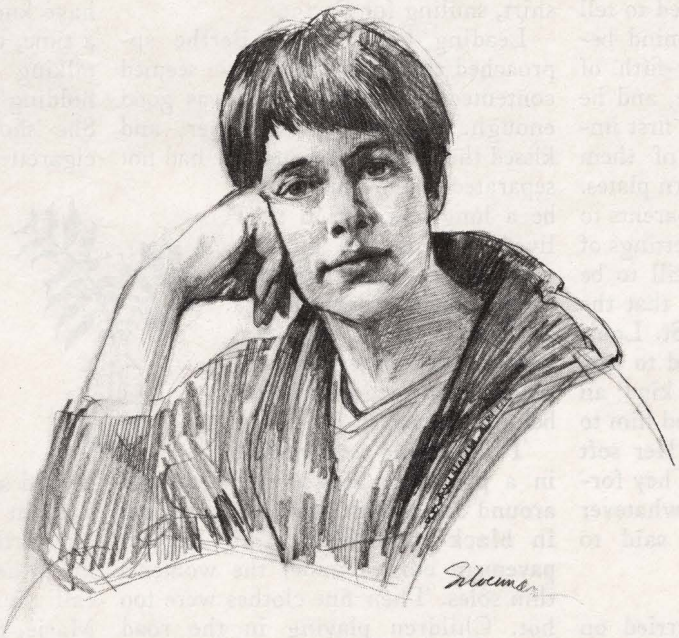
PROFILES

GETTING EVERYTHING IN



JENNIFER BARTLETT'S New York friends are often surprised to learn that she grew up in Southern California. How could that laid-back, sybaritic culture (as we tend to view it from the East Coast) have produced an artist of her energy, analytic rigor, and undissembled ambition? Bartlett herself says that California always seemed strange to her. When she was five years old, she told her mother she was going to be an artist and live in New York. Although she now lives part of the time in Paris in order to be with her husband, the film actor Mathieu Carrière, New York has been her real home for the last fifteen years and her aesthetic home for a lot longer than that.

The art world becomes more diversified all the time, of course, and Bartlett's career reflects that fact. As one of the most widely exhibited artists of her generation—the generation that emerged in the late nineteen-sixties and the early nineteen-seventies—she is well known in Tokyo and in London, where her disconcertingly direct manner, her helmet of close-cropped dark hair, and her habit of cracking jokes at her own expense lead people to assume that she must be a native New Yorker. Nevertheless, she did grow up in Long Beach, California, and her childhood there—she was the eldest in a family of four children—seems to have been a reasonably conventional one. It was her response to it that was unusual. She was born in 1941, and she put in enough time at surfing beaches and on the sidelines of various athletic fields (she was briefly a cheerleader at Woodrow Wilson High School) to become permanently dubious about male supremacy—a trait that proved useful to her when, in 1963, she went to Yale. Her father, Edward Losch, was a pipeline engineer whose earnings fluctuated from year to year. The family's mode of living fluctuated accordingly, but most of the time they were able to consider themselves as in the upper middle class. Her mother had been a commercial artist, a fashion illustrator; she quit work when Jennifer was born. Jennifer went to the vast public schools of Long Beach, where she quickly established herself as the class nonconformist, arguer, and artist. "I never had the kind of natural talent that lets you draw portraits or horses or things like that," she recalls. "I'd do very large drawings on brown paper that showed, for example, everything I could think of underwater. Or scenes with people dropping from cliffs into boats, and Indians in the background. Art teachers always liked me, but I never really understood why what I did was good." In addition to drawing constantly, she developed an early passion for reading—stories and novels of all kinds. Sometimes, her reading took the place of her school assignments. Told to read one thing and write an essay on it, she would read something entirely different and write about that. For a while in her teens, she thought about becoming a lawyer, because she was so good at arguing, but aside from that there was no significant wavering from her decision, at age five, to be an artist.

The decision was reconfirmed at Mills College, in Oakland, California, which she entered in 1959. Although Mills was known as the Vassar of the West—as a place for young women of the best families—it had a strong art department, and an even stronger music department, both of which were open to advanced contemporary work. Fernand Léger and Max Beckmann had taught there, and so had Darius Milhaud and John Cage. Jennifer Losch absorbed a wide variety of aesthetic influences, and began painting in a loose abstract style derived mainly from the work of Arshile Gorky. She had her first one-person show at Mills in 1963, her senior year. The reactions to it were mixed, but the slides she had made of some of the paintings were impressive enough to get her into the graduate art program at Yale, which happened to be the best possible place just then for an ambitious art student.

