

An inspired life

BY KARLA ARAUJO

Over the past decade, artist Stephanie Danforth of Chilmark has made a significant difference in the lives of many Kenyan children.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELIZABETH CECIL



The Truth Shall Set You Free, oil with gold leaf and etched metal on panel, 18 by 18 inches, 2008.

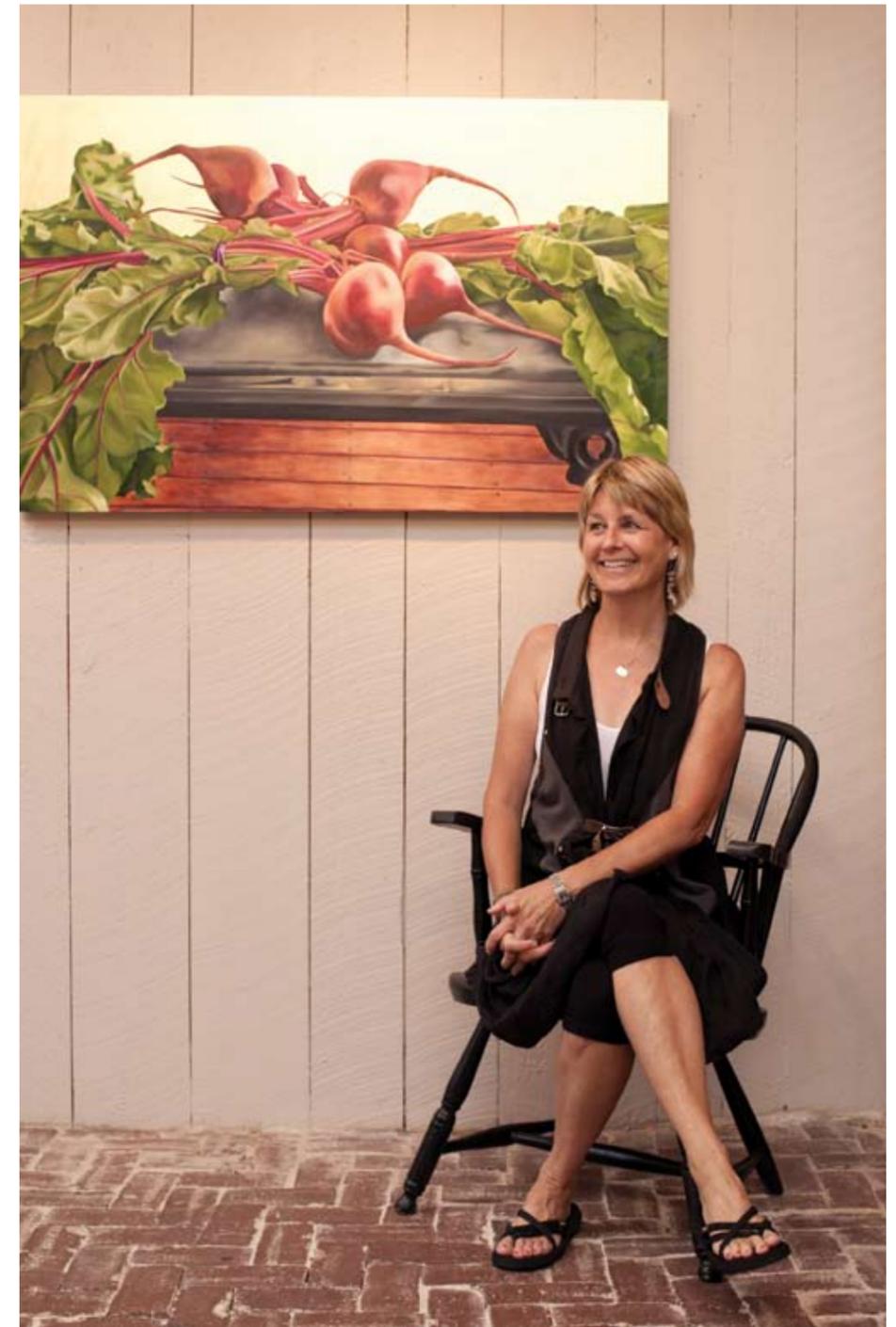
When Stephanie Danforth embarked on a safari to Kenya in 2000, she never suspected the adventure would alter the course of her life. In addition to observing the wildlife of this diverse East African nation astride the equator, Stephanie opted for a side trip to a two-room schoolhouse in Samburu, a rural tribal community in north central Kenya.

“I made a vow that day that any money I earned from art would go to education in Kenya,” she says.

