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ART

INCONVERSATION

Jennifer Bartlett with Phong Bui

By PHONG BUI

On the two occasions of her second installation of the monumental work "Rhapsody" in the Atrium of MoMA and the recent exhibit The Studio Inside Out (May 18 – June 30, 2011) at Locks Gallery in Philadelphia, Rail publisher Phong Bui paid a visit to the painter Jennifer Bartlett's home/studio in Fort Greene, Brooklyn to discuss her life and work.

Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Phong Bui (Rail): One of many memorable things that was brought up in the interview between you and Elizabeth Murray published in BOMB magazine in 2005 which I would like to begin with is when you both said you were interested in Gorky's paintings. I remember Elizabeth told me it was his use of color with its resonance of lost memory and its sense of intimacy that she mostly admired. What aspect of Gorky's painting do you most identify with?

Jennifer Bartlett: For me, it was the linear aspect of his painting or drawing that I liked most. The way the imagery just flowed from one to another. Particularly since I was lifting madly from him at the time I was an undergraduate at Mills College. But, as I told Elizabeth in the BOMB interview, I was so shocked by the scale of the paintings later when I saw the first real ones at the Art Institute of Chicago. They were smaller than I thought. I was in fact disappointed.

Rail: They must have been the two paintings, "After Khorkum," Gorky's Miró-esque painting of the early '40s (1940 – 42, 36 by 473/4 inches), and "The Plough and the Song II," an exquisite painting of his late, mature style, painted in 1947 (517/8 by 613/8 inches), a year before his death. I love everything Gorky ever made. Ellen Phelan feels the same way as I do.

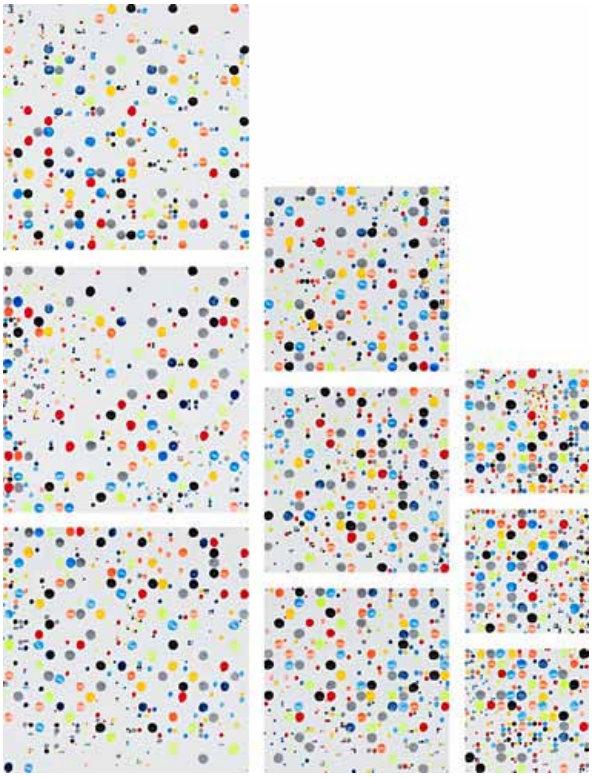
Bartlett: I do, too. In the reproductions they look like much bigger paintings than when I saw them in the flesh.

Rail: Does that lessen your admiration of the work?

Bartlett: No, but I don't think I've ever really made the adjustment.

Rail: I had a similar experience with Piero della Francesca's painting "The Flagellation": How monumental it looked on the projected screen in art history class! But when I finally saw it years later (1987) at the Galleria Nazionale della Marche in Urbino, it was tiny (about 24 by 32 inches).

Bartlett: Which is not true of his amazing fresco "Resurrection" at the Museo Civico of Sansepolcro (Piero's hometown). It was by chance that I saw it. I was visiting a friend, the film director Volker Schlondorff, in Tuscany; he wanted to give me a summer treat (c. 1988). He took me to see a dumpy small museum. In the first room there were varnished dark paintings and in the second room Piero's "Resurrection." We walked right into the space. There was no climate control. The windows were totally open and it was fabulous. And that remains one of the nicest art experiences I have had in my life.



"Large Medium Small Dots," 2011. Enamel over silkscreen grid on baked enamel steel plates. 75 x 57". Courtesy of the artist and Locks Gallery.

Rail: So how would you describe your sense of scale after those two encounters, one with Gorky's and the other with Piero's?