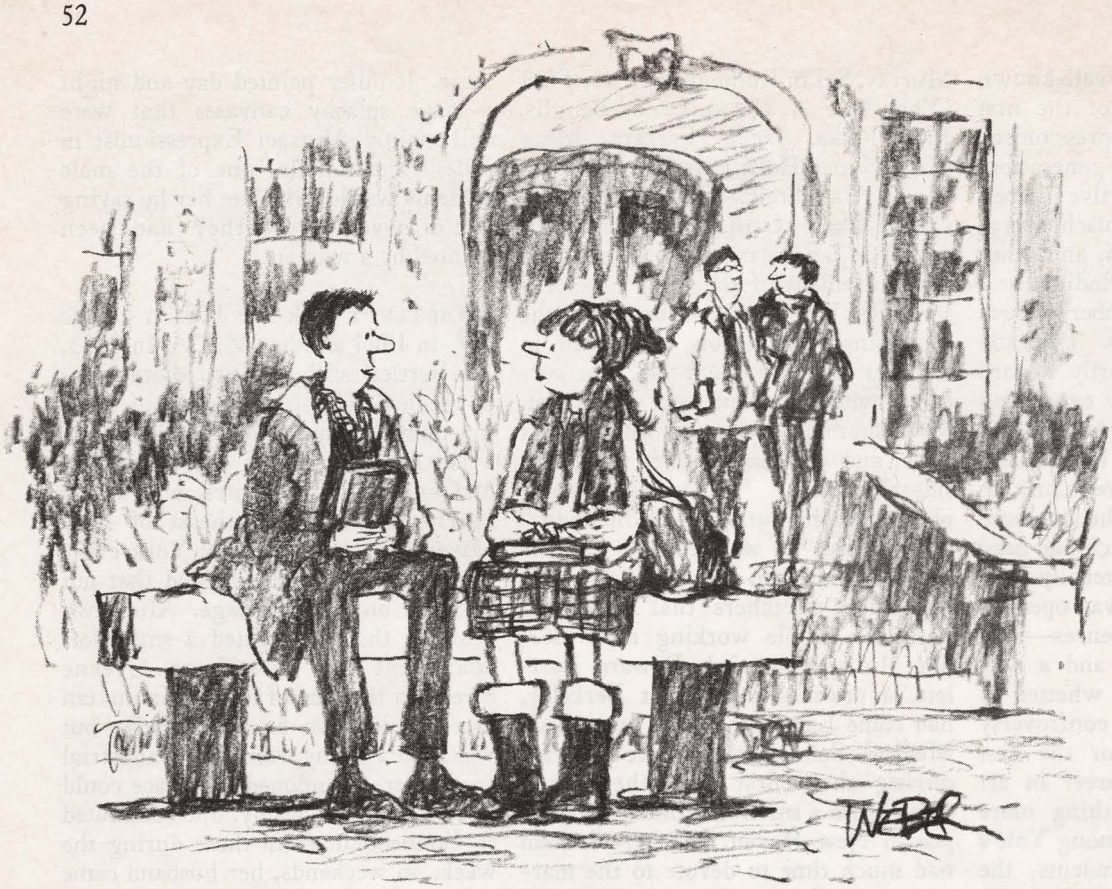
Yale's popular reputation as an incubator of stockbrokers has sometimes obscured its strength in fields that other Ivy League schools have barely begun to cultivate. The School of Art and Architecture, founded in 1869, is a good example. Teaching standards there have always been on a high and thoroughly professional level. In 1950, the school's fine-arts program came under the guidance of Josef Albers, the former Bauhaus teacher, who had established his American reputation at Black Mountain College, in North Carolina. Albers changed the program's conservative direction, putting the emphasis squarely on modern art and bringing in as guest teachers distinguished contemporary artists with widely divergent approaches—Willem de Kooning, Stuart Davis, Burgoyne Diller, José de Rivera, Ad Reinhardt, and James Brooks, among others. As a result, Yale in the nineteen-fifties became a mecca for the most adventurous art students. Albers retired in 1958, but the program continued to attract many more students than it could accommodate. (One out of twenty applicants got in.) When Jennifer Losch arrived, in the fall of 1963, Jack Tworkov had just taken over as the school's chair-

man. Tworkov was a well-known New York painter, one of the first generation of Abstract Expressionists. Unlike some artists of that generation, he took a lively and supportive interest in the work of Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Frank Stella, and other young people who were finding new paths, and he invited a number of them to Yale as guest teachers. Tworkov oriented the school primarily toward New York and its rapidly expanding art world. Midtown Manhattan was less than two hours away by car, and the students went down regularly to visit the galleries and the museum shows. The art world, which had been a small and tightly knit fraternity until the mid-nineteen-fifties, was opening up to all sorts of new influences—new art forms, new galleries, and a new public, whose interest was whetted by rising prices and by the controversy surrounding Pop Art. For the first time in many years, a career in art began to seem like something more than a quixotic gamble. Among Yale's highly competitive art students, the feeling was very strong that they were "the next generation" in contemporary art; they used to joke that the New York art world was an extension of Yale. "There was no question in our minds that we would be showing at Leo Castelli's any day," Bartlett recalls. "I remember hearing that Larry Poons had had his first New York show when he was twenty-six, and it was perfectly clear to me that if I hadn't had a show by the time I was twenty-six I was quitting."

A number of the students who got their B.F.A. or M.F.A. degrees, or both, at Yale during the years that Bartlett was there did become important figures in contemporary art: Richard Serra, Chuck Close, Jonathan Borofsky, Nancy Graves, Rackstraw Downes. One of the interesting things about this generation of artists is that so many of the good ones are women. In addition to Bartlett and Graves, the list includes Elizabeth Murray, Susan Rothenberg, Judy Pfaff (Yale, M.F.A. 1973), Lynda Benglis, Judy Rifka, Jackie Ferrara, Mary Miss, Nancy Holt, Lois Lane, Audrey Flack, Pat Steir, Cindy Sherman, Louisa Chase, Catharine Warren, Susan Crile, and many more. The feminist movement of the early nineteen-seventies had a lot to do with the increasing recognition of women in art, but the movement had not surfaced when Bartlett was a student. Male supremacy was still the norm at Yale, and she reacted to it with considerable anger. "I adopted a completely macho attitude of my own," she told me. "I was terrified my first semester, but then I just started building huge stretchers that interfered with the people working near me." She also got married. Edward Bartlett, a pre-med student at Berkeley, had come East with her to enter Yale Medical School; they were married during their first year there, and moved into a small apartment off campus in New Haven. Neither of them had much time to devote to the marriage. Jennifer painted day and night—large splashy canvases that were still mainly Abstract Expressionist in style. Occasionally, one of the male students would infuriate her by saying you'd never know they had been painted by a woman.

