

JENNIFER BARTLETT

Binary Images: Shaped Canvases and Plate Paintings

October 1–November 12, 2005

Interview by Elizabeth Murray

with an introduction by Betsy Sussler

Jennifer Bartlett and Elizabeth Murray both came to the New York art world in the legendary late '60s, when such artists as Joan Jonas, Robert Smithson, Eva Hesse, Sol LeWitt and Richard Serra were altering art's parameters. And while influenced by the headiness of the times, Bartlett and Murray each developed a distinct vision. Murray's earlier work imbued household objects with a numinous quality implicit in Matisse's still lifes as well. Her subsequent shaped canvases alchemized the exotic, gritty dazzle of the city's streets, its clanging visual language and its graffiti, into high art. A retrospective of her work, curated by Robert Storr, opens this October at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Jennifer Bartlett's seminal, incandescent *Rhapsody*, a running panorama of 987 one-foot-square panels affixed to the wall in a bright grid not unlike musical notation, will be on view at the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, MA.

Bartlett has used the serialization of geometric forms, familiar objects that recall the ideal American homescape—a house, a tree, a white picket fence—along with literal painterly shapes, a line or a brush stroke, to create paintings of incremental, seemingly endless possibility. Her paintings with three-dimensional objects have reinvented the mural. More recently, a particular narrative has evolved—contained in traditional stretched canvas—a cumulative transformation of combines that hints at a darker, perhaps imperfect world, where nightmares melt into cartoon dreams, referencing Gorky's influence. In their long association as peers and as friends, Bartlett and Murray have occupied parallel worlds; they have watched each other's work develop over 30 years. What follows is an oral history of sorts, of two painters' progress.

—Betsy Sussler, Editor-in-Chief, BOMB Magazine

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ELIZABETH MURRAY

I met you in the fall of 1962, at Mills College, in Oakland, California. You were a senior and I was a first-year graduate student. I remember the first time I set eyes on you: we passed each other on the road, and you looked at me with a quizzical, curious expression and then walked on by with your fuzzy beehive hairdo. What were you thinking about in the fall of 1962?

JENNIFER BARTLETT

Being an artist, Ed Bartlett, Bach cello suites, Cézanne, getting into graduate school, getting to New York, Albert Camus, James Joyce. I'd drawn constantly since childhood: large drawings of every creature alive in the ocean; Spanish missions with Indians camping in the foreground, in the background Spanish men throwing cowhides over a cliff to a waiting ship; hundreds of Cinderellas on five-by-eight pads, all alike but with varying hair color and dresses.

EM *I remember one painting from your Mills college days; you were very proud of it. We had both just discovered Gorky. Your painting was little, in grays and blacks, and it looked—*

JB Like Gorky.

EM *Who else interested you?*

JB In high school I went to see a Van Gogh show at the Los Angeles Museum; it knocked me out. I had little exposure to art but knew I was going to be a painter. My mother had one art book at home, with Cézanne, Picasso, Van Gogh, Manet. I thought it would be possible for me to do that. I also wrote poetry.

EM *What were your favorite books?*

JB Anything that had nothing to do with Long Beach, California. Dostoevsky, The Alexandria Quartet, *True Confessions* magazine, *Seventeen* magazine, the Oz books, T. S. Eliot, Stephen Crane, Nancy Drew, Hendrik Van Loon, a book on color theory. At Mills I picked up *L'Etranger* by Camus, and my course was determined: art had to be dark, spare and serious. I've yet to achieve one of these goals.

EM *Why did you feel that way? You turned me on to Lawrence Durrell.*

JB My own childhood was dark and mysterious. The books, movies and art I liked had complexities that I could identify with, and that were not part of the milieu in which I lived. Truffaut, Godard, Fellini, Jean Genet, Violette Leduc, John Cage, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Charlie Mingus, Mondrian, Miró, Kandinsky. I felt there was a chance I could do this myself.

