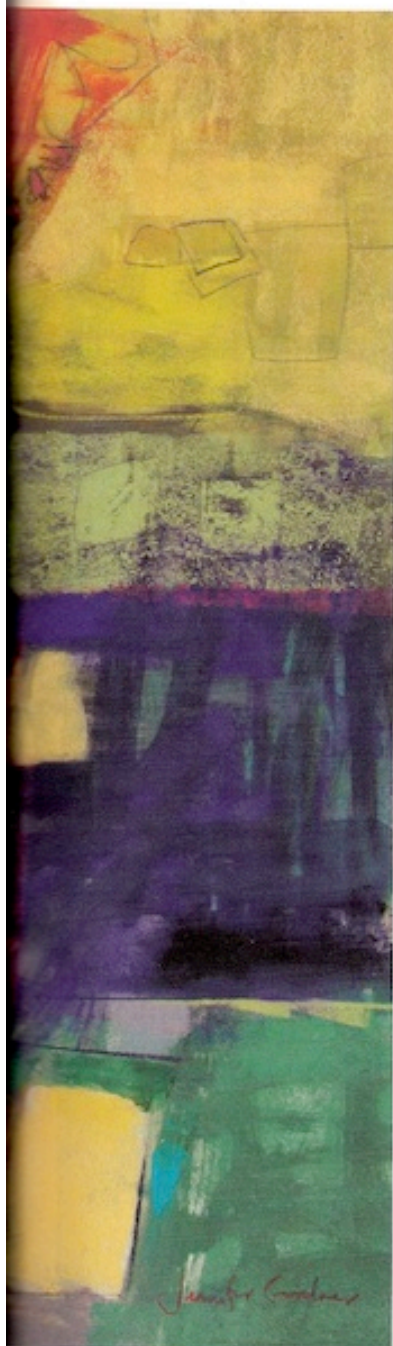




*From Above 2 (22x16)*



## Jennifer Gardner

A need to “see what happens” has driven the artist’s evolution in style—from impressionistic to abstract—with prizewinning results.

BY AMANDA METCALF

### Jennifer Gardner likes to begin a new painting

without any preconceived ideas. “I try to clear my mind of any specific plan as to what I want to achieve,” she says. “What transpires is partly chance and partly a design that gradually evolves into something recognizable.” In her piece, *From Above 2*, what developed was an aerial-view cityscape—an energetic abstraction that won her this year’s Art Spirit Foundation/Dianne B. Bernhard Gold Medal Award for Excellence, a cash prize of \$1,500.

To ensure that each painting stands on its own and becomes an independent creation, Gardner turns her studio into a blank slate before each painting session. “I’m quite tidy in the studio,” she says. All pastels are stored away with their color kin; paper and other materials reside in their proper places. The idea is that nothing should remain from yesterday to influence the painting today; she doesn’t want to think that because yellow created some successful effects today, she won’t be able to let go of the color tomorrow.

### Responding to the Moment

Gardner’s creative process, then, is more of a reaction to a mood than a concept. “I look at my pastels, pick colors that catch my eye and put them in my working tray,” she explains. At this point, a given color is nothing more than something that appeals to her on that particular day. In the case of her award-winning *From Above 2*, the subject matter revealed itself to Gardner long after pastel hit paper.

### About the Artist



Jennifer Gardner ([www.jennifergardner.com](http://www.jennifergardner.com)) of Sarasota, Fla., was born and raised in England. A former lawyer, Gardner turned to her childhood enthusiasm for art when she moved to the U.S. in 1999. Her work has been featured in *The Pastel Journal* (October 2008), *The Artist’s Magazine* and, most recently, in *Best Of America, Pastel Artists, Volume 2*. Gardner is a juried associate member of the Pastel Society of America and is represented by galleries in Acton and Newburyport, Mass.; and Raleigh and Bald Head Island, N.C.



Typically, she begins with a sketch and an initial color application—usually in blocks—with no specific plan. Eventually some interesting shapes will emerge, only some of which, of course, may remain in the end. Gardner then brushes over the pastel with an alcohol wash. “It’s the unexpected effects of this wash which often determine the course a piece will take,” she says. A red area, for instance, may inherit unexpected, interesting colors from the brush. And these, in turn, inspire more strokes and marks.