Bartlett took her B.F.A. degree in 1964 and her M.F.A. in 1965. Ed Bartlett still had two more years of medical school, so instead of moving immediately to New York she got a job teaching art at the University of Connecticut, in Storrs, which was nearly two hours northeast of New Haven. She went to New York every chance she got, though, and that put a strain on the marriage. After two years of this, she rented a small loft apartment for herself on Greene Street, in the part of lower Manhattan that would soon be called SoHo but was then a grimy, run-down industrial area where abandoned loft space could be rented quite cheaply. She commuted to Connecticut from there during the week; on weekends, her husband came

"It's called a dry Martini. When Grandpa was a young man, all the young men on the move drank dry Martinis."



"My ambition is to be a talk-show host. I myself don't have much to say, but I'd like to offer encouragement to those who do."

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to see her in New York. Living in New York made her exhausting schedule bearable. She never once considered going back to California. "I didn't think it was possible to be a serious artist there," she told me. "And anyway I was just crazy about New York. I remember, the first time I got there, being knocked down by a big, fat woman when I was trying to hail a taxi—for some reason, this appealed to me enormously."

She had a built-in network of friends. Elizabeth Murray, an artist who had been her best friend at Mills College, had moved to New York the year before. Jonathan Borofsky had a loft just down the block on Greene Street, and Barry LeVa, who had been in her class at Woodrow Wilson High School, and was just becoming known in New York as a Conceptual artist, lived not far away. Through them she got to know most of the young New York artists and kept in touch with all sorts of new developments. The opening-up process of the early nineteen-sixties had led to a bewildering proliferation of experiments, styles, and ideas. Minimalism, which had started at about the same time as Pop, in the early sixties, but had taken longer to gain recognition, was on its way to becoming the dominant style of the seventies; many young artists, influenced by Frank Stella's stripe paintings and Donald Judd's metal-box sculptures, were trying to reduce painting and sculpture to their essential elements of shape, color, and volume, and to do so in ways that removed all traces of the artist's personal touch or sensibility. Others were moving in different directions: using the Nevada desert or their own bodies as art material (earth art, body art); becoming public performers of one sort or another (performance art); investigating language in its relation to art (art and language); or shedding the notion of the art object altogether and devoting their attention to mathematical, linguistic, or philosophical concepts, which in some cases did not take any material form (Conceptual Art). Some of this activity seemed to be a reaction against the increasing commercialization of the art world, although even the earth artists, whose labors in the desert and elsewhere looked like noncommercial ventures of the purest sort, were not averse, it turned out, to having the photographic evidence of their works offered for sale in high-priced galleries. It was a period of great uncertainty and confusion. Dozens of young artists were searching for the unique something that would single them out from the crowd—the new image, the new material, the new mode of expression.

"I liked all of it," Bartlett recalls. She wanted somehow to take it all in—not just the newest trends but also the work of artists who had already made their mark. One of the artists she and her friends particularly admired was Jasper Johns, but this did not prevent her from getting into heated arguments with Johns when they met. "Jennifer was sort of a brat," Elizabeth Murray has said. "She was outspoken, and she seemed very sure of herself, and she made people angry—especially men." The kind of work that Bartlett was doing then struck Elizabeth Murray as "unfathomable." Some of it looked like process art—a form that made use of non-art materials in ways that emphasized the processes through which they could become art. In Bartlett's case, though, the processes had to do mainly with her living in New York. She bought cheap merchandise from the second-hand outlets on Canal Street—quantities of red plastic sugar bowls, for example, which she subjected to various ordeals. One was dropped from a fourth-floor window; another was left outdoors for a week; a third was left outdoors for a month; a fourth was baked in an oven for ten minutes at three hundred degrees; and so forth. At the end, she set them all out on the floor of her loft, in a temporary tableau. She made a series of wall hangings out of stretched, interlaced canvas straps—the kind of straps people use to tie up their suitcases or trunks. She also painted, and she made a great many drawings—colored-dot drawings on graph paper, which often seemed to her the most interesting

things she was doing then. In addition, she had started to write. Some of the Conceptual artists appeared to be more interested in words than in visual images; Bartlett says that writing seemed easier to her than painting. She wrote a long, four-part essay called "Cleopatra" (it dealt with the historical Cleopatra and a quantity of other, unrelated subjects, and was published in 1971 by Adventures in Poetry, a small New York press), after which she commenced work on her autobiography—an open-ended document that would eventually turn into a thousand-page autobiographical novel, called, self-mockingly, "The History of the Universe." Trying out all these forms and moving in several directions at the same time tended to put her at a disadvantage among her peers, most of whom had charted what they hoped was a unique course and were sticking to it. She usually found herself on the defensive when talking with the artists at St. Adrian's or the other downtown bars where they gathered. "People had very definite opinions, and everybody was terrifically competitive," she recalls. "I imagine there were very few people doing abstract work who were acceptable to Brice Marden, and very few people doing sculpture who were acceptable to Richard Serra. I didn't really have a point of view like that. I liked a lot of different people's work."