EM *In 1963, you left Mills and went to Yale. Who was there?*

JB You and Carlos Villa were the first real artists I'd met who had been in a community of artists. Yale was such a community. All ambition, all the time. Richard Serra, Brice Marden had just left, Nancy Graves, Jon Borofsky, Chuck Close, Michael Craig-Martin, Jan Hashey, Janet Fish, Sylvia Mangold, Jenny Snider—whose brother-in-law was Joel Shapiro.

EM *The next time I saw you, you were a different person. I visited you in New Haven from Buffalo, where I was teaching. You came downstairs and opened the door and there was this teenybopper girl in a miniskirt, a little Beatles hat tilted on your head. You had left Mills far behind. You showed me these huge pictures. They were completely ambitious and quite different from the little Gorky imitation. Something big happened to you there.*

JB Yes, I'd walked into my life.

EM *And Jack Tworikov?*

JB Yale was conservative as an art department—not the students, but the faculty. Jack brought in famous artists.

EM *Younger artists.*

JB James Rosenquist, Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Rauschenberg, Alex Katz, Al Held.

EM *What did you learn from these people? Or was it just the idea that they were such fabulous artists?*

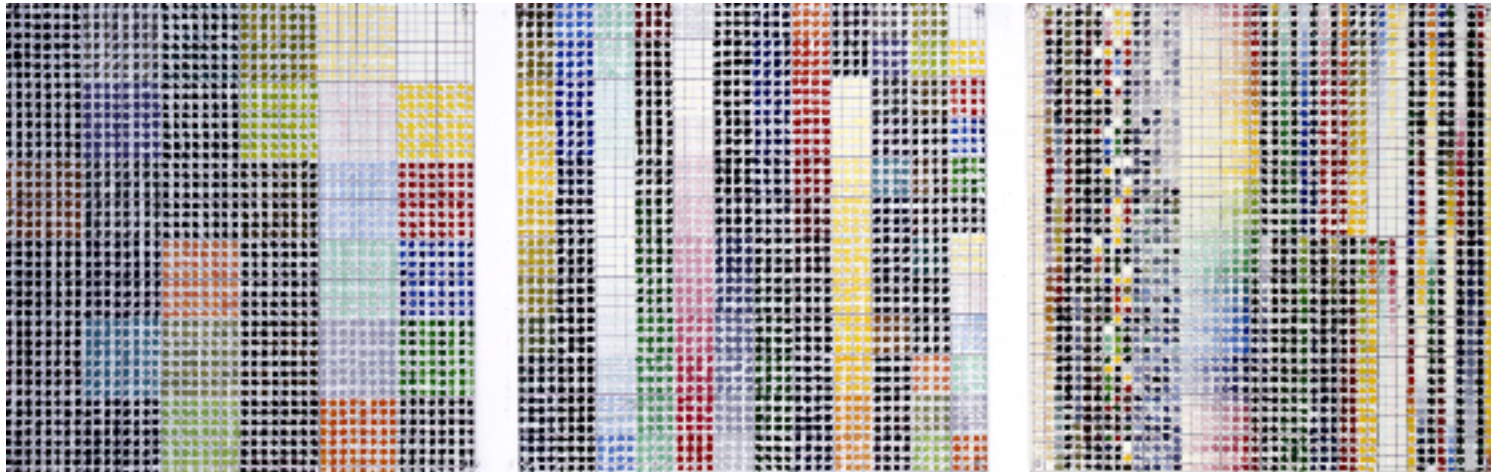
JB With New York City one and a half hours away, I was seeing art, and at Yale watching the people who made it.

EM *To paraphrase Jimi Hendrix, you were experienced.*

JB I was away from California, and it was easy to be what I guess I always was. I did big paintings right away.