For nearly twenty-five years leading up to her safari, Stephanie, the mother of two daughters, had worked as a pediatric nurse practitioner in the Boston area. Children, therefore, were hardly unfamiliar to her. “But the children in Kenya are not like children I’ve met anywhere else,” she explains. “They have smiles we don’t see anymore in the US.”

As she speaks, she scrolls through hundreds of images on her laptop, photographs she’s shot with her simple digital camera of scores of young Kenyan boys and girls, their faces radiant. The photos depict hopeful smiles, innocence, and gratitude for the simple gifts Stephanie has proffered: a world map, school supplies, fabric, a caring touch. But the pictures tell only partial stories. What’s left out: parents killed by AIDS or violence, homelessness, a lack of life’s simple necessities.

She returned from her trip determined to alleviate in some way the plight of Kenyan children, particularly girls who are orphaned or have only a single parent. “I heard that four million girls in Kenya can’t afford secondary education,” she explains. Granting herself a one-year sabbatical from



At West Tisbury's Field Gallery by Repose (oil and gold leaf on panel, 48 1/2 by 30 1/2 inches, 2011).



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY STEPHANIE DANFORTH

From left: Stephanie volunteers at Daraja Academy, a free secondary school for girls in central Kenya; at a nearby primary school, a child's face lights up for visitors; a Daraja student displays a colorful self-portrait on fabric, stitched together using an unfamiliar tool – an electric sewing machine.

pediatric nursing, she devoted all of her time to pursuing art, a passion she had all but set aside during her career and child-rearing years. Soon she was hard at work crafting sculptural angels from found and antique objects, despite her own lack of formal religious beliefs.

"I never set out to create angels," Stephanie says, still sounding mystified a decade later. "I'm just a vessel."

While the angels opened doors to several galleries on the Vineyard, Stephanie's art has evolved to encompass finely detailed handmade boxes, watercolor paintings, mixed-media works, and oils. A former member of the New England Watercolor Society, she has been awarded membership in the prestigious Copley Society of Boston, and she is currently represented by the Field Gallery in West Tisbury.

According to Jennifer Pillsworth, director at the Field Gallery, Stephanie has become one of her most popular artists. At this past summer's late July opening, a large crowd of patrons gathered before

Stephanie's luminous paintings of fruit, vegetables, and retro objects; several paintings bore small red stickers indicating the pieces had already sold.

"Stephanie's not afraid to take risks with her work," says Jennifer. "There's so much she wants to do. She'll never become repetitive and formulaic. People respond to her art because they understand that it may be the only piece like it. We have no idea where she's going to go but we're excited about making the journey with her."

When the gallery informs potential buyers that Stephanie donates the proceeds from her sales to education in Kenya, Jennifer reports that their response is uniformly enthusiastic. "It just adds to the level of awe and appreciation people have for her work," she explains.

Today, Stephanie is sponsoring sixteen children at Kenyan secondary schools and plans to return this March for her fifth trip. She never resumed her nursing career, instead devoting herself to her new work as an artist and philanthropist. Each time she trav-

els to Africa, she carts duffel bags brimming with supplies. "Give them a pencil and it's like a computer," she explains. "We can make a difference in their lives with so little."

A folder brimming with students' letters and photographs offers ample evidence of Stephanie's impact on their lives. One student tells of the devastating loss of family goats from drought and the turnaround resulting from Stephanie's donation; another of how she will be able to attend boarding school instead of washing clothing and cleaning house for a neighbor. Each letter is meticulously hand-lettered and filled with gratitude and promises to work hard.

"I know each of them," Stephanie says simply. "When I go to Kenya, I feel that I'm the lucky one. I'm the one who is blessed."

Creating her own haven

Stephanie moved year-round to her Chilmark home on a quiet lane just off

Facing: *Serafina*, mixed media with found objects, 27 by 15 inches, 2011.