Few of the artists of her generation were making money from their art. They supported themselves any way they could—carpentry, bartending, teaching. Bartlett was still commuting to the University of Connecticut. Her teaching methods were unpredictable. After once criticizing a student's failure to use the whole space of a canvas —to "make every inch count," as she had been told to do at Yale—she began to think that maybe it would be interesting to have some blank space around the image after all, so she had her students try that. One of the problems in her own work was that other people's ideas interested her too much; she had a lot of trouble thinking up ideas of her own. Her best ideas always came out of the actual process of working. She felt that if she could find a new method that involved a great deal of physical work, a "labor-intensive" method, she would be a lot better off. "I was looking for a way to get work done without the burden of having to do anything good," she told me. "I wanted desperately to be good, of course, but whenever I sat down and tried to think of something that would be terrific to do I couldn't."

"Tweet?"

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At this point, late in 1968, she hit on the notion of using one-foot-square steel plates as the basic module for her paintings. The Minimal artists often used modular units, but in Bartlett's case the idea had nothing to do with Minimalist sculpture, or with philosophical meditations on "the object." She wanted a simple, flat, uniform surface to paint on—a surface that did not require wooden stretchers, canvas, and all the bothersome paraphernalia of oil paint. "I thought that if I could just eliminate everything I hated doing, like stretching canvas, then I'd be able to work a lot more," she explained later. She tried a number of different surfaces—wood, plastic, aluminum—before settling on the steel plates, which were coated with a layer of baked-on white enamel (very much like the signs in New York subway stations, which gave her the idea), and on which she superimposed a silk-screened grid of light-gray lines (suggested to her by the graph-paper drawings she had been doing). All this had to be done for her by professional jobbers, and that suited her fine. Bartlett is an exceptionally fastidious worker; some of the inspiration for the steel plates must have come from her abhorrence of mess.

The paint that she found to use on the baked-enamel surface was Testors enamel, which is sold mainly in hobby stores to be used on model airplanes and cars. It comes in twenty-five colors, in small bottles that can be recapped when not in use. Bartlett started out by limiting herself to four colors—yellow, red, blue, and green—plus black and white. "It always made

me nervous to use just the primary colors," she told me. "I felt a need for green. I felt no need whatsoever for orange or violet, but I did need green. Of course, I know that yellow and blue make green, but not really in the same way that yellow and red make orange. I just had to have green." She applied her colors in the form of dots, in strictly planned combinations and progressions. The sequence of colors was always the same—white, yellow, red, blue, green, black—but her combinations and progressions ran a gamut from simple to extremely complex. What she was doing *sounded* like Conceptual Art: she was using mathematical systems to determine the placement of her dots. But the results—all those bright, astringently colored dots bouncing around and forming into clusters on the grid—never looked Conceptual. For Bartlett, the mathematical system was not important in itself; its only function was to provide a means of getting work done. The benefits came from the physical act of applying the paint, not from the system.

It was indeed a great way to get a lot of work done. In 1970, she showed "about three or four hundred" painted steel plates (her memory is a bit vague here) in her first New York exhibition, at Alan Saret's loft, on Spring Street. In those days, Saret, an artist who has since become well known, occasionally turned his loft into an exhibition space for himself and others. (The dancer-choreographer Laura Dean gave her first performances there.) Only a few art galleries had opened in the area south of Houston Street, and much of the activity there was still impromptu and informal. Before her show at Saret's, Bartlett marched into the nearby Paula Cooper Gallery and borrowed its mailing list, which she used to send out announcements. This was not quite as brash as it sounds. Paula Cooper, the first person to open a gallery in SoHo, in 1968, did everything she could to help young artists. Her gallery, which was then on Prince Street, functioned almost like the nonprofit "alternative spaces" that appeared a few years later. She showed mostly unknown artists, and advised and encouraged a great many others. She also made her gallery available in the evenings for all kinds of special events—benefits, performances, poetry readings. Bartlett herself gave a reading at the Paula Cooper Gallery soon after her show at Alan Saret's loft, from her autobiography-in-progress, and later she gave several more readings there.

Bartlett's next show was at the newly opened Reese Palley Gallery, on Prince Street, in January of 1972. Palley had a large space, and by then Bartlett had more than enough work to fill it—hundreds of enamelled steel plates grouped together into multipart series paintings. (In the show at Saret's, each plate had been presented singly.) It was hard even for her to tell where one painting stopped and the next one began. In hanging the show, she had left a two-foot space between series, a one-foot space between the various sets of plates within a series, and a one-inch space between individual plates. These separations tended to get overlooked, and the total effect was of a large room entirely filled with colored-dot paintings in a mind-boggling display of patterns. Although a majority of the patterns were abstract, she had also included a very large (sixty-plate) painting in which a rudimentary but clearly recognizable house—a square with a triangle on top—appeared in many different aspects and in a wide range of colors that suggested different times of day and different seasons of the year. A lot of people saw the show. There were even a few sales (the prices were modest), and there was a review in *Artnews* by Laurie Anderson, who was just getting started then as a performance artist, and who supplemented her income by writing gallery notes.