EM *I remember that feeling of arriving in New York, landing on the street corner and thinking, This is where I belong. It felt like I fit into something that I wanted to be or that I could be.*

- JB I married Ed Bartlett and got a loft in New York, 175 dollars a month for 2,500 square feet. I commuted from New Haven to New York to the University of Connecticut where I taught, slept in my office, then back to New Haven.
- EM *That was the Greene Street studio? I remember it well.*
- JB I was there for 13 years. Jon Borofsky was across the street. Richard Serra and Nancy Graves were married. Joel was married to Amy Shapiro. You and Don Sunseri were married; Chuck and Leslie Close and Joe and Susan Zucker lived around the corner. With Chuck, Joe and me, there were lots of dots on Greene and Prince streets.
- EM *Do you remember the first work you did in the loft?*
- JB I'd write out a list of ideas for work, and beside them I'd put down the artists I felt owned them. Art at that time had to be new. One had to make the next move. I did the things on my list that other artists didn't want to do. They were conceptual, off base, not correct. They involved committed trips to Canal Street for rubber plugs, plastic tiles, hanks of rope, red plastic teapots, which I would subject to various ordeals: baking, freezing, dropping, painting, smashing, et cetera.
- EM *Right, I remember that. But you just said something very interesting—you sort of muttered under your breath, just now, "That's how the plates started." I want to ask you about that. But I also want to remind you of your birth present for [my son] Dakota. You gave him these plastic boxes filled with incredible things, little tiny shapes that were like asteroids. There was a whole world, a universe in those boxes.*
- JB They fit in small steel drawers; I made a written key describing the items in each one.
- EM *It reminds me so much of the unfolding of the metal-plate pieces, where you develop incremental variations using these 12-inch squares. Looking at your studio right now, it's the same issues and ideas of the world, and colors and shapes that are all still there. All compartmentalized.*
- JB Yes.
- EM *So you just said that that's how the plates started.*
- JB Do you remember two things that were happening then? Process art, where everything was on the floor—
- EM *Who were the process people?*

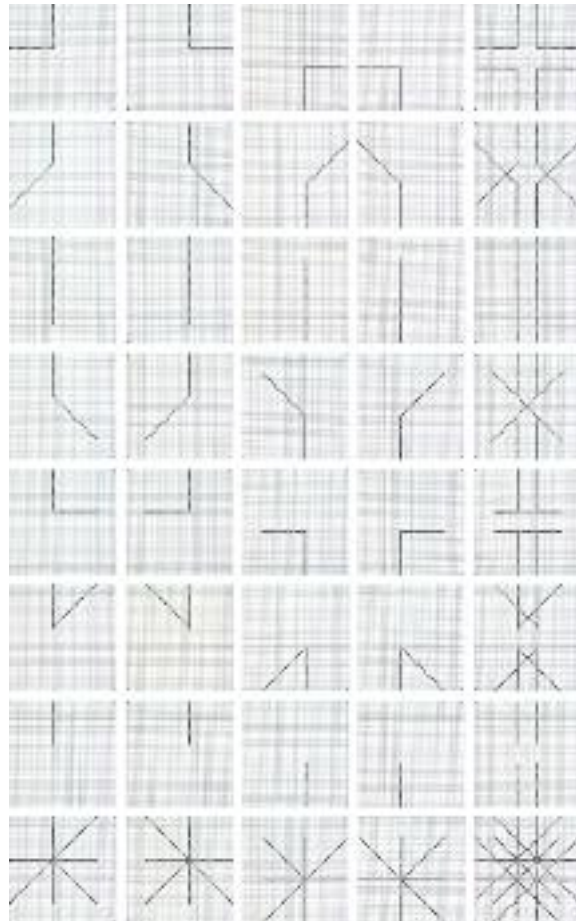


2,304 Colors, 1970, enamel over silkscreen grid on baked enamel on steel plates, 12 x 38 inches