Bartlett: Well, there are two things: I always loved working big, even when I was making my early student paintings under the influence of Gorky. It must have been an innate and visceral situation. Two, I always wanted to make paintings that have a sense of tranquility, stillness in them. Both Gorky and Piero Fra Angelico are obvious examples, but even some of Warhol's paintings have this quality: in his "Electric Chair" paintings, despite their slightly sinister presence, there is a calmness about them as well. I also felt that same stillness in Mondrian paintings. I remember while looking at his paintings and some watercolor and drawings at the extraordinary retrospective at the Modern in 1995, I felt like I was swimming slowly across the space that his work generates.

Rail: Could you say similarly with Morandi's paintings?

Bartlett: I never responded to his paintings like the way many of my friends did at Yale (Morandi was the favorite painter when I was there). Maybe they are too still for me.

Rail: That's interesting—your response to Morandi's work. Perhaps it's not that different from Bob

Ryman's response. I remember calling Bob as soon as I finished seeing the Morandi retrospective at the Met and saying, "Hi Bob, you gotta come and see this amazing show of Morandi at the Met." And all he said was, "I've seen enough of his paintings and I'm not that interested in them, partly because they they make me very anxious."

"Lg. M. Sm. 1-500 Vertical," 2011. Enamel over silkscreen grid on baked enamel steel plates. 57 x 75". Courtesy of the artist and Locks Gallery.

Bartlett: Maybe that's how I feel too. That's a very funny remark from him.

Rail: He speaks with such economy whatever he says sticks in your head forever. Anyway, you and Elizabeth have been friends since your Mills College days. You were a senior in undergrad when Elizabeth was in her first year of grad school (1963).

Bartlett: Yes. Friends forever. Her loss is great to me.

Rail: We all feel the same way for sure. When Elizabeth later came to visit you at Yale's graduate school sometime in '64, your paintings had changed. All Elizabeth said was how ambitious and sophisticated your paintings were but there were no descriptions of them.

Bartlett: They were still very Gorky-esque but big and more confident I suppose.

Rail: How big?

Bartlett: About 10 by 12 feet. But I was also bouncing around with a lot of other things at the same time. For instance, I took Albers's color class. Sy Sillman taught with Richard Serra, who was in his third year when I was in my first, as an assistant teacher. I remember hating the smell of the color-aid paper and rubber cement. So instead I did free studies; these were just supposed to be every once in a while, but that was all I turned in. And that was why Richard told me that I would flunk the class. But in the end I managed to pass.

Rail: That's great, because he just told me recently about you being his most memorable student.

Bartlett: But what was important was once Rauschenberg, who was then the visiting artist/critic, came in my studio and said that one of my paintings reminded him of Picasso's "Night Fishing at Antibes" (1939). And Rauschenberg stayed for awhile; this was a big deal for me at the time. Then soon after that I started doing panel paintings, and they always had a narrative to them.

Rail: Were they mostly figurative paintings or abstract?

Bartlett: They were a combination of figurative and abstract in most cases. In other cases there were

"Path," 2011. Oil on canvas (diptych). 60 x 120". Courtesy of the artist and Locks Gallery.

completely abstract and minimal ones that were similar to my early Dot pieces, where I'd mix up 250 colors and each one would have a specific combination of the colors used.

Rail: Did you have any contact with Alex Katz at Yale?

Bartlett: Alex left Yale before I got there. But I met Alex later, and it was during the times I sat for him—Alex put me in several of his paintings—I got to know him well. I have always enjoyed talking to Alex, mostly because I like the decisiveness and violence of his opinions, definitive and at the same time hilarious.

Rail: I believe Alex gave his brief teaching job at Yale to Al Held. So you probably studied with Al when you were there.

Bartlett: Yes. I can remember when I got some kind of prize at graduation Al followed me out and said, "The only reason you got this prize is because you envelop everything in a pictorial envelope," which I thought was funny, and probably accurate. I also had a fondness for Jack Tworkov, who was very supportive of me.

Rail: Who else among the visiting artists/critics beside Rauschenberg were responsive to what you were doing at the time?

Bartlett: Jim Dine and Jim Rosenquist were supportive. And I was interested in their work. I also think Rosenquist has a great sense of humor.

