

ARTFORUM

Jennifer Bartlett

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Jennifer Bartlett, *Rhapsody* (detail), 1975–76, enamel on steel, 987 plates, each plate 12 x 12”.

Over the past forty years, Jennifer Bartlett has explored the results that applied rules can yield in abstract and figurative painting. “History of the Universe,” a current survey of her work at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, consists of paintings and sculptures from 1970 to 2011 that are presented as key examples of her oeuvre. Here, she discusses the show, which is on view until October 13, 2013.

IT WAS KIND OF A JOKE when I titled my 1985 novel *History of the Universe*. I was being ironic, since it would be very hard and perhaps nearly impossible to describe the history of the universe. But it’s not that I think my work is too ambitious. I feel very lucky to have such a long career, and I hope it goes on longer and longer. I feel okay about the novel now, but it was really an idea from Klaus Ottmann, the curator of the show, to use it as the title here. I haven’t made new work for this: It includes about thirty works. I view it as an offering of a variety of possibilities.

My working methods haven’t changed. Usually I begin a piece by making notes on scraps of paper and using what I have. The notes determine the rules I apply to before beginning a painting. Sometimes the rules change, but I prefer to follow through with them until the end. My work is finished when it’s finished: when I finish solving the problem. For example, squaring. For Squaring 2; 4; 16; 256; 65,536, I squared two, and then I squared the square root of two and so on. Solving it eventually took multiple plates for one set of numbers—a problem that became apparent immediately after beginning. People often tell me a painting is finished when I’m still not sure.

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I've always been interested in color. There are a lot of different blues, reds, yellows, greens that can all be called by the same name. With color, I try to surprise myself. Primary colors always remain red, yellow, and blue, and secondary means orange, green, and purple, but what surprises me most is that when I postulate something, the result ends up being something entirely different than when I see it in reality.

I'm not sure what exactly was the right point in my career to start making freehand works. Unlike my previous work, the "Blob" series is not ruled and measured. This method hasn't surprised me as much as my others, but I really like the word blob. The paintings in these series have neither stated problems nor solutions.

I first showed Rhapsody in 1976 at Paula Cooper Gallery. I made it one plate at a time at my loft in Greene Street and in the Hamptons. Part of my novel was written there too, but that's pure coincidence. The first time anyone saw the entire piece, including me, it was at the opening. It sold that night. There were all these kinds of romances during the 1970s, but I don't remember when they all took place. At this point in my career, Rhapsody is just something that I have done. I feel we all only have one Rhapsody in us.

I intentionally gave both Rhapsody and Song titles that are musical terms. Rhapsody seems to me like an energetic, romantic piece of music, and Song seems like a solo. Yet I don't think music relates directly to my work. I am more interested in indeterminacy than music. I prefer rules.

—As told to JULIAN ELIAS BRONNER