

## *Jennifer Bartlett's Oceanic Feeling*

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L O C K S G A L L E R Y



Installation view of *Jennifer Bartlett: Swimmers*. Photo by Constance Mensch

In 1915 the humanist intellectual Romain Rolland received the Nobel Prize in Literature for his “lofty idealism.” In 1927, in a letter to Sigmund Freud—they had been corresponding, in mutual admiration, for a decade—Rolland coined the phrase “oceanic feeling.” It arose when one had a “sensation of eternity,” bringing with it the conviction of “being one with the external world as a whole.” A devotee of the Vedantic mystic Ramakrishna, Rolland argued, as Ramakrishna did, that oceanic feeling is the source of “religious energy” as distinct from “religious systems”—it has nothing to do with whether one believes in one God or many Gods—in fact it is implicitly atheist. One can renounce every institutional religion—any particular religious belief not to say socially sanctioned religious illusion—and still be profoundly religious, if one has the energizing oceanic feeling of being one with the external world as

a whole, that is, if one's internal world of feelings and the external world of objects become one, the difference between them disappearing—a “mystical experience” indeed, or at least a mystifying one.

Freud didn't think “oceanic feeling”—“a spontaneous feeling as of something limitless, unbounded, without perceptible limits, called a sensation of eternity, the direct fact of eternity”—was so mystifying. Always the skeptical empiricist—never a gullible idealist, taken in by belief systems and seductive illusions, and hardly a mystic (he called Jung's theory of archetypes mystical mud)—he regarded it, “if it existed,” as “a fragmentary vestige of a kind of consciousness possessed by an infant who has not yet differentiated himself from other people and things.” More particularly, it is “the preserved ‘primitive ego-feeling’ from infancy.” In other words, oceanic feeling is profoundly regressive—perhaps (hopefully?) what the psychoanalyst and art historian Ernst Kris famously called a “regression in the service of the ego,” which he thought occurred (routinely?, automatically?) in creative activity, and was particularly evident in artistic creativity. According to Freud, “the primitive ego-feeling precedes the creation of the ego and exists up until the mother ceases breast feeding. Prior to this, the infant is regularly breastfed in response to its crying and has no concept that the breast does not belong to it. Therefore, the infant has no concept of a ‘self’ or, rather, considers the breast to be part of itself. Freud argues that those experiencing an oceanic feeling as an adult are actually experiencing a primitive ego-feeling.” And with that a wish to be breast fed and comforted by the breast forever—to become a devotee of the many-breasted Magna Mater of mythological fantasy. “The ego, in contrast, comes into existence when the breast is taken away, and involves the infant's recognition that it is separate from the mother's breast, and therefore, that other people exist.” According to psychoanalytic theory, “primitive” or “primary ego-feeling can co-exist along with the ego in some people” because “all thoughts are preserved in a conservation of psychic energy.” In oceanic feeling there are no people



*Swimmers in the Storm*, 1979, enamel over silkscreen grid on eleven baked enamel steel plates and oil on canvas, two panels, 55 1/2 x 95 inches



*Swimmers and Rafts, Jumble*, 1979, enamel over silkscreen grid on fifty baked enamel steel plates and oil on canvas, two panels, 81 1/2 x 262 inches



in the world, not even oneself, only the life-giving ocean, from which Venus, the life-giving goddess of love, is born. She is the permanently young, eternally virginal mother in the mind of the infant, totally dependent on her for his life. He is symbolized by the infantile Cupid, and later the infant Christ, also mystically conceived, also mysteriously born of a virginal mother. They are the ideal couple, eternally united in the unconscious. A “religious energy” binds them, holds them together in the heaven of the womb.