Spot applications of watercolor might follow. “In *From Above 2*, for example, there is a dab of white watercolor to the right of center, a small dab of orange in the bottom left and turquoise in the upper left,” she says. Gardner might finger-paint or manipulate these spots with a brush. And she especially likes the sharpness that linework can add to her cityscapes and abstracts. “My abstract paintings really do just start to evolve,” she says. “I keep standing back and thinking about how I might exploit shapes and colors.”

Thus goes Gardner’s daily adventure in the studio. Intuition rules the day, freeing her—and her work—from a guiding statement. One day, one mood, one painting, no crisis of continuity. “There’s no guarantee that the following day I’ll have the same emotional response to those shapes and colors,” she says.

*Gold Series 4*  
(below, left; 20x22)

*Intersection* (below,  
right; 18x20)



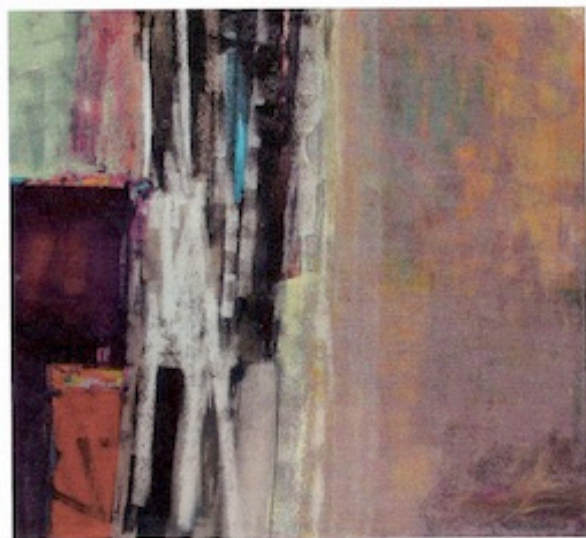
### Style Imitates Art

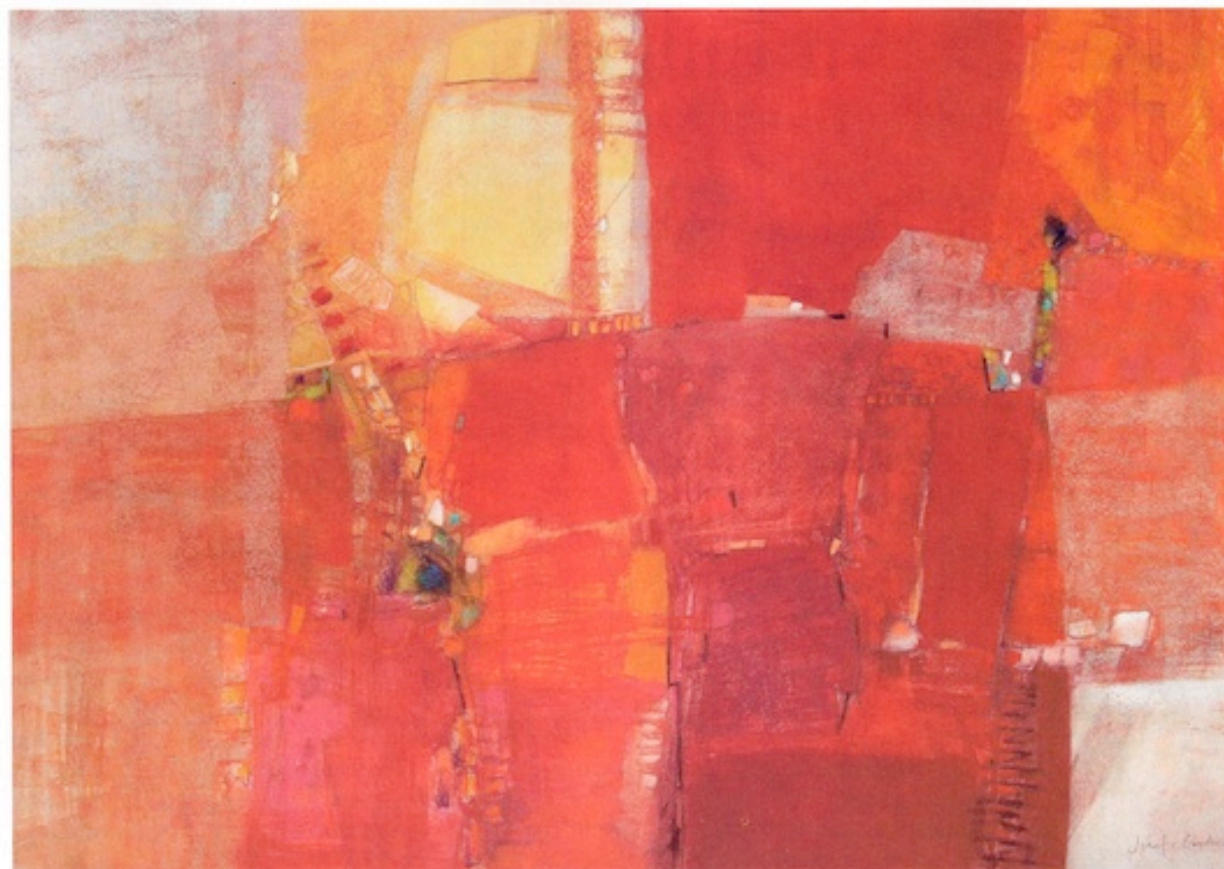
Gardner’s style has evolved in much the same way each of her paintings do. Known for her cityscapes and landscapes, she has added more abstract work to her portfolio, not so much from a desire to replace the old as from a desire to explore the new. “People who paint a lot need to change a lot,” she says. “The more experience you have, the more there’s something inside you that wants to evolve.”