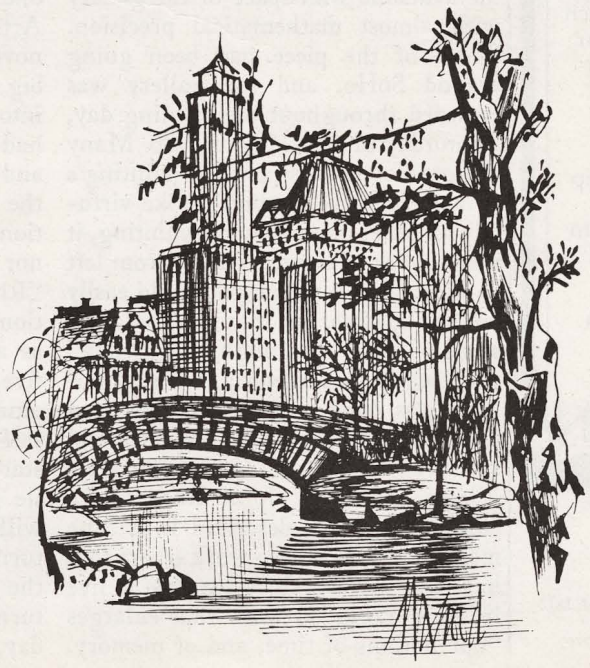
During the next year and a half, Bartlett continued to pour her energy into diverse activities. In 1972, she got a job teaching at the School of Visual Arts, in downtown Manhattan, which meant that she could quit commuting to Connecticut. She did a lot of painting, and her work was included in several group exhibitions outside New York. Her autobiographical novel, meanwhile, was getting longer and longer, its pages of personal history interspersed with brief prose portraits of friends, lovers, members of her family in Long Beach, fellow-artists, chance acquaintances. She was divorced from Ed Bartlett by this time. One of her closest friends was Paula Cooper, whom she described in an admiring prose portrait. "People find Paula beautiful, reserved, and don't always know what she's thinking," it reads in part. "She is five feet, seven inches tall, thin, with dark hair, a large mouth, large brown eyes, and a small soft high-pitched voice. She is stubborn, slow to make decisions, and has an erratic explosive temper." A decision that Paula Cooper had been slow to make involved taking Bartlett into her gallery. Bartlett had made no secret of her desire to be there, but Cooper had reservations about her work. She was a little put off by Bartlett's wanting to crowd so many paintings

into a show, and also by her blithe way of following a mathematical system until it became inconvenient and then bending it or simply dropping it. She accused Bartlett of being a "nihilist" in this respect. Cooper admired very much the work of the Conceptual artist Sol LeWitt, whose first wall drawings (made directly on the wall) were done in her gallery. She felt that if you decided to use a mathematical system, as LeWitt and several other Conceptualists did, then you were involving yourself in an investigation that became, in effect, the content of the work, and for this reason you had no business breaking the system. It took her a while to understand that Bartlett had no real interest in the system or the concept—that for her it was just a means. Early in 1974, at any rate, Bartlett forced the issue by demanding to know what Cooper's "intentions" were toward her work. Reese Palley had closed his gallery. Several other dealers had made offers, Bartlett said, but she wanted to be with Paula Cooper, and, as Cooper puts it, "Jennifer usually gets what she wants." She agreed to give Bartlett a show that spring.

The "nine-point" paintings that Bartlett showed in the spring of 1974 were rigorously Conceptual—to a degree. She used only black dots and red dots this time. The placement of precisely nine red dots was identical on each one-foot square; it had been arrived at by a random procedure that involved drawing numbered cards from a coffee can (one number for the horizontal line on the grid, another for the vertical). The black dots went down according to a variety of prearranged systems: they might connect one or more red dots in a straight line, or descend vertically from the red dots (and then pile up chaotically at the bottom), or move about the grid in different directions. The general effect was somewhat austere, and quite perplexing. One piece in the show, called "Squaring," had no red dots at all. It was a sequence of thirty-three plates, with two black dots in the two top left-hand squares of the grid on the first plate, four black dots on the second, sixteen on the third, two hundred and fifty-six on the fourth, and then twenty-nine plates entirely filled (except for a section of the twenty-ninth) with black dots, representing the square of two hundred and fifty-six. It was the kind of mathematical system that Bartlett enjoyed—mathematics' goofy side.

Several group shows followed, in and out of New York. Bartlett went to Europe for a gallery show of her work in Genoa and a two-artist show with Joel Shapiro, a good friend of hers, at the avant-garde Garage, in London. Her medium was still Testors enamel on enamelled steel plates, but it was no longer austere; she had begun to use more and more of the twenty-five colors, sometimes mixing or layering them to make new colors. In a big work called "Drawing and Painting," which appeared in a group show at Paula Cooper's new Wooster Street gallery in the fall of 1974, some sections were done in colored dots, while others were actually painted with a brush, obliterating the grid. She was getting ready to throw away the Conceptual crutch.

IN the summer of 1975, Bartlett arranged to house-sit for well-to-do friends in Southampton, on Long Island's south shore. In exchange for taking care of the garden and the main house, she had the use of a small cottage on the property. She soon became so absorbed in her work that the garden dried up. Bartlett had laid in a large supply of her steel plates (more than a thousand), with which she planned to make a painting "that had everything in it." This idea had been knocking around in her mind ever since the Reese Palley show, in which it had been so difficult to tell where one picture stopped and the next began; the show might almost have been a single painting, she thought, except that it had not been planned that way. It struck her now that she could organize and orchestrate a really large work whose effect would be like the experience of a conversation, in which subjects are taken up, dropped, and then returned to in a different form, with many voices and interwoven themes. Since the conversation was to include "everything," she decided that it would have both figurative and nonfigurative images, and that they could appear in small scale, on individual enamelled squares, or spread out over a great many squares. She picked the first four figurative images that occurred to her: a house, a tree, a mountain, and the ocean. (Later, she greatly regretted the tree, which she claimed to find banal, but she refused to alter her original decision.) The nonfigurative images she chose were a square, a circle, and a triangle. There would also be color sections and sequences, sections devoted to lines (horizontal, vertical, diagonal, and curved), and several different methods of drawing (freehand, dotted, ruled). These and many other basic decisions were reached in her workroom in Southampton, including the decision that she would make up her mind about retaining or discarding a specific plate within one day of finishing it. "I didn't want to get involved too much with thinking about the piece," she told me. "If I didn't like what I'd done each day, I'd just wipe it out. I wanted the piece to have a kind of growth that was actual rather than aesthetic."



