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ART

Jennifer Bartlett, 15 Year Retrospective

By Michael Berenson

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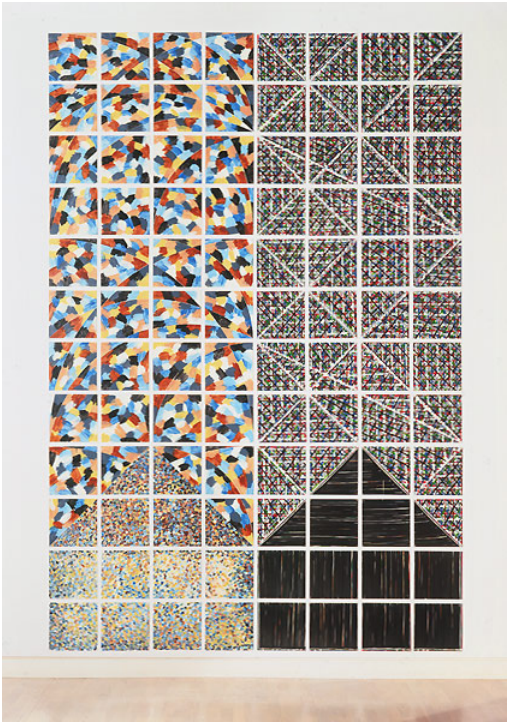
FEW contemporary artists are more controversial than Jennifer Bartlett. To her many defenders, her work is immensely ambitious and endlessly rich and inventive, and her serial, cinematic and novelistic approach has pioneered new ground for painting. Her detractors believe that she has flaws as a painter, that her work is weakened rather than strengthened by its eclecticism and that no matter how how large and ambitious it is, her painting is only skin deep.



27 Howard Street: Day and Night, 1977-78, enamel over silkscreen grid on 96 baked enamel steel plates, 155 x 103 inches

Bartlett is such a prominent and controversial figure because her work is filled with challenging paradoxes and contradictions. She has used a deliberate, almost manically controlled method identified with the art of the 1960's to release an energy and irrationality that may have more in common with the art of the 80's. She has tried to be both impressionistic and systematic, both true to the moment and true to the unfolding of time. She wants her pictorial performances and celebrations of process to have the weight of masterpieces.

The collisions do not stop here. Bartlett wants to plunge into the world around her while remaining afloat in the modernist world of surfaces and reflections. Her work is defiantly resistant to being tamed and confined to any category and place, yet it is filled with references to furnishings, interior design and home.

The best opportunity so far to come to terms with Jennifer Bartlett is the retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum through Jan. 6. With 40 large-scale paintings, 50 drawings and a section devoted to Bartlett's commissions, it is larger than the exhibition at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis last spring. It is accompanied by a book-length catalogue with contributions by Calvin Tomkins, Marge Goldwater, who organized the show for the Walker, and Roberta Smith, whose essay is particularly helpful. After leaving Brooklyn, the retrospective - which, in fact, covers only the last 15 years - will travel to Kansas City, Mo., La Jolla, Calif., and Pittsburgh.

The exhibition begins with the serial works in which Bartlett used dots painted on 12-inch-square steel plates to explore ideas about art and the workings of the mind. In her 1970 ''House Piece,'' the dot patterns not only focus our attention, as Minimalism did, on the visual field, but they also make us aware of conflicting emotional responses to the idea of a house.

Bartlett's development of a systematic method to make us focus on perception, on process, on the effect of shifting perspectives - and on the leaps that take place in our minds no matter how rational we may think we are - culminate in her 1975-76 ''Rhapsody.'' In this, her most celebrated serial piece, 988 painted tiles installed on all of the gallery walls create an environment. There is more color in this work, a greater range of imagery and a clear sense of the artist's concern both with the instant and with the passage of time.

Since then, the pictorial gestures have become broader and Bartlett's approach has become increasingly more painterly. But even with her ''In the Garden,'' ''Creek'' and ''Sea Wall'' paintings, there remains a horror of a vacuum - something that feels like a terror of silence and empty space. Bartlett also continues to maintain her particular dialogue between looseness and control, sloppiness and rigor. Since her 1984 Volvo commission, she has been placing on the floor three-dimensional mirror versions of objects that appear in her paintings. The recent paintings and objects in the museum rotunda seem one step from the landscapes of Monet and one step from the urban art playpens of Keith Haring.

Work this ambitious is going to raise questions. While there is curiosity and immense patience in Bartlett's works, they also seem to be airless. Partly as a result of the artist's commitment to surfaces, there is no sense of space in these paintings and no sense that anything in them actually exists. In other words, with all the lush textures and passion for houses, water and trees, in the end the world seems to exist only in the artist's imagination.

