

# GAVLAK

Jan Sjostrom, "Gavlak Gallery show reveals the many faces of Gloria Swanson", January 6, 2016



## Gavlak Gallery show reveals the many faces of Gloria Swanson



Judith Eisler paintings are on display at Gavlak Gallery.

Not every actress would be willing to be filmed with a live lion, much less let one rest its paws on her bare back. But Gloria Swanson insisted on doing so for the 1919 silent film *Male and Female*, even after director Cecil B. DeMille discouraged her because he considered it too dangerous.

Swanson's determination and bravery riveted painter Judith Eisler's attention when she ran across a clip of the actress talking about the scene years later on YouTube - See more at.

"She was an amazing person, powerful and brave," Eisler said. "I got obsessed with her and started painting her."

Eisler bases most of her paintings on still photographs she's shot while watching movies. "I'll see something and think, what was that?" she said. If the moment interests her enough, she pauses the frame and shoots a picture.

Eisler's show at Gavlak Gallery features five oil paintings of Swanson derived from *Male and Female*. They don't depict the lion scene, but rather a moment when Swanson's character, a pampered rich woman shipwrecked on an island, concocts a fantasy that

# GAVLAK

develops into the lion scene. Swanson is crouched on the ground surrounded by tall grass, her eyes fixed on the distance.

The monochrome paintings are virtually identical. What distinguishes them is color.

“The color changes the read — what dissolves and what becomes more apparent,” Eisler said.

A particular color might make the shadow on a cheek bone more apparent or the line of the nose more prominent. In one painting, the character might look surprised, in another, angry.

## **‘Study of light’**

Dealer Sarah Gavlak likens Eisler’s Gloria series to Claude Monet’s serial paintings of haystacks and cathedrals. “It’s a study of light and one thing, in this case, a person,” she said.

Light has been a prevailing theme in Eisler’s work. It animates the films that inspire her and guides how she applies paint to canvas.

Eisler chooses the moments she paints for their emotional tension, but they’re also about the nature of mediated images. Much of what we perceive to be reality today comes to us through mediated imagery on computer, phone, television and movie screens, she said.

Establishing distance between her paintings and the original image - itself a representation of reality - is important to her.

## **‘Too sentimental’**

“It’s necessary to establish some kind of distance that’s in contrast with the emotional content,” she said. “I’m interested in that dichotomy. Otherwise it’s too sentimental.”

In the YouTube film clip, Swanson says she insisted on filming the lion scene because she remembered seeing a copy of Gabriel Max’s 1908 painting *The Lion’s Bride*, which shows a lion with its paw on a reclining bride, in her grandmother’s house.

“What I find interesting is that she was inspired by a reproduction of a painting,” Eisler said. “I am painting a reproduction of a film scene that was a reproduction of a painting.” She achieves another layer of distance by turning the canvas upside down or sideways as she works so that she can concentrate on mark-making rather than on reproducing what’s in front of her.

Her goal is not to re-create a moment from DeMille’s film but to make something new that viewers can interpret as they will. “Because it’s a painting, it’s a different narrative,” she said.