JB Alan Saret, Richard Serra, Carl Andre, Joel Shapiro, Barry LeVa, Mel Bochner, Robert Morris, with his felt pieces, Robert Smithson. The other thing was pushpin art; everyone put their art on the wall with pushpins, no frames, no glass. Many featured graph paper. I liked James Rosenquist's idea of an impersonal style. I'd usually make mistakes on my graph paper. I'd knock over a cup of coffee, then accidentally walk on the paper. These were not Frank Stella's discreet coffee cup rings. I'd noticed New York subway signs. They looked like hard paper. I needed hard paper that could be cleaned and reworked. I wanted a unit that could go around corners on the wall, stack for shipping. If you made a painting and wanted it to be longer, you could add plates. If you didn't like the middle you could remove it, clean it, replace it or not. There had to be space between the units to visually correct plate and measuring distortions. My dilemma was, which measurement system, feet and inches or metric? In 1968 it was predicted that we would go metric. I bet we would continue with our standard measuring system. The smallest large unit of that system is one foot. The plates were cold-rolled steel, one foot square with a baked enamel surface, and a small hole in each corner with which to fix the plate to the wall. A quarter-inch grid is then epoxied onto the baked enamel. I went on the bus to see Gersen Feiner at his factory in New Jersey. He made the plates with deburred edges and sub-contracted the enamel surfaces to someone who did home appliances. He continues to make them for me.

EM *Your grid was a given. You worked out very inventive systems. Did you know Sol LeWitt then?*

JB I thought Sol was wonderful. And I think he may have recommended the silk-screener Joe Wantanabe, who screened the first plates with the quarter-inch grid. You know that problem in high school when everyone's wearing a certain kind of shoe—in my case it was Joyces or Teardrops—and you buy a version of that shoe, and it's much more wrong than if you had been independent and worn mukluks. In New York, I felt a distance between myself and others. I didn't understand a lot of what was going on, what people said or how people felt about art. I feel that to this day. I don't feel threatened by it anymore. I don't understand, sometimes, what other people are seeing, or what they're after, but back then it seemed necessary to pretend that I understood. Sol LeWitt's "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" had been published, one of the great mid-century poems. And on a good day I could follow 15 of



Four Right Angles, 1972, enamel over silkscreen grid on baked enamel on steel plates, 64 x 103 inches

his 32 rules. I first showed at Alan Saret's. He was very supportive. He built a bamboo stairway, beautiful, and I fell through and went to the hospital to have my leg seen to. I saw a lot of Alan during that time. Very much his own person, and completely honest.

EM *When did you first show the plates, at Alan's?*

JB In 1969, 1970. My first gallery show was at Reese Paley's in January 1971. I was on crutches. After I fell through Alan's staircase I continued injuring one leg or the other before each show, group or solo.

EM *Where was that gallery?*

JB On Prince; it's where the Mercer Hotel is now. He showed European and American artists, including Barry LeVa with whom I went to high school in Long Beach. Reese Paley only wore black. Among the European conceptualists showing in New York City were Jan Dibbets, Hanne Darboven, Joseph Beuys with his wolf, lard, felt and copper. Reese had a show in which vats of blood bubbled. It was a German artist, or possibly Austrian.

EM *I didn't realize that they started with the blood that early.*

JB The blood was early; also decomposed stuff. I don't know if they used them for the same reason that Damien Hirst does; I would think the shark would be more expensive, to get a good one that's intact. I think Hirst's work is more related to a water-based taxidermy.

EM *What really costs money is getting it in the air.*

JB All the technology, the refrigeration units.

EM *We're talking big bucks.*

JB Interesting problems. I had my hard paper, the sets and series, the counting pieces. When I came to hang the show, I didn't know where a piece began and ended, if it was a set within a series, a piece by itself or the whole series. I did two big series. One was abstract and one was figurative. I think that an abstract painting is actually more figurative than a figurative painting, because it frequently is closer to the thing it is depicting. If you paint a red square, you have a red square of a certain measurable dimension. If you paint a vase of flowers, the vase of flowers is not measurable, more abstract than the red square.

EM *Some people might disagree with you.*



House: Pink Grass, 1998, oil on plates, 64 x 64 inches

JB They did.

