

## Jennifer Bartlett at PAFA — Equal priority to the mind, the eye and the hand

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Installation view at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

Jennifer Bartlett has made her own way through the stylistic and ideologically-divided precincts of the New York art world for more than forty years. An impressive survey of her work, organized by the Parrish Art Museum, where it will open in April, 2014, is on view at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA) through Oct. 13, 2013. *Jennifer Bartlett: History of the Universe-Works, 1970 – 2011* offers direct and abundant pleasure, as well as an exploration of the persistent significance of painting in the late 20th Century and beyond.

### Background of the artist

Bartlett emerged from art school in the mid-1960s when the emphasis was on conceptual rigor. But she clearly loved looking, and loved painting. She resolved the tension between the visual and conceptual origins of her work by means of seriality, grided structures, intentionally mis-aligned imagery, diverse objects combined with a collage aesthetic, technical experimentation, and the use of text and other notational systems, including that of music, LED signs, and the 0-1,0-1, that underlies all digital content. She also deployed that long-standing, formal concern of modernism: a play between figure



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and ground. The rare woman of her generation in a very male cohort of successful artists, Bartlett chose generic and impersonal imagery in work that, if it came from her heart, was thoroughly filtered by her mind.

### The artist's invented technique – enamel paint on steel plates in a grid

*Atlantic Ocean* (1984) was created with a technique that Bartlett developed and made her own, painted in enamel on small, baked steel plates onto which she had silkscreened a graph-paper grid, which were assembled into large, wall pieces. *Atlantic Ocean's* more than 200 units are hung in a grid which abuts a corner and continues onto the adjacent wall. It is at once a grand, ocean view and a reflection of our mediated vision of the world around us. As with certain paintings by Chuck Close, each individual unit can be read as an abstraction. But it could equally depict reality as observed at the microscopic level. The expansive ocean view is also composed of multiple units on a larger scale, as if the artist created it from several photographs, each with a different focal point. The clouds sit on multiple horizons, their apparent unity a product of the viewer's expectations over-riding what she actually sees. The precise, white grid of the wall, visible between the gridded squares of steel, itself demands attention. It becomes a screen through which we see the ocean.

The first room of the exhibition contains two, lush, multi-part paintings on canvas, *Pool* and *Wind* (both 1983) that situate the viewer within verdant landscapes, undistracted by foreground incident. Nothing happens in these scenes. The only activity is the changing focus of the view, and hence the viewer. Perhaps it is a private joke, more likely the product of the landscape that served as the model, but the grid makes an appearance in *Pool*, a painting that accepts the illusionistic conventions of perspective, in the tessellation of the pool itself. Both are painted on a scale (seven feet tall by fifteen and twenty-five feet, respectively) whose only precedents in landscape painting are stage sets and curtains, and decorative murals. They bear a family resemblance to the wall-sized paintings for interiors done by



Jennifer Bartlett 'Pool' (1983) 84x180 in., oil on canvas, private collection courtesy Locks Gallery, Philadelphia

Bonnard, Vuillard and other Nabis painters, and I'd be curious to see Bartlett's work hung similarly, on separate walls that surround the viewer.

*Atlantic Ocean* is a 2-dimensional image which engages the 3rd dimension as it bends around one, and sometimes a second corner. *Boats and House*, both from 1987, include actual 3-dimensional components, constructed of painted wood. These are simplified and fragmentary versions of the subject matter in the paintings, which sit behind them as backdrops. Bartlett offers multiple ways to depict the same subjects and plays with the conventions of representation. The three-dimensional components appear to be constructed after the paintings, which themselves appear painted from life, and the sculptural elements carry much less conviction than their painted partners. The sculpted forms are also abstract chromatically, a flat white, in marked contrast to the paintings' extraordinary and subtle use of color.

### The seduction of color and the dangers of the decorative

Bartlett is unafraid of the seductions of color and the dangers of the decorative. Her works on canvas reveal a mastery of paint handling that offers lessons for anyone who paints. They also display a varied and finely-graded palette, something the artist suppresses in most of the work in enamel on steel, which have bright colors in the limited range of the smallest of children's crayon sets: red, blue, green, black and white. That limitation may well have been a product of the enamel paints available.

A series of paintings done in 1991-92 mark the hours of the day, a universalizing structure for works that otherwise appear less formally constructed and more specific and intimate in subject than Bartlett's previous work. In 2005 Bartlett turned to personal narrative, once again using steel plates and employing the squared typography produced by LED signs and the scrolling text commonly seen on computers. And since 2006 her paintings reveal the influence of pixellation from video screens, applied to simplified subject matter. Bartlett continues to demonstrate the possibilities of work that gives equal priority to the mind, the eye, and the hand.