The whole effort of Jennifer Bartlett’s ambitious art is to communicate, evoke, again and again and again, a mystical “oceanic experience,” symbolized by the ocean she repeatedly—compulsively, obsessively—glorifies, its energetic waves sensorially spontaneous, continuous, unending, global, for there is no shore or island or ship in sight, only the pulsing, everlasting, illimitable ocean. We see the limitless ocean in all its sublime glory, each spontaneously moving wave an oceanic feeling, in *Atlantic Ocean*, 1984, a sublime tour de force, the intricately related six panels of *At Sea, Japan*, 1980, and the two panels of the bizarrely shaped, not to say absurdly eccentric *Tidal Wave II*, 1978. The spectator is totally immersed in it, as he was in his mother’s womb. Birth is said to begin with the breaking of the water in it; expulsion from it is said to be traumatic. Psychoanalysts speak of the birth trauma, trauma being a break in the continuity of existence, as the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott argues. The birth trauma—the break with the mother, the expulsion from the Eden of her life-giving womb, where every need is instantly satisfied by her body—is said to be the greatest trauma of life.

Sometimes Bartlett’s luminous ocean gesturally ripples, as in the three right panels of *At Sea, Japan*, sometimes the ocean sparkles with star light, as in the darker fourth and fifth panels. Light and dark struggle to unite—or are they permanently at war or trapped in a stand-off?—in the sixth panel. The work is a tour de force of negative dialectics. All the works are ambiguously abstract and descriptive, but above all they are an aesthetic sum of nuanced colors and singular shapes, often readable as simultaneously gestural and geomorphic, ingeniously integrated in a kind of panoramic display of oceanic movement. If, as Baudelaire said, modern art affords a sensation of the new, then Bartlett’s panoramic paintings of oceanic movement, emblematic of the stream of consciousness, fraught with psychic as well as physical energy indistinguishably one, then Bartlett’s sensational paintings—paintings that afford a seemingly endless number of new sensations, as the constantly moving waves, in endless process of change yet subliminally similar, do—are the grand climax of modern art.



It may seem strange to say so, but Bartlett's is a profoundly psychological sacred art, for it involves an insatiable unconscious longing for—a wish to take exclusive possession of—the primordial mother, symbolized by the everlasting ocean, for it is where life was first conceived, mysteriously generated. The goddess of love born from the ocean, as Botticelli shows us, epitomizes its generative—creative—power, for the creation of life is impossible without love—the virginal mother's spontaneously given spiritual and inspiring love as distinct from the married mother's sexualized and physical love. In work after work Bartlett shows us, with declarative insistence and uncompromising clarity, the ocean in all its extraordinary splendor and inexhaustible energy. Kant thought the waterfall at Schaffhausen afforded a sublime experience, but he never saw the ocean, nor Bartlett's "sensational" rendering of it, making its inherent abstractness clear without denying its material reality. Hovering on the boundary of the abstract and the objective, she shows that each can be a revelation of the other, for both can afford a sensation of eternity.

All of Bartlett's panoramic seascapes are meticulously constructed with the same materials in different quantities. *Atlantic Ocean* is made of "enamel over silkscreen grid on 224 baked enamel steel plates." *At Sea, Japan* is made of "86 woodblocks and 96 silkscreens on six sheets of handmade Hoshō paper." *Tidal Wave II* is made of "enamel over silkscreen grid on 44 baked enamel steel plates and oil and graphite on canvas." The steel plates and woodblocks form a solid foundation for the painting, making it stand out like a bas relief. They are in effect the enduring unconscious of the consciously made image. The durability of steel—a manufactured material—and wood—a natural material—suggest that the image will endure and remind us that art is at once artificially manufactured and naturally created. Bartlett's use of the grid—eternal geometry—reminds us that the ocean—waves—have a structure, however much at first naïve glance they look like random gestures. There is nothing random about Bartlett's works. They are considered masterpieces made with creative skill. They remind me of Durer's *Heller Altarpiece*, which he said would last forever, and which it has. The cover of the first edition of Debussy's *Le mer*, 1905 featured *The Great Wave of Kanagawa* by Hokusai. The sea in *At Sea, Japan* is not as self-dramatizing, but more complex, as the changing variety of its moods, six in all, each a tone poem, like Debussy's sea.