EM *They would say, This is the difference between the phenomenon of the red vase and a phenomenology of painting, numinous, that which is only thought. I would say, looking around in your studio now, that that is really where your thinking is. You have an extremely eccentric way of combining these ideas. You put them into a paper bag, shake them, and out pops your unique way of looking at it all. Jennifer, your Reese Paley show was a big success. People were intrigued. I remember how beautiful it looked; it was fabulous the way it filled the space. It was very colorful and joyous, but it was also on a grid, so it was serious. You'd covered the bases. You had your conceptual ideas, you had a system, but you also had something really beautiful.*

JB Thank you. I wanted to tell you about the two pieces hanging next to each other. *Intersection*, which was abstract, and *House*, which was figurative. This is where the house image came from. I thought, What is the most common image in the U.S.A. that everyone would recognize? I picked a red house with a white picket fence, three hills in the back, and a pond with two ducks in it. I thought one would be able to purchase this painting or a variation at any dime store.

EM *The house image has stayed with you since 1970; you've used it in your entire 40 years of artmaking.*

JB That, plus the grid. Joel Shapiro was making beautiful house pieces at the time as well. I subjected this house scene to various scenarios. What would happen if one element of the landscape left the painting in sequence, until the plate was blank? Now I realize I should have done it both ways, starting and ending with a blank plate. Adding and subtracting. I zoomed in on the house, through the open door, looking through a window with the landscape behind it that you couldn't see because the house was in front of it. What would happen if I rotated the house, the four quadrants of the image? What if? Some people would like the intersection piece, and hate the house piece. I was curious about that. I became increasingly interested in setting up a circumstance where each system I had used—the house, a different set of suppositions than the intersection piece—became a “what if” situation. In 1971, Richard Artschwager, whose work I admire, came to the studio and said, If I'd invented these plates I'd really try different sizes, and different-sized grids. I thought, I see what you mean. In 2004, I added 50-centimeter squares, 18-inch squares and 24-inch squares with different grids. I get interested in following rules I select; I have found the

visual results are always surprising. I did a simple counting piece, six colors in a sequence that builds so that each color expands its domination, starting always on the upper left-hand corner and reading left to right, and then drop down a line. The piece is called *Ellipse*. This way of counting created ellipses. I don't know why. I understand the visual phenomenon but would not understand the explanation. But chaos theory made absolutely perfect sense to me.

EM *Why do you think that is? What intrigues you so much about these number systems?*

JB I have other ways of thinking about what we do. Because of you, I became interested in using oil on canvas. I started combining plates and canvas; then paper, plates, canvas and glass. I made three-dimensional pieces that stood in front of the paintings that obscured or commented on them. *Seawall* and *Fence* are examples.

EM *That's interesting to me, because, even talking about "Seawall" and "Fence", "paintings with objects" has a whole different sound to it than talking about paintings that are about a house, or about numbers that develop ellipses through a counting system. I see a similarity in a way. You reach into the bag and you say, monsters, no babies. Or, babies standing up, babies*



Seawall, 1985, oil on three canvases, 84 x 369 inches, with sculptural elements

lying down. Monsters in the corner. There's always a system, whether it's a dot or whether it's monsters made up of dots. Am I right?

JB Yes. This painting started two years ago. There were nuns, and it was hilarious to me. These nuns sitting at a table and embroidering a theater curtain in Brussels. The nuns disappeared and became two trees, two windows, a table, two plates of fried eggs and two chairs.

EM *First of all, the painting is made up of one rectangular shape, and then two squares on top of it. So it looks like kind of an upside-down table shape.*

JB I'd never thought of that.