Rail: Then eventually you moved to SoHo in 1967. I really like Brenda Richardson's description of you in her insightful essay "What if?" which was written for the catalogue of the show of Early Plate Work at Addison Gallery of American Art in 2006. She said of your arrival to downtown NYC, "[Jennifer] took to the new bohemia like a duck to water." Which basically can be applied to any artist who comes to New York in order to be liberated from his or her previous upbringing.

Bartlett: I loved it. I can remember clearly everything I saw as short story that actually happened. As soon as I got off the train from L.A. to Grand Central a woman pushed me over from behind as she was

"White Pine," 2010. Oil on canvas (diptych). 72 x 144". Courtesy of the artist and Locks Gallery.

trying to get off. I thought it was fabulous; it seemed so New York to me. So sure, I felt completely at home in New York as soon as I set foot on the street.

Rail: What was the art world like when you first came?

Bartlett: There were artist friends from Yale and others who had come to New York before me. Jenny Snider had been at Yale with me and her sister, Amy, who was married to Joel Shapiro at the time; Richard Serra and Nancy Graves, Joe and Susan Zucker, Chuck and Leslie Close, Alan Saret, and John Torreano were my immediate neighbors. It was a very small community. And there wasn't any money around at the time. No one sold any works, but everyone kept making works with the same intense commitment.

Rail: And they were all big works because that's what artists do; they know how to adapt to the given space, both mentally and physically. Everyone had large studios so they made big works, but I can't imagine they were desirable for any collector at the time.

Bartlett: None of us thought of our works in those terms, because we had never anticipated selling anything that we made. Which is good, I think, for all of us, because we were free to experiment with different ideas. I remember being excited as soon as I finished making something about the next thing.

Rail: When I was at the Locks Gallery in Philadelphia, I talked with Sueyen (Locks). She told me that some of the early plate works that were included in the show at Addison Gallery were found as a happy surprise—after decades of sitting in Paula Cooper's storage space.

Bartlett: That's true. And for the most part, we were very supportive of each other. Joel Shapiro once lent me $500 to make my first plates at Gersen Feiner in New Jersey, the same metal fabrication factory that still makes my plates today. If it wasn't for Joel maybe those early works would not have gotten made.

Rail: How long did it take you to pay Joel back his $500, which was considered a lot of money at the time?

Bartlett: To me $500 was a nice chunk of change. I paid him back within a few months after, I think. I'm usually very good about that kind of thing [laughs]. But I must say that I appreciated his generosity.

Installation view of "Rhapsody" (1975) at the Atrium of MoMA. Courtesy of the artist and Locks Gallery.

Rail: How did you get to know Joe Zucker?

Bartlett: Through Chuck, because he and Chuck lived in the same building, which was just around the corner from me. I was on Greene Street and they were on Prince. I saw a lot of them, as well as John Torreano, Barry La Va, and Dennis Oppenheim. But Joe was especially smart and hilarious.

Rail: He certainly is both. Actually, the first time I saw "Rhapsody" when it was on view at the Modern's Atrium as part of the Edward R. Broida Collection (which was a gift to the museum in 2006) it was a staggering experience to say the least. In some ways it reminded me of Joe's "100-Hundred-Foot-Long-Piece," which I saw at the Parrish Art Museum in the early '90s.

Bartlett: I've heard about it but I haven't seen it. However, I did see his last show of the gypsum paintings at Mary's space in Chelsea, which was beautiful.

Rail: Yes, it really was. But what I meant to say is you and Joe seem to share similar aspirations. Neither of you prescribe to either minimalist or conceptual ideologies, abstract or representation, and so on.

Bartlett: I think we were a few who could make work in between, mostly because what we both like to do suits our temperaments.

Rail: Which brings up the issue of unity of style. This was first dealt with in the case of Picasso's work. I think when Picasso had his first show in 1901 at the age of 20, the French poet, Felicien Fagus, who reviewed the show, wondered whether Picasso, in spite of his unusual ability to paint, at such a young age, in every manner of the day would ever find a true style that belonged to him alone. As we know this is an unusual conflict that Picasso managed to feed off of and cultivate throughout his life. Perhaps one particular moment was more pronounced than the other. But he was known to paint, for example, in the summer of 1921, a synthetic cubist painting like "Three Musicians" in the morning, and a neo-classical one like "Mother and Child" in the afternoon. My question is in your 1972 show at Reese Palley Gallery, did you deliberately juxtapose "House Piece," 61 plates with several irregular spaced intervals, painted with limited palette of black, yellow, red, blue, and green (basically the first time you introduced pictographic elements like the house, the window, the clouds, mountains, flying birds, and so on), one on one wall, and on the other wall— —

Bartlett: Totally abstract, with "Big Intersection" (plates with horizontal and vertical lines forming an axis). I was very conscious of the two walls opposite each other. One was acceptable to people, and one wasn't. Which is easy to understand. The abstract one was, and the other one being representa-

tional wasn't.