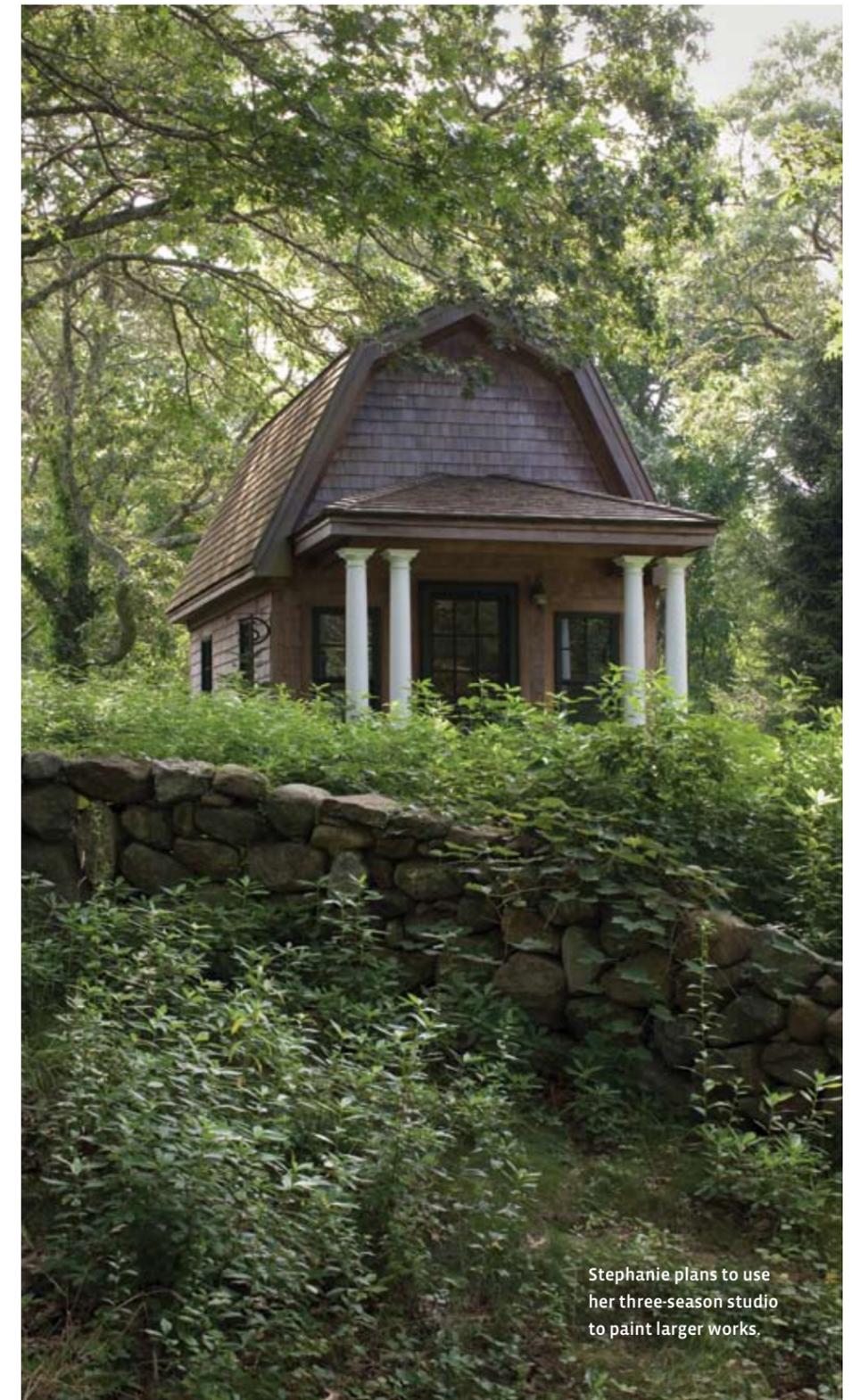
“Stephanie’s not afraid to take risks with her work,” says the Field Gallery’s director Jennifer Pillsworth. “She’ll never become repetitive and formulaic.”

Middle Road nearly five years ago. She had purchased the property two years before as a summer refuge, relocating full time to the Island following a divorce. Today, she and her two cats, Bella and Petie, share the charming, light-filled home on three-and-a-half acres, with her adult daughters and close friends as frequent visitors.