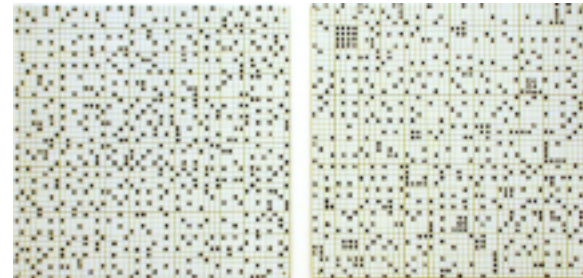
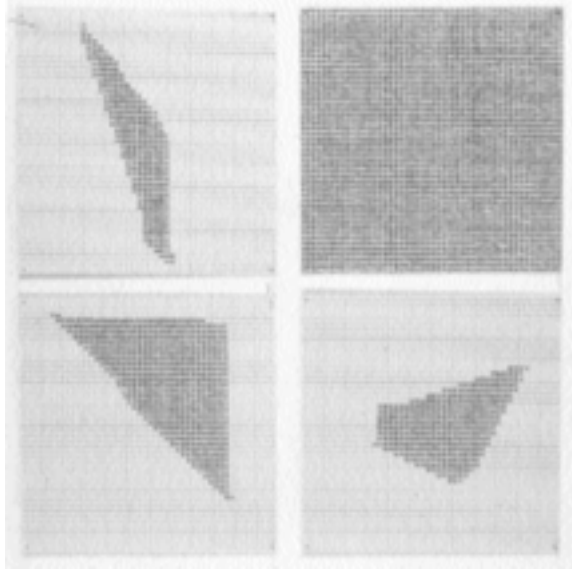
EM *The two trees make me think of something between Vuillard and Seurat—a Pointillist kind of thing. Like a little theater. I think there's a theater aspect to your paintings that nobody ever discusses. A stage, and then you enact a play. Even in the most abstract ones, there's some kind of a story going on. In this one, I see the two trees on either side so it's kind of symmetrical. But then it becomes Matisse-y and Bonnard-like, with the red table and the two chairs. I like the painting; it's really an intriguing painting. So far we've talked about the beginning of your real work, which starts in the very early '70s, late '60s, and was influenced by the kind of ideology and philosophies of what kind of art you could make during that period of time. What was permissible, and how you worked your way in and out of it. You fit in, and yet you had your own way of fitting in. So that you didn't fit in. You always had an interest in the past. Van Gogh was the first guy that you fell in love with, because he's all about those tiny, dotty marks, and building up an image with increments of paint that you can clearly make out. Seurat is about those little tiny dots.*

JB On the way east, the train stopped in Chicago. I saw Seurat paintings for the first time, heaven. They were the right size. When I'd seen Gorkys, I was very disappointed: the size seemed wrong. I had thought they were bigger.

EM *We saw those beautiful slides that knocked you over, then you saw the painting, "Hey it's a little squinty thing."*

JB The late '60s and the '70s was a time of incredible passion, and poverty. No one I knew was making their rent from art. I got into a cab, and the painter Bob Moskowitz was driving it. To sell a painting was an extraordinary event.

EM *That's so different now. Whether it's good or bad, I don't know, but I know that none of us had any money. Or expected to have any money.*



left: *4 Four Point Planes of 2 Densities, 4 Four Point Planes on...*, 1972, enamel over silkscreen grid on baked enamel on steel plates, 25 x 25 inches
right: *Black 6" Square Series #5*, 1972, enamel over silkscreen grid on baked enamel on steel plates, 12 x 25 inches

JB Nope.

EM *Everybody had day jobs, and you did art for the hell of it. Everybody was ambitious, and wanted their work to be seen. It had nothing to do with making money.*

JB Do you remember all those art-for-fur-coats in the '60s?

EM *That happened to us, with Sidney Lewis.*

JB When we got our washing machines! God bless Sidney Lewis.

EM *Everybody's first TV and first washer. The thrill when that happened, being able to order anything out of that catalog, like a slide projector, a washer-dryer. It was fabulous. Sidney Lewis brought the middle class to poor artists. I remember seeing all those shiny new appliances sitting around in everybody's crummy apartments. There were no elevators; you had to carry all that stuff up these steep staircases.*

Let's get back to the monsters and work in the past. I stopped you because I was talking about Seurat and Van Gogh and how I see all of that stuff colliding in your work. I felt that we had a connection, although I saw you as further ahead than me. You had figured out a way to paint and not paint. You had that beautiful surface of the enamel plates.