Rail: Was there a percentage of citation of merit of one over the other? [Laughs.]

Bartlett: Given the climate at the time, which was more in favor of minimalism and conceptual art, I can't think of an artist who would be interested in the "House Piece" that much. But to me they both dealt with the same problems that kept me amused endlessly.

Rail: And chance operation was an important part of the process.

Bartlett: Yes. As early as '68 or '69 I began to be more interested in John Cage's ideas and quickly embraced random elements along with the grid and the plates in my works.

Rail: "Rhapsody" is so complex and big I can't imagine the time that it took you to paint the whole 987 one-foot-square steel plates is any less than the time it required you to play around with the matching order. I wonder whether you could see the whole thing when it was made all at once?

Bartlett: I would say I devoted equal time to doing both. Also, I could only see 1/3 of the piece at one time in my studio. I never saw it together until it was shown at Paula's in 1976. But at the time while I was making it I had a couple of ground rules; one was that I had to make up my mind at the end of the day whether a plate would stay in or out. And that was it—I wasn't allowed to change my mind the next day.

Rail: What was the reason behind such self-imposed constraint?

Bartlett: Because I didn't want to get caught up in the issue of judging or selecting, changing my mind, and so on, which takes forever. It was supposed to be like a conversation, in which people digress from one thing and maybe come back to the subject, then do the same with the next thing. That was how the images got developed. I remember they were all sort of taken for granted. In other words, I began with an image of the house, a tree, the ocean and mountains and birds, which represented the figurative element. A section of each line, shape, color. Each presented freehand, ruled and measured, or dotted.

Rail: Well, in the show at Locks Gallery in 2008 (From Rhapsody to Song) there were several preparatory drawings of "Rhapsody," so they were some forms of rehearsal, I would say.

Bartlett: If it was to be random, then it was really random; otherwise it was very deliberate. The thing that amazed me about the interior grid was that it opened the wall up instead of closing it down. It looks bigger than it really is. And I never figured out why. But I think it's partly because of my aversion to the issue of edges in painting, which was probably why I've always preferred to work in panels. It's my way of making edgeless paintings, so to speak.

Rail: When you moved to NYC in 1967, it was the same year that Sol LeWitt wrote his landmark "Paragraph on Conceptual Art."

Bartlett: Which I think is one of the great late 20th century poems. [Laughs.]

Rail: Which you must have read when it was published in Artforum?

Bartlett: My only Artforum memory is being on the train with Germano Celant in Italy in 1974 when Lynda Benglis was on the centerfold, naked with a dildo. It was fantastic. [Laughs.] No, I don't think I read it when it was just published, but soon after. I may have met Sol before I had read the essay. And of course he was always on my mind.

Rail: Lynda's centerfold caused a group of distinguished editors like Annette Michelson, Rosalind Krauss, and few others to leave the journal. I mean, I didn't know that Lynda had that much power.

Bartlett: I don't think she knew it either, mostly because she's just sort of a perpetual motion machine. I don't think she thought much of that ad and what would come after because she'd be onto the next thing that she was thinking about.

Rail: The little I know of Lynda, what you are saying about her is so true. Again, you had read LeWitt's essay, but how about Kandinsky's book Point and Line to Plane?

Bartlett: I love Kandinsky. I haven't read Point and Line to Plane. I read his other book Concerning the Spiritual In Art.

Rail: I was thinking about Point and Line to Plane partly because it's so rudimentary about how each point functioned in relationship to what you and many artists of your generation were doing at the time!

Bartlett: I was interested in both the formal issue and the narrative elements.

Rail: Were you conscious of carving out a space for yourself as soon as you got to the city?

Bartlett: Yes. I remember in the late '60s Bob Morris owned the color gray, and the competition was so different at the time. I wouldn't know how to put it. I mean everyone was incredibly competitive, but we all were critical of our own works as much as we were critical of each others' works. I learned about myself really early that if I dislike a work that I see in a show, I better go to it a couple of times, or I better think about it. I learned that from Vito Acconci's early work, which had everything in it that I just can't stand. I found myself defending his works to all of my friends. His career has developed in such an interesting way.