Bartlett finished the first hundred-odd plates in Southampton, and the rest—there were nine hundred and eighty-eight in all—in her New York loft that fall and winter, often working twelve or fourteen hours a day. Many more hours were spent in library research. She read dozens of books on trees, and dozens more on mountains. Although the figurative images she used were very simple ones, she wanted to show an *essential* tree and an *essential* mountain (the peak she used was taken from a book on the Alps), and, anyway, she loved to read. The huge work was organized in sections. The first section introduces all the major motifs; after that, each

motif gets a section to itself, with some overlapping. The work gathers complexity as it goes along. The house, the tree, the mountain, the line and color sequences, the geometric shapes, the many different techniques of drawing and painting—all these elements and many more announce themselves individually and then begin to work with one another in the continuity of the whole, which culminates in a one-hundred-and-twenty-six-plate ocean sequence that employs fifty-four shades of blue. Bartlett never saw the entire painting together until it was installed in Paula Cooper's gallery; her loft could accommodate only a third of the plates at a time. Sometimes it struck her as the worst idea she had ever had. When it was nearly complete, she still had not decided on a title. An English friend, the architect Max Gordon, said he thought the title should have some reference to music; he suggested calling it "Rhapsody," and that appealed to Bartlett's self-deprecating sense of humor. "It was so awful I liked it," she said. "The word implied something bombastic and overambitious, which seemed accurate enough."

It took a week to install the nine hundred and eighty-eight square plates at Paula Cooper's. Each plate was nailed to the wall, in most cases separated from those around it by exactly one inch on all sides. Although Bartlett had never plotted the measurements of the complete work, it filled the available wall space of the gallery with almost mathematical precision. Word of the piece had been going around SoHo, and the gallery was crowded throughout the opening day, a Saturday in mid-May of 1976. Many visitors commented on the painting's strong narrative quality; unlike virtually all other contemporary painting, it was a work that you "read," from left to right, and in which you could easily become so absorbed that you lost your sense of time. Although "Rhapsody" was clearly an art-world "event," nobody was quite prepared for the lead article that appeared in the Arts and Leisure section of the next day's *Times*, in which John Russell, the paper's art critic, described it as "the most ambitious single work of art that has come my way since I started to live in New York," a work that enlarges "our notions of time, and of memory, and of change, and of painting itself." Russell's glowing review was an art-world event in itself, and the repercussions were large and immediate.

The gallery was closed on Sunday and Monday, but on Tuesday there was an even larger influx of visitors. At some point during that frantic morning, Paula Cooper took a telephone call from a man she did not know, who said his name was Sidney Singer. He wanted to know whether the work was still "available." Paula Cooper said that it was, and he told her to hold it for him—he would be there in forty-five minutes. Although Bartlett had decided that "Rhapsody" should not be broken up, she had never really thought it could be sold intact; if anybody wanted to buy a section of it, she planned to repaint that section. On that Tuesday, however, Sidney Singer, a relatively new collector, who lived in Westchester, arrived within the promised forty-five minutes and bought the complete work, for what seemed at that time the astronomical sum of forty-five thousand dollars. Paula Cooper persuaded him not to take possession of "Rhapsody" until it had been exhibited in a number of museums around the country—showings that gave an added boost to Bartlett's suddenly soaring reputation.

Bartlett's life did not change dramatically as a result. She paid off a lot of accumulated debts, bought some clothes, and kept right on painting. She also continued to teach at Visual Arts and to write her autobiographical novel. Nevertheless, something very big had happened to her. She had come into her own estate as an artist, and it had turned out to be a rather grand and impressive one. She had gained the confidence to trust her inclinations, which were neither Minimal nor Conceptual, and her work since "Rhapsody" has been a direct reflection of her unencumbered personality as an artist—lavish in scale, decorative, inclusive to the point of being omnivorous, frequently mocking or self-mocking, wildly eclectic, and startlingly ambitious. She is a little like Robert Rauschenberg in her willingness to risk failure at every turn. Her mistakes are all made out in the open, and as often as not they are turned into assets. She said to me one day, "I've developed an infinite capaci-

ty for work and none for reflection."