When something outside the artist actually appears to erupt within the paintings, there is a sense of power and release. In the 1977 ''Graceland Mansion,'' for example, a five-part painting in which a house changes identity according to the style and perspective with which it is presented, the gallery wall seems to burst through the interstices between the painted steel plates and all but shatter the images.

In the 1983 ''Shadow,'' there are intimations of at least a dozen faces within the inflamed cypress trees behind the swimming pool. They are wild and irrational images, bringing to mind heads by artists like Holbein and Picasso. Here there is a sense of being allowed to enter the work, of being able to understand what lies behind the dread of silence and space, of being able to hear a voice that seems consistently to be trying to speak.

With the apparent resistance to space, it is not suprising that another question has to do with the artist's drawing. Good drawing not only situates an object in space, but it also situates a work within an existing artistic category. Even if we are sympathetic with Bartlett's determination not to make painting or sculpture in a traditional way, is it possible to give ourselves consistently to work if it is not spatially convincing and if it is clear that the artist did not want to dwell on detail?

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Can we continue to believe that ideas are worth pursuing if the works in which they are presented lack the sense of scale that is invariably a clue that an idea is in some way finished? Certainly the strength of Bartlett's work has a great deal to do with its need to be everywhere and race in many directions at the same time. But is that not also part of its weakness? Also of interest this week: Sherrie Levine (Baskerville & Watson Gallery, 578 Broadway, between Houston and Prince Streets): In her new works, Sherrie Levine is no longer working with specific appropriated images. One of the two series in the show consists of 12 abstract paintings on mahogany, each one 24 by 20 inches. The other series is made up of five framed pieces of plywood -the dimensions smaller but still suggesting icons - in which some of the knotholes are painted over with metallic gold paint.

Levine continues to make art that can exist in some kind of negative space. The abstract paintings consist of four vertical stripes; the stripe on the left is about one-third the width of each of the other three. Although they bring to mind paintings by artists like Brice Marden, Ellsworth Kelly and Robert Motherwell, Levine's works remain independent. They establish their identity not by what they are are but by what they are not. The paintings are both a celebration of key modernist figures and an attempt to focus our attention on their difference from them.

In the other series, Levine allows the evocative lines and shapes of the wood to speak for themselves; they suggest diptychs, triptychs and landscapes. But the paint then functions as a strange and ambivalent laugh. By placing the gilt over places through which the wood breathes, the paint - which in the other series is a sign of pleasure - becomes just as much a sign of glitz and betrayal. Here, too, there is an admiration for a tradition - which probably goes back to German Expressionist wood blocks - combined with a sense that this tradition has become impossible. Here, too, Levine asks us to consider what art would be like that is not identified with a tradition - neither with painting, nor with respect for materials and craft, nor with commercialization. (Through Dec. 21.) Chuck Connelly (Annina Nosei Gallery, 100 Prince Street): Chuck Connelly is one of a number of promising artists intent on making ambitious paintings that are not identified with Abstract Expressionism. In Connelly's case, this means bridging the 1980's with early American modernists and American painting of the 19th century. His landscapes and figures suggest Marsden Hartley, Albert Pinkham Ryder, George Inness and the artists of the Hudson River School.

One of the ways in which the past is brought up to date is through Connelly's concern with what was in the background of the earlier work. Before World War II, industry was still developing, and artists either idealized it or tended to mute their apprehension. In Connelly's work, the factories are far more prevalent, and they are producing a plague of smoke.

Connelly also bridges pre-World War II American art with the contemporary world by giving some of his paintings a fairy-tale quality. There is effective tension between seriousness and play, art and entertainment. Some of the figures in the largest painting, ''Battle,'' look like toy soldiers and graffiti figures. The use of thick, creamy paint in works like ''Little Man'' and ''The Drain'' can seem abstract or like an end in itself, but, as in earlier art, it remains powerfully linked to the content. (Through Dec. 12.) Linda Cunningham - ''War Memorial'' (SoHo 20 Gallery, 469 Broome Street): The climate that has generated Vietnam War memorials is also producing a new kind of war memorial - one that has

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nothing to do with patriotism and glorification of war. Linda Cunningham's war memorial consists of five 12-foot bronzes. Three are upright. Two are on the ground. All suggest human figures.

The bronze is cast in such a way that what we see are shells. The surfaces are varied and rich. Each bronze is open and closed, intact and torn, self-contained and dependent upon the others. They suggest classical sculpture, natural history skeletons and the pleurants, the sculptural procession of grave and dignified mourners made for Burgundian tombs at the end of the Middle Ages. This work expresses in a very unsentimental way the equally stunning human abilities to blow itself to bits and to endure. (Through Dec. 14.)

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