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## Jennifer Bartlett's "Epic Systems" at Cleveland Museum of Art celebrates the power of contemporary painting

By STEVEN LITT

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- With its major salute to the important American artist Jennifer Bartlett this fall, the Cleveland Museum of Art is finally devoting one of its two big temporary exhibition galleries to a solo show on a leading contemporary painter – something it hasn't done in decades.

The once-conservative museum has paid a good deal of attention lately to contemporary works in other media, especially photography, now increasingly viewed as the more influential medium.

The Bartlett exhibition, in contrast, is nothing if not a full-throated defense of painting as a field that has never lost its relevance and remains full of infinite possibilities and delight.

It's also part of the museum's ongoing project of playing catch-up with the 20th and 21st centuries, art historically speaking.

Entitled "Epic Systems," the show focuses on Bartlett's three biggest and most ambitious works.

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They are “Rhapsody,” from 1975-76; “Song” (2007), recently acquired by the museum as a gift from Agnes Gund; and “Recitative,” from 2010.

According to the museum, the show is the first ever to feature all three works, which gives it a newsy air. Nevertheless, all three won't be on view at the same time.

“Rhapsody,” on loan from the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and arguably Bartlett's most famous and important project, will be on view through Sunday, Feb 22.

“Recitative” will remain on view through Tuesday, Nov. 4, at which time it will come down, to be replaced on Saturday, Nov. 22, by “Song,” which will be exhibited for the first time since the museum acquired it in 2008.

## Parts that make a great whole

Each mural-sized work comprises hundreds of individual enamel paintings on square plates of steel coated in baked enamel. The squares, pinned directly to the gallery walls without frames, function as cellular units in larger compositions that envelop the viewer in luminous and seemingly endless theme-and-variation explorations.



The upshot is a sense of Bartlett as an artist with inexhaustible energy, an outside ego and a desire to claim significant areas of artistic territory as her domain.

“Rhapsody” is a visual manifesto in which Bartlett weaves variations on four principal motifs – house, tree, mountain and ocean – while exploring aspects of painting as a visual language.

The entire sequence measures more than 150 feet long, and includes 988 individual steel plates, each of which is ruled with a silk-screened grid that Bartlett uses to structure a variety of dots, stripes, dashes, squiggles and other kinds of marks.

Inside this vast work, Bartlett explores how points can become lines and planes. Fields of color



wash the eye in baths of pure color.

A pointillist section – in which each square of the fine grid on a steel plate is filled with a single dot of paint – resolves when viewed from a few feet away into a wall-size image of a square house with a triangular roof gable.

Other sections explore the tree and mountain motifs in ways that range from childlike scribbles to photorealistic images or scenes that evoke Romantic 19th-century landscape paintings.



## I can do it all

Bartlett's approach is systematic, but not prohibitively so. She sets up the game, and then subverts the rules.

The point seems to be that the artist is saying, I can do it all -- and that, by extension, painting is a vast and open-ended field perennially available for creative conquest.

“Rhapsody” made a big splash in its debut at the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York. Critics were enthusiastic, but also somewhat flummoxed. In his 1992 book, “Beyond the Brillo Box,” critic Arthur Danto wrote that initial reviewers struggled over whether to categorize the work as minimalist or conceptual in style.

“Rhapsody” today seems to be both a summation of painting’s possibilities and an inflection

point. It occupies a position between the modernist viewpoint of art as a never-ending sequence of progressive, forward-moving stylistic movements, and the postmodernist view that style has ceased to matter because all ways of painting are equally possible and valid.

Bartlett takes an agnostic view on style and theory. She won't be pinned down. Her playful nature breaks out of the box – or the square, literally -- as she asserts her right to be contrary, cantankerous or whimsical.

In the midst of a sequence of mountain images in “Rhapsody,” for example, there's a painting of a white rabbit in the snow, another with a pair of frigate birds in flight, and a third with mountain goats arrayed on a white slope.

A viewer might ask, why insert all these critters without obvious rhyme or reason? Bartlett's painting seems to say, why not?

### More relaxed and confident

“Recitative” reveals Bartlett in a more relaxed, assured and confident mood than the more argumentative “Rhapsody,” which seems at times to have a chip on its shoulder.

In “Recitative,” Bartlett reprises familiar variations on her dot-matrix imagery, along with sequences of stripes and areas of solid color.

References to recent art history also emerge. One section mimics the drip-and-splatter technique of Jackson Pollock. Another area focuses on stripes in a manner that echoes the work of Sean Scully and Jasper Johns.

Bartlett's quotations are both respectful and humorous, and they insist on her right to “sample” trademark gestures and marks associated with other artists.

Apart from theoretical debates, Bartlett's art has a simple and powerful visual appeal, with its lush colors and playful refusal to consider any single approach to the making of images more important than another.

The other profound message of Bartlett's work is that big things can be created out of small units completed one at a time. That's an idea anyone, in any field, could find appealing, if not deeply inspiring.