Rail: That's true. Let's talk about your quasi-autobiography, History of the Universe: A novel (Nimbus Books, 1985). When did the urge to write begin?

Bartlett: It was always there. Since I was very young I would write sad poems about the ocean in Long Beach, California, where I grew up. I was always good at writing essays. One of the really interesting ones that a teacher didn't know how to grade was an essay I wrote, I think in the eighth grade, on Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov. And the whole thing was based on Ivan, the middle son and first by Fyodor's second marriage, and how he was the chosen one to redeem the sins of his father, which was a complete misreading of the whole novel. I must have written convincingly enough, and took on such big projects that right or wrong, I would get good grades.

Rail: When did you read Lawrence Durrell's The Alexandria Quartet? A tetralogy of novels, which you turned Elizabeth on to?

Bartlett: I just reread that in the last five or six years. But yes, I first read in high school.

Rail: You probably just read them when they came out in the early '60s.

Bartlett: Yes. Reading was another thing that Elizabeth and I shared. One of the reasons I liked her so much was when I first met her she was reading Ulysses and on the floor and laughing hysterically at parts of it.

Rail: What was it about the Quartet that impressed you the most?

Bartlett: The Quartet contains different points of view of the same sequence of events, much like my painting, where each panel is a self-contained story.

Rail: It's a synthesis of Einstein's theory of relativity and Freud's analytic method, all reacting against materialism.

Bartlett: Or like Kurasawa's Rashoman. Four stories told by different characters of the same event.

Rail: Yes, absolutely. What are some of your other favorite books?

Bartlett: Recently I went back and read a lot of Russians again Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov. Also Dickens, George Eliot, Stendhal—that whole 19th century contingent, and I still enjoy a good Trollope any time. I love the whole Palliser series. I love all the characters and one of my favorites was Phineas Finn. I also listened to all of them on tapes read by David Case whose voice is amazing with Trollope.

Rail: When do you read?

Bartlett: I usually read when I get up in the morning and I when I go to bed at night. And then some days I just kind of drop out of the world and read the whole entire day.

Rail: What a pleasure! I really envy you. Anyway, if anyone would take the time to look at "Rhapsody" I think it may take him or her the whole day to look at the entire installation carefully.

Bartlett: I didn't think I'd see it again in my lifetime. But I was really surprised and delighted to see it again at MoMA in the Atrium. And it was good that Roberta Smith wrote about it as she has in previous times.

Rail: She certainly has championed your work for a long time. Are you both friends?

Bartlett: Yes, we've been friends ever since we first met. Roberta was working for Paula Cooper in 1972.

Rail: Cool. The most detectable thing is, and I think everyone would agree, how well "Rhapsody"

holds the Atrium space. I can't remember the last time a work of art looked so terrific in that space.

Bartlett: Well, Martin Puryear's Ladder ("Ladder for Booker T. Washington") looked great there.

Rail: So did his other piece called "Ad Astra," which he made specifically for the space. With two wheels from an old wagon, attached to a geometric shape, from its so-called cargo, as a base, there arose one single carved form of a burl tree reaching as far as the sixth floor. It was awesome.

Bartlett: It was.

Rail: Actually, Pipilotti Rist's 2009 video installation ("Pour Your Body Out") and Dan Perjovschi's 2007 wall drawing looked pretty good there as well. At any rate, about your current show: On the first floor, there are the early plate paintings from the '70s, while on the second floor, installed along with the five diptychs (oil paintings on canvas) there is a group of new plate paintings with different sizes.

Bartlett: Yes, small, medium, and large.

Rail: When did you begin to combine the three sizes?

Bartlett: Just before "Recitative," which was shown at Pace last January and February. I initially did some extra small pieces, which were 50 cm plates that I made all at once for some reason. They initially became the word pieces. The idea of relative relationship in three different sizes. That was how the three conventional sizes of small, medium, and large came about.

Rail: What was the impulse behind the diptych paintings in the show? When were they first conceived? Also, they seem modest in scale compared to the previous ones I had seen in the past.

Bartlett: You're right. They initially started in the early '80s as part of the In the Garden series, shown at Paula's. But they in fact relate to both the Air paintings ("Air: 24 Hour, Eleven AM"), all 24 of which all were 7 by 7 feet, made between 1991 – 92, and the Amagansett paintings, some of which were very large. For example, Amagansett diptych #1 ("Two Oceans"), displays two views of the ocean, one facing west the other facing east; the piece measures over 100 by 200 inches. They were all painted in one year, 2007.