JB If you did the same thing to a figurative image as you would to an abstract one, why would one look cozy and cute, and the other minimal and pure? I thought about the dialogue between *Intersection* and *House*.

EM *They were almost like a film; you could edit and add and mix.*

JB Except the plates were hard, and you could hold them, and see them. They were fixed to the wall, not illuminating it.

EM *Then you did a show at Paula Cooper's.*

JB That was an all-black show, abstract systems. The house piece had lost. I rented a room in Provincetown from Jack and Wally Tworikov. Jack was working on paintings of chess moves. He said something that was important to me, about ambition. He said, "Can you imagine a situation in which you don't have the kind of ambition you have?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said that the happiest moments in his life were not the big events, the attention. For him, a true sense of happiness might occur in the morning; pouring a bowl of cereal, he might look out the window and see that a bird had landed on the butterfly bush. I responded to this. I believe what Jack described has brought



Color Study: Size, Hue and Tint, Location, 2001, oil on canvas, 107 1/2 x 140 inches

me joy all of my life, a grouping of things in stillness.

EM *And this is something you feel you'd like to have in your paintings.*

JB Yes. Then I think, the bird has blood, the bird can move like me. The bird can fly. The bird needs to eat to stay alive. The bush can move, it won't move far, it will move in relationship to the weather, it will also move with the seasons in time. Then I'll think, they're both made of molecules, like me.

EM *Why does that interest you? Something about mutability? What is it that fascinates you? There's a key in there for what your work is about. What your life is about.*

JB It makes me sad when I think about it. The bird's going to die. The tree will too, but not quite as soon, unless something happens to it—acts of nature or man. It is about mutability, in which things are changing from one state to another. The movies that, to me, were the most passionate are those of David Lean and Stanley Kubrick. I could never understand why people found them cold. I find them highly emotional.

EM *They're very mental, too.*

JB They're also physical.

EM *I want to move on to "Rhapsody".*

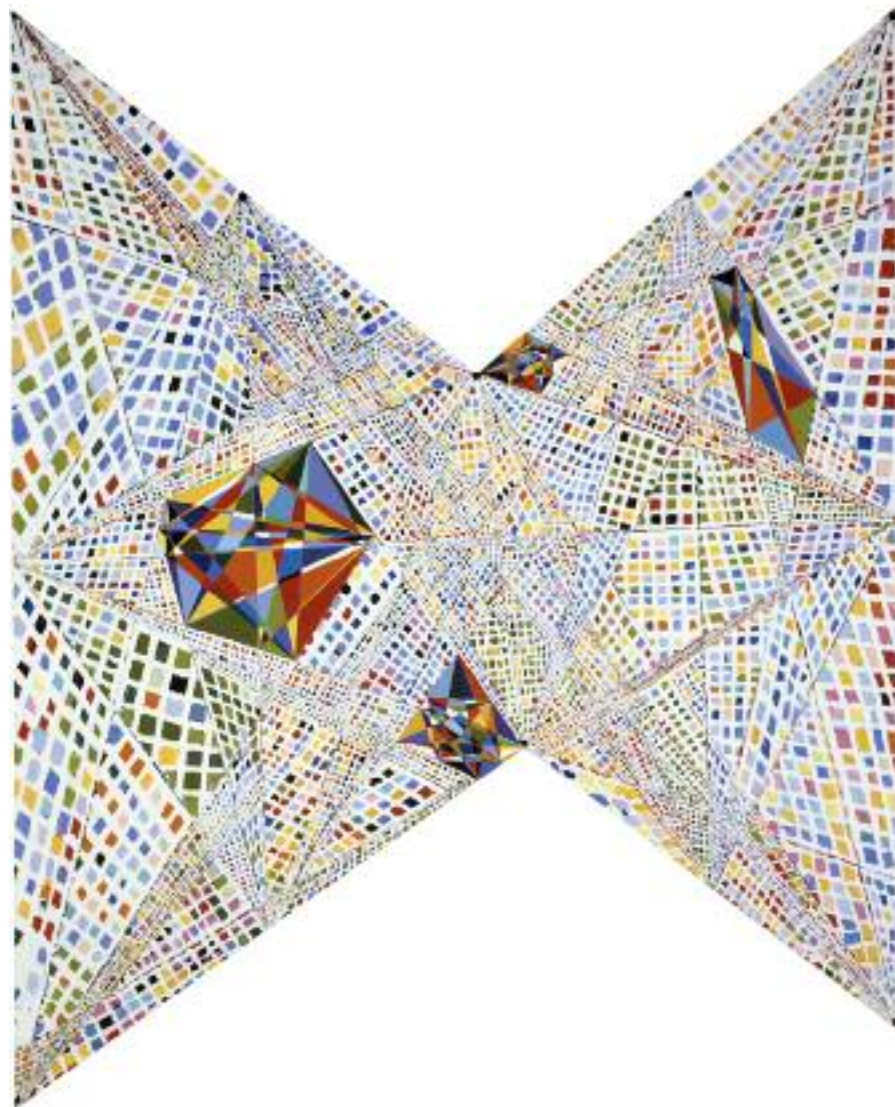
JB Well, this is far after *Rhapsody*. I was standing in this ugly little garden in the south of France. It was like I was completely still, and everything was humming and in motion around me, but humming on different frequencies. The air was humming, the light was humming, that interested me.

