

Jennifer Bartlett: Swimmers

September 1–October 13, 2023

LOCKS GALLERY

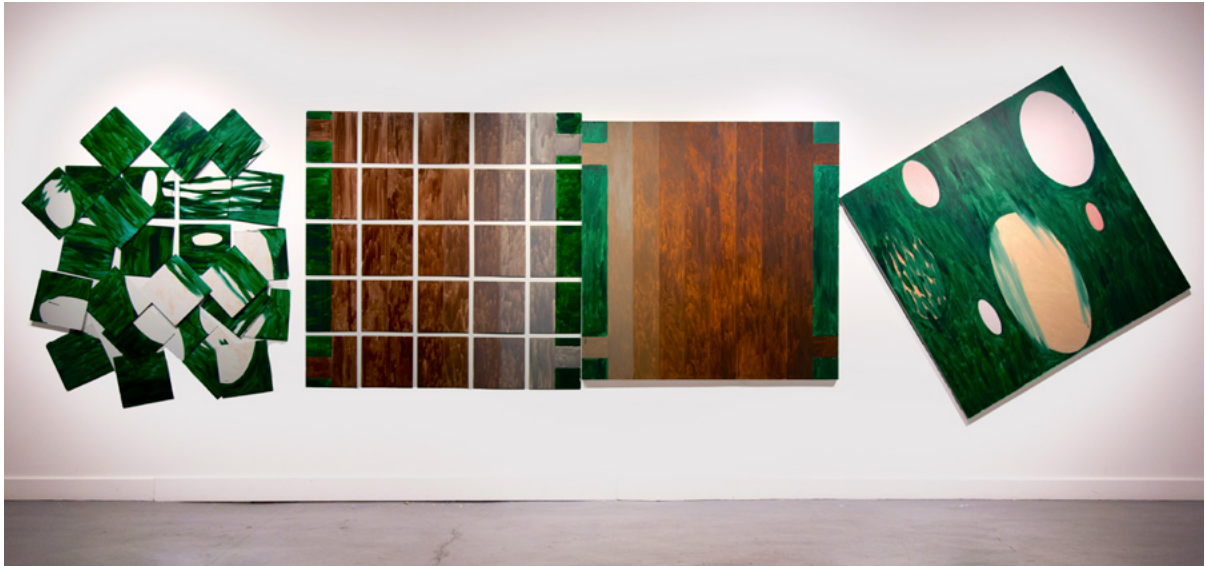


Jennifer Bartlett, *Tidal Wave II*, 1978, enamel over silkscreen grid on forty-four baked enamel steel plates; and oil on canvas, two panels; overall dimensions: 103 x 144 inches

Locks Gallery is pleased to present an exhibition of large-scale works by Jennifer Bartlett from her *Swimmers* series (1978–1980), alongside her monumental piece, *Atlantic Ocean* (1984), made up of two hundred and twenty-four steel plates.

Throughout her six decade career, Jennifer Bartlett worked in ambitious, iterative series. With her first major work, *Rhapsody* (1975–76), Bartlett set out to exhaust every expression of color, line, style, and form — making the simple complex, and the complex simple. In the interim years between *Rhapsody* and her next well-known series, *In the Garden* (1980), Bartlett returned to painting on canvas after a decade of almost exclusively painting on enameled steel plates arranged in a grid. During the period in which she produced the *Swimmers* paintings, she continued her exploration of “banal” signifiers (universal motifs like: *house*, *tree*, *boat*) but softened the contours of her conceptual stratagems in favor of bold, impressionistic brushwork and palettes.

The oblong, flat and fleshy ‘Swimmer’ motif first appeared in her work in 1977. While in one sense Swimmers are a stand-in for people, they can also be compared to Monet’s haystacks or water lilies and his durational study of light and landscape. Bartlett depicts her Swimmers and the water around them in endless permutations of season, mood and time of day. Like Monet’s late water lilies canvases, in which the viewer becomes immersed in a horizon-less landscape, Bartlett’s Swimmers paintings play with similar disorienting perspectives and scales. Later Bartlett works, like the thirty-foot gridded painting *Atlantic Ocean*, creates a hypnotic, distorted environment, where the viewer becomes the Swimmer, subsumed in the undulating waves.



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

Bartlett's paintings from this period are an exuberant break from the grid-based parameters she set for herself to make *Rhapsody*. Her colors become more dynamic and boisterous. She combines canvases and steel plates within single works to highlight contradicting states. The works are less well-behaved, reading like cliff-hanger adventure stories, compared to the erudite, rambling timbre of *Rhapsody*. Time becomes mixed up; pictorial planes shift, overlap and collide. 'Landscape' becomes a gymnastic activity, rather than a static suggestion of place.

In works like *Swimmers and Rafts, Jumble*, Bartlett establishes and then disrupts the grid, misaligning canvases and setting another askant, with Swimmers quietly passing through murky waters. In 1987 Bartlett described her Swimmer as "an object of contemplation," a formal device used to "make a situation [she] could respond to." Masterfully, Bartlett keeps abstraction and figuration in familiar, unfussy tension.

Writing in *Art in America* in 1979, Roberta Smith said that *Swimmers, Atlanta* (the first major work of this series) "does for Bartlett's sense of touch and gesture what *Rhapsody* did for her formal vocabulary: scrambles it, makes it more expansive, generous and accessible. It shows her increasingly able to balance lyrical with harsh." Smith went on to say that the *Swimmers* works were "a strange ambition, alternately simplistic and encompassing, childlike and grandiose, restricting and liberating."

The works in this show explore Bartlett's use of the Swimmers subject during a pivotal period in her career, and how she used it as she did many of her motifs — as a formal and conceptual tool to which she could fix her boundless attention and curiosity.

Jennifer Bartlett: *Swimmers* will be on view in the second floor gallery and open to the public Tuesday through Saturday, 10am – 6pm or by appointment.

For all press inquiries, please reach out to Adrianna Brusie at abusie@locksgallery.com.