Rail: Do you think their size may have roots in the two huge commissions for AT&T in the mid-'80s, one being of the Atlantic Ocean, which was painted on the steel plates, and the other of Pacific Ocean, painted with oil on canvas?

Bartlett: Oh yeah, I'd forgotten about those. I do have an affinity for the ocean, don't I? [Laughs.]

Rail: I remember seeing your Sea Wall paintings with all sorts of sculptural elements such as boats and geometric forms and other things while I sat on the floor in front at Paula's gallery in May 1985 or 1987 when I was an art student. Do you think the monumental scale and the breadth of your ambition have to do with keeping up with what was going on with Neo-Expressionism, which was dominated by male artists?

Bartlett: I had been in France and Japan for a year and a half; when I returned to New York, Neo-Expressionism was a fait accompli.

Rail: Not that I ever disputed your ability to paint things big [laughs]. Nor your prolific output, but I feel in this group of diptychs, there's a greater sense of intimacy and tenderness, maybe because of their sizes, I don't know, which were rarely seen in the previous works.

Bartlett: They all were painted from different views and places of my new garden in Fort Greene, Brooklyn.

Rail: Yes, I recognized the various views after having seen the paintings as soon as I walked into your garden. In fact, let's look carefully at, let's say, the five paintings "Iris," "Juniper," "Path," "White Pine," and "Pond." What interested me, in addition to the ways the images were slightly altered in order to create spatial discrepancies, however what interested me was thin the paint application was in all of them, the painterly gestures were physically present in every brush stroke.

Bartlett: That sounds good to me.

Rail: How do you achieve that cross-hatching look? Were they mostly painted with many brushes with one handle?

Bartlett: You're partially right, though I gradually build them up so they are less visible than what you have just described. In other words, I would paint with regular brushes over the whole painting, partly to accentuate the representational description, wherever that's required, and partly to be more spontaneous with my hand.

Rail: Crosshatchings are so incredibly impersonal, yet in these paintings you were able to make them so personal at the same time. This is something you've done your whole life, play or experiment with the impersonalness of the conceptual restraints while allowing the personal freedom of spontaneity to exist at the same time. Can one be a hedgehog and the fox simultaneously?

Bartlett: I think so, but that's one of my great failings. It's been a consistent situation ever since I was a kid. This may have initiated in my early reading. I suppose it was the reason why I was drawn so strongly to the Alexandria Quartet. I just feel more is more sometimes. I feel these new diptychs were a natural progression from what I have been doing all my life. What interested me in these new groups is the variations that occur within the landscape. I mean within whatever landscape the image is varied differently from different views.

Rail: That is so true.

Rail: Do you think the cross-hatching gesture evolved out from your dots?

Bartlett: I certainly hope so [laughs]. I believe the cross hatching was to evoke air and light. I always look for a way to drop the figurative element but I haven't succeeded yet.

Rail: I suspect that the black or the deep blue line would be laid out first in terms of sketching out the

imagery before building up colors and light gradually on top?

Bartlett: Yes. But then each one would go through so many stages; it's difficult to say how each should be painted. The real truth is I usually get through my body of work in a certain period of time then I go through a phase where I just wait and see.

Rail: Yeah, the gestation period.

Bartlett: Exactly. So if you have any good ideas just call me.

Rail: You know how silly the idea is, like de Kooning said of Cézanne's subject of the apples being not a brilliant subject.

Bartlett: True. But Cézanne was one of those painters who has this quality of stillness that I love as I mentioned earlier of Piero. I actually prefer his late paintings of "Mont Sainte-Victoire" to his more celebrated still lives.

Rail: What's your reason?

Bartlett: Because they're so boring in certain ways, but at the same time the unsettling energy of the early paintings, which were horrible by most standards, is so riveting while looming from below the surface.

Rail: I agree. Do you remember that great show of his early paintings at the National Gallery of Art (Cézanne: The Early Years 1859-1872) in 1988? Lawrence Gowing's essay for the catalogue was also very brilliant.

Bartlett: I loved that show as I love a lot of his early painting. Actually, this conversation goes back to what I had said before about how at first when you dislike something, it bothers you enough you must go back and figure out why, because most of the time is challenges you of what you may have but choose to ignore.