt Giehl, used to the binary world of banking, appreciates critique unafraid. Rabinowitz challenges herself to go beyond her comfort zone and approach each day as an open slate. For her, studying with Jennings is a master class. "Like with yoga, class is not your practice, but a forum," she said.

Jennings tells her students to keep working and practicing, encouraging them to have a place in their house at the ready for an inspired moment. Hers is a classroom where artists are unveiled, given the tools to go out into the world and create.



“Storm Series IV” by Janet Jennings, 2016. Watercolor on paper. Photo by Gary Mamay. Courtesy of Janet Jennings.

[The 2017 Springs Invitational Art Exhibition](#) presents art by around 114 artists with work selected by Invitational curator Teri Kennedy. The show will be on view from August 4 to 20, 2017 at Ashawagh Hall in East Hampton, N.Y. Presented by the Springs Improvement Society (SIS), the exhibition is a benefit for SIS which maintains and manages Ashawagh all.

The “Springs Invitational Art Stories Series” was arranged by Teri Kennedy to reveal the stories behind some of the art on view, presented from the point of view of the exhibiting artist or artists. To read the series introduction for the Springs Invitational Art Stories, click [here](#).

BASIC FACTS: The Springs Invitational will be held August 4 to 20, 2017 at Ashawagh Hall, 780 Springs Fireplace Rd, East Hampton, NY 11937. www.ashawagh-hall.org.

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