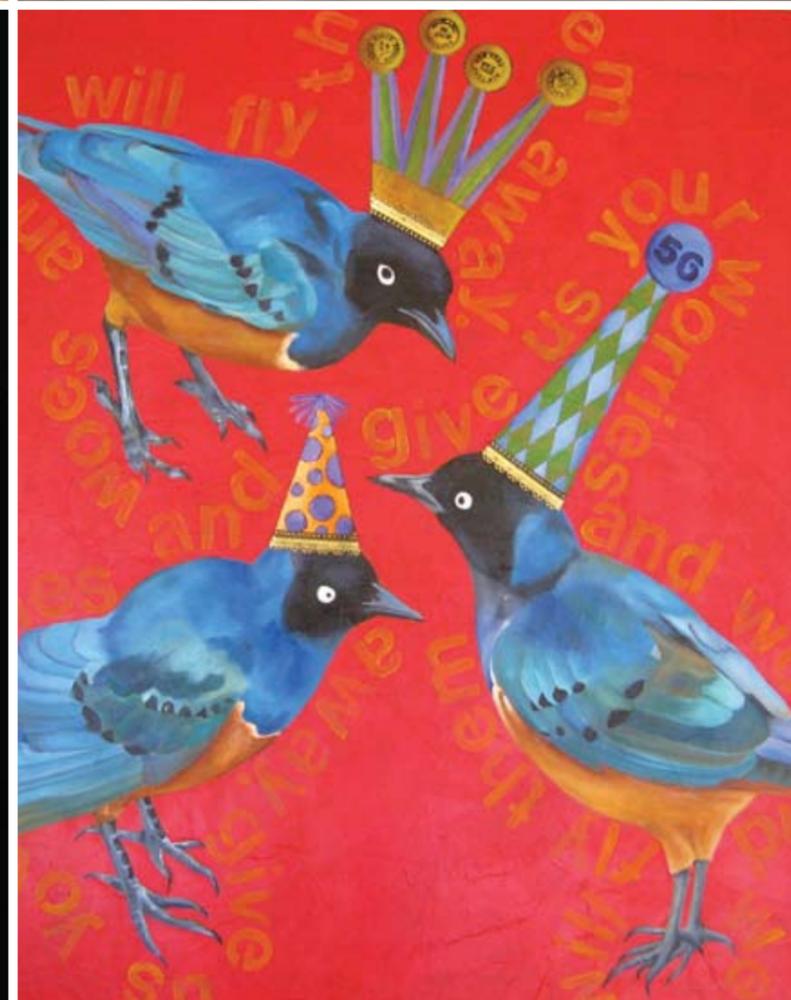
The three-bedroom main house, garage/guest quarters, artist’s studio, and gardens form a vital nucleus for Stephanie’s work. “I love the quietness of Chilmark,” she remarks, seated at her dining room table, bathed in late-afternoon sunlight and surrounded by a whimsical collection of artwork – her own as well as that of friends.

Although she designed her small, unheated studio for painting in the warmer months, Stephanie finds she often prefers working on an easel in her dining room. With her indoor cats for company, the convenience of the kitchen and laundry room a few steps away, and the comfort of her eclectic collectibles surrounding her, it’s easy to see why she’s happy to spend up to ten hours a day painting in this setting.

As she walks through her home, she points out artwork and furniture, each piece with an accompanying story. “This painting is by my friend Kara Taylor [an Island artist and Vineyard Haven gallery owner]. She painted it for me after I went through my divorce. I bought this table and these chairs at Brimfield [Antique and Collectibles Show]. These lamps too. I love refinishing old pieces.”



Stephanie plans to use her three-season studio to paint larger works.



FACING BOTTOM ROW: COURTESY STEPHANIE DANFORTH

Facing, clockwise from top left: A detail from *Sweet Pea*, mixed media on panel, 26 by 24 inches, 2009; an assemblage of paint brushes lined up and ready for action in Stephanie’s dining room; a detail from *Superb Starlings*, mixed media, 36 by 36 inches, 2011; and *Paris*, mixed-media box, 12 by 9 inches, 2009.



Stephanie designed this creative project for the girls at Daraja Academy and provided the materials.



A Daraja Academy boarding student goes home to visit her family in their Turkana village in Kenya.

Stephanie's home is, as she characterizes it, "something along the lines of shabby chic." Comfortable, oversized upholstered pieces mingle with antiques and reproductions, each room designed for casual, unpretentious living. "Comfort is key," she explains. "You can't be afraid of anything getting ruined. They're just things.

"I can't imagine using a designer," Stephanie adds. "This is what I look like. This is me in house form." Her most treasured items, she says, are gifts or purchases from artistic friends. "I feel like I have little hugs all around the house." Some of the little hugs, in fact, are often arranged on tabletops in personal vignettes – small, framed photos of family and friends, beloved books, miniature paintings, fresh flowers, sculptures, her favorite heart-shaped beach stones, and vintage objects artfully displayed like three-dimensional collages.

When she's not preparing for her annual gallery exhibit, Stephanie loves working in her gardens, which she helped create with Oakleaf Landscape of West Tisbury over the past several years. She even laid the carefully selected stones that form paths from building to building, garden to garden. While she used to maintain the grounds herself, she says she now hires someone to mow so she is free to paint.

A screened porch and outside patio are encircled by lush foliage and flowering plants and bushes. Stone walls, arbors, and meandering pathways invite both the eye and the inquisitive visitor to explore.

Inside Stephanie's detached art studio, the word "create" is spelled out in large, individual letters on the bright white wall near the roofline of the vaulted ceiling. It has served as her catchword during this second chapter of her life, a decade defined by the threads she has woven, connecting her passion for art, for giving, and for Island living into a rich and indelible tapestry. ♦



Vignettes of family photos, sculptures, and found objects give the living room an artsy feel.