The series of "house paintings" that followed "Rhapsody"—multipart renderings of the same rudimentary house image—expanded her repertory of painting styles. Impressionism, Expressionism, Neo-Realism, Rayonism, Van Gogh, Matisse, Mondrian, Pollock—sometimes the entire history of modern art seemed to be making a guest appearance in her work, without quite upstaging the host. Bartlett was creating a style out of borrowed styles (and doing so long before the current fad for "appropriation"). Her new house paintings were really portraits of people. Their titles came from addresses of people she knew well (one was a list of the places where she herself had lived), and most of them had some abstract visual reference to a particular person. In "White Street" (Elizabeth Murray's New York address), she used all twenty-five of the Testors colors, to suggest the kind of "contained chaos" that she associated with her friend. The most impressive painting in this series was named for Elvis Presley's Graceland Mansion, because Presley, a childhood idol of Bartlett's, died while she was painting it. "Graceland Mansion" is really five paintings hung in a horizontal sequence, showing the same symbolic house image from five different angles, at five different times of day (its shadow falling to the left or to the right), in five different painting styles. Bartlett's most famous print is derived from this painting. Also called "Graceland Mansion," and published in an edition of forty, it is really five prints, each done in a separate technique: drypoint, aquatint, silk screen, woodcut, and lithography.

THE "swimmer paintings" came next. Elongated-oval shapes that had appeared for the first time in her final house painting (it was called "Termino Avenue," after the address of the hospital, in Long Beach, where her father died) became abstract swimmers in a series of more than twenty large pictures, and also in her first public commission, a General Services Administration grant to execute a work for a federal courthouse in Atlanta. The new pictures had a dual format: half of the picture surface was enamelled steel plates, the other half was oil paint on canvas. "I hadn't painted on canvas in years, so I decided I'd just try it," she said. She took great pains to match the colors in the two mediums; the enamel-on-steel sur-

face was brighter and more reflective, but she was able to make the contrasts work together in interesting ways. For the hundred-and-sixty-foot-long lobby of the Atlanta courthouse, she proposed a series of nine paintings collectively entitled "Swimmers Atlanta" and ranging in size from two feet to eighteen feet square. Bartlett's sense of geography is a little hazy. When she made the proposal, she thought that Atlanta was on the ocean, or near it, and each of the nine paintings, for which she had made preliminary drawings in gouache, dealt with an aquatic subject—icebergs, whirlpools, eels, boats, and so forth—in a range of semi-abstract (or semi-figurative) styles. The G.S.A. accepted them without argument. Bartlett finished the commission on schedule, in 1979, and hurried back to her new living-and-working loft in SoHo, an immense space bought with income from the house paintings and redesigned in a spare, Art Deco style by the architect Peter Hoppner. She was working at full tilt, finishing the swimmers series, painting three big new dual-form works (steel plates and canvas) with more realistic imagery than she had used before ("At the Lake," "At the Lake, Morning," and "At the Lake, Night"), and immediately starting in on a series of even larger paintings—steel-plate paintings with canvas-cutout swimmers attached to the surface—on the theme "At Sea." Her work was in great demand by this time. Paula Cooper was selling it to a number of important collectors, and museums here and abroad were asking to show it. Life had become increasingly complicated as a result. Even though Bartlett generally shuns the New York art world in its social aspects, avoiding gallery openings and cocktail parties and late evenings, she was feeling the multiple pressures of success. What she needed, she thought, was some time to herself, in a place quite far from New York.

The perfect solution apparently presented itself in 1979, when she met the writer Piers Paul Read at a lunch party in New York and he proposed that they trade living quarters for a year—his villa in Nice for her loft apartment in SoHo. She agreed to it on the spot, sight unseen. Her acute disappointment when she moved into that dreary villa, on the wrong side of town and far from the sea, at a time of year (December) when the Côte d'Azur is at its worst, has been much written about. At first, she felt distinctly

frightened, alone in her damp, cold house and knowing barely a word of French. She used to practice shouting "*Au secours!*" in case of burglars, although there wasn't much to steal. It rained and rained. Her plan had been to do no artmaking during her year in France. She would travel, go to museums, and write a new book, tentatively entitled "Day and Night." ("The History of the Universe," parts of which have appeared in several vanguard magazines, is still unpublished in its totality; a shortened version is scheduled to appear in 1985.) She did do some travelling, to England and to Italy—Ravenna for the mosaics, Padua for the Giottos, Florence for Renaissance art, which she had appreciated rather casually until then. Naturally, she visited the nearby Fondation Maeght, in Saint-Paul de Vence, and the Matisse Chapel, in Vence, which made a very strong impression on her. For some reason, though, she could get no writing done. And because she is "no good at just having fun," as she puts it, the lack of an absorbing activity began to weigh on her. Several projects were started and abandoned, and then, one day, she sat down with a pencil and paper at the dining-room table, looked out the window, and began to draw "the awful little garden with its leaky ornamental pool and five dying cypress trees."

"In the Garden," a series of two hundred drawings, in ten different media, that grew out of this unpropitious beginning, has running through it a remarkable sense of self-discovery. Picasso talked of forcing himself to forget how to draw. Bartlett had decided to learn to draw—to get down on paper what she saw, that is, with her eyes and her extremely active mind. She had taken no courses in this sort of drawing at Yale. Students who were accepted there were expected to know how to do it, but in our era a surprising number of well-established contemporary artists have never learned. Bartlett had some help from her sister Julie, who came to stay with her for several months in the villa. Julie had recently graduated from the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena and was on her way to becoming a commercial artist. She knew about shading, perspective, and other conventions that Bartlett had never bothered with, and she was able to pass some of this knowledge on. One of the delights of "In the Garden" is the increasing skill with which the artist

renders the scene—the moribund pool with its kitschy statue of a small boy urinating, the background of dark, shaggy trees, the shrubs and the perennials in their unkempt beds. She shows it to us in every kind of light and shade (moonlight included), from every conceivable angle (in some cases, we are looking down from a considerable height), and in countless variations of style, from virtual abstraction to meticulous realism. Many of the drawings were done in pairs, with the more figurative one on the left and the more abstract one on the right. The "everything" that Bartlett usually aims for is here in full measure. Look at this absurd garden, she seems to be saying—look at it long enough and hard enough and you can find the world.

