

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS

Jennifer Bartlett

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By Christopher Howard

The titles of Jennifer Bartlett's large-scale paintings on square plates of baked enamel steel—from *Rhapsody*, 1975–76, to the more recent *Song*, 2007, and *Recitative*, 2009–10—undoubtedly intend to invoke music and melody. Critics have also described these and similar works in terms of speech and syntax, calling them “novelistic.” Her latest exhibition, “Addresses (1976–78),” comprising four major plate works supplemented by notes, sketches, and drawings on graph paper, shifts the focus to a subdued but ubiquitous theme in Bartlett's work: location.



Bartlett, Jennifer, *5725 East Ocean Boulevard*, 1977, enamel over silk-screen grid on ninety-nine baked enamel steel plates, 77 x 350”.

Throughout her career, Bartlett has offered generalized images of bodies of water (oceans, lakes, swimming pools) as well as schematic renderings of trees, mountains, and houses. The ninety-nine plates of the nearly twenty-nine-foot-long *5725 East Ocean Boulevard*, 1976–77, does not literally depict the artist's childhood home in Long Beach, California; instead, it enigmatically presents eight versions of the same archetypal house—a horizontally oriented rectangle topped with a triangular roof—that has appeared in her work since 1970. This singular structure, formed by smooth, thickly translucent enamel paint, may not offer biographical clues, but Bartlett provides effervescent pleasure by charmingly combining, in each section, four related hues—such as banana yellow, sunflower, tangerine, and blood orange—using brushstrokes that resemble brisk snow flurries or darting schools of fish.

Another lengthy piece, *Falcon Avenue, Seaside Walk, Dwight Street, Jarvis Street, Greene Street*, 1976, represents major phases of Bartlett's life in Long Beach, New Haven, and SoHo, but you wouldn't know that from her five treatments of that same house. On the left side of *27 Howard Street: Day and Night*, 1977–78, named for the Manhattan address where a friend lived, what looks like ribbed vaults or fireworks soar above a dotted building; on the right, a sky full of trestles reigns over a house whose underlying colors are nearly covered with smears of black paint. Such is the mystery of Bartlett's conceptual portraiture.

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