EM *And did you feel happy?*

JB If happy can be defined as a kind of still bewilderment, with awe, yes, but alone, totally alone.

EM *Would you say the culmination of part of your work was when you began to develop the ideas for "Rhapsody"? How did "Rhapsody" come about?*

JB *Rhapsody* came out of the dialogue between *Intersection* and *House*. I began thinking about pieces not having edges: how do you know when a painting ends? I thought, what if it doesn't end? What if a painting is like a conversation between the elements in the painting? I was thinking of a painting that wouldn't have edges, that would start and stop, change tenses and gears at will. It needed to be big and fill the space in which it was shown.



Moth
2001
oil on canvas
120 x 96 inches

I asked, What can you have in art? I decided you could have lines: short, medium, long. They could be different widths: thin, medium, thick. They could be colored or not, horizontal, vertical, diagonal or curved, and any combination of the above.

EM *So were you thinking at the time it would be like a dictionary or an encyclopedia of all the possible things you could make a painting of, or you could have in art?*

JB Yes. I went on: you can have shapes; you can have colors. You can have figurative images. I selected four images. They were house, tree, ocean, mountain. Each category—color, line, shape, house, tree, ocean, mountain—had a section in which it would interact with the others.

* * *

EM *These paintings remind me of the plates. The dots have gotten fatter and drippier, and have different sizes and shapes, the material has changed, the shapes are made of canvas and stretcher bars. Do you feel a connection, do you feel like you're dipping back into something from the plates?*

JB I am dipping back in. The plate pieces were one layered; idea, execution, correction, sign off. If they were multi-layered I was either trying to make a figurative image, or addressing the idea of one layer of paint over another, et cetera.

EM *So there's a problem to solve there.*

JB The second coat on this painting, we are looking at, this diptych, you can barely see the second coat. The next coat always x-es out the preceding one. The second coat which you can barely see was of all the primaries and secondaries that appeared in the first coat, mixed with black. The next coat, the third coat, which you can barely see was all the original colors mixed with white. The next coat reverted to the first color...

EM *So no matter what you've done over the years, there's been a structural essence. And then the circles come in there, or the dots come in there and kind of bust it up like little particles . . .*

The complete interview is available at www.bombsite.com.