After working in an impressionistic style for a few years, Gardner became aware of her growing interest in abstraction. “But I had no idea how to get there,” she recalls. At first, some of her landscapes simply took on a more abstract flair, inching toward monochromatic themes. This step enabled her to experiment with color combinations while still creating works with mass appeal. Eventually, painting abstracts just felt like the next step in a natural progression. “I began to feel more positive about the abstracts because I enjoyed painting them so much,” she says. Gardner chose to delve more deeply into her abstract adventure and has been working primarily in that style since April.

### Room for Gray

The artist’s main exploration has been a study of the distribution of color. “My paintings have always been quite bright,” she notes. “Now there’s just a difference in terms of how I put the colors






together." She adds that she doesn't categorize colors into "like" and "dislike" columns. Instead it's the interaction of colors that grabs her. All of this provides greater freedom, one result being a growing expanse of colors she might not have known what to do with previously. "It surprises me how some colors that I might not have looked at before now look far more interesting," she says. Take gray, for example. She never used much of it in her landscapes, which she infused with the bright colors of romantic lighting, but as she studied other artists' abstracts, including those in her own personal collection, she discovered the presence of grays and noticed how much it allows other colors to pop.

In fact, in *From Above 2*, the grays and dark tones on the left were the first to appear. To the cityscape painter within her, the strokes resembled a roadway, and the abstract artist she's becoming then added colors and shapes that evolved into the buildings on the right.

### Urban Perspectives

When painting cityscapes, Gardner concentrated on San Francisco, Chicago and New York, enjoying the unique perspective that the sheer height of these large cities could bring to a painting, along with the rare opportunity to look down upon her subjects. And so, the shapes and colors she was creating in *From Above 2* started to meld into a familiar viewpoint, following a more conscious thought process than most of her abstract work.

To paint this way—reacting more than planning—requires technical mastery, plus confidence and curiosity. Gardner never knows quite what will unfold on the surface. While some pieces don't satisfy her as much as others, she's excited every day to see what transpires. And when the day is over, she enjoys the pleasure of tidying up in preparation for tomorrow and a new creative opportunity. 

**Amanda Metcalf**, a former editor for *North Light* fine art books, works in New York City as a freelance writer and public relations professional.

*Red Series 4* (22x30)