Bartlett spent fifteen months on the project. Some of the later drawings were done from photographs, after she returned to New York, and others were done from memory. Her godson posed for a group of figure studies in which the little statue comes to life. Each of ten mediums—pencil, colored pencil, pen and ink, brush and ink, Conté crayon, charcoal, watercolor, pastel, oil pastel, and gouache—is explored thoroughly and boldly, with particularly impressive results in pastel and in watercolor. When the complete series was hung together for the first time, at Paula Cooper's, in 1981, it had an even stronger narrative pull than "Rhapsody." Critics commented on the "cinematic" effect of the shifting points of view, and on the astonishing range of styles. An odd combination of qualities was visible throughout the series: spontaneity, bordering now and then on impatience, and, at the same time, a powerful analytical intelligence that stood back from the work in order to see where it was leading. The analytic side of her talent had always been there, leading some critics in the past to find her work cold and unfelt; here, it was in balance with her impulsive, risk-taking courtship of excess. The strongest narrative thread was Jennifer Bartlett's unflagging curiosity, her own high-spirited willingness to let the act of drawing call the shots.

The enormous critical success of "In the Garden" made Bartlett more sought after than ever. Although it was not possible to keep the series of drawings intact (the demand for individual drawings, pairs, and whole sequences was intense), Bartlett was able to design and oversee its reproduction

in a handsome art book ("In the Garden," Abrams, 1982) with a graceful introduction by John Russell. Since then, of course, she has been working harder than ever. Although she often says that she hates commissions and will never undertake another, she has undertaken four major ones since "In the Garden": the dining room of Charles and Doris Saatchi's house in London, for which she executed works in oil, charcoal, fresco, enamel, tempera, and collage; a huge steel-plate mural for the Institute for Scientific Information, in Philadelphia, a building designed by Robert Venturi; two thirty-foot murals for the staff dining room of Philip Johnson's A.T. & T. Building, in New York; and a multipart work for the new international headquarters of the Volvo Corporation, in Sweden, which includes several pieces of large, freestanding sculpture as well as paintings. Meanwhile, new paintings, prints, and drawings emerge from her studio with such frequency that Paula Cooper is hard pressed to keep up with them. The recent work has been increasingly figurative, and involved with landscape—or, to be more accurate, with land- and waterscape, since Bartlett's passion for lakes, streams, and the sea has not abated. Some of her admirers wonder whether in these fluent, realist landscapes Bartlett may not at last be finding her own particular style. Paula Cooper doubts this, and so does the artist. When I asked her about it, she said, "I certainly hope not."

THE feminist movement had a significant effect on the New York art world in the nineteen-seventies. While Bartlett would hardly agree that full equality is at hand, the situation for women artists here is certainly more open than it used to be and a great deal more open than it is in Europe. In spite of this, the generation of American artists that came along after Bartlett's—the generation of Julian Schnabel, David Salle, Richard Longo, and others whose work began to attract public notice in the late nineteen-seventies and early eighties—is dominated once again by men. It is too soon to tell whether the shift is temporary and accidental or whether it reflects social or aesthetic considerations, or both. In the present climate of heavy-handed, macho, neo-expressionist painting, however, Bartlett's inclusive, analytical approach may tend to make her work appear more "decorative" than it actually is. This issue does not trouble her. All painting is decorative to some degree, she feels; what it is in addition to that is what counts. She does not see why she should do without the decorative element, or any other element that appeals to her. There may be something of Long Beach in that attitude, but there is also a lot of New York.

Never doctrinaire in feminist matters, Bartlett does not see why she should do without a husband who is a film star. She met Mathieu Carrière at a New York dinner party in 1980 (it was one of the few dinner parties she went to that season), and they were married in 1983. Carrière has been a highly successful actor in European films since he was thirteen (he is now in his late thirties), and because his work is in Europe Bartlett now spends about half the year living in Paris, in a fairly grand apartment near the Luxembourg Gardens. She has told friends that she dislikes living in Paris. "Paris is so boring," she said last spring, just before going back to rejoin her husband. "After I'd been there for six months, last year, I realized that I'd hardly laughed once the whole time. I'm very frightened that being away from New York half the year may be bad for my work. But I also know that I don't want to be a great artist if what I have to give up includes someone to live with, kids, and so forth—which I guess sounds pretty conventional and female."

Elizabeth Murray reports that after Bartlett returned to Paris in the summer of 1984 she sounded, over the transatlantic telephone, somewhat more enthusiastic about life there. Paula Cooper is sure she will make something out of the place, just as she did out of the dingy garden in Nice. Paris may not be New York, but it is not entirely without interest for an artist. Paris, in fact, might turn out to be just the place for an ex-Long Beach cheerleader to lose and then find herself in a gigantic new work of art.

—CALVIN TOMKINS

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SOCIAL NOTES FROM ALL OVER

[*From "Over the Coffee Cup," by Tommye Miller, in the Mobile (Ala.) Register*]

Christine and Alex Bowab are having a party on St. Pat's Day, Sunday, which is unusual to say the least. This is their fifth annual Corned Beef & Kibbie Party to which no one will be admitted unless appropriately dressed in either PLO or IRA attire. The house is to be cordoned off into four military sections where food appropriate to that area will be available.