

# The Boston Globe

## From a Minimalist approach, maximum impact

By Ken Johnson, Globe Staff | October 13, 2006

ANDOVER -- Jennifer Bartlett's "Rhapsody" (1975-76) is one of the most celebrated single works of late 20th-century American art. It is also, because of its unwieldy size, one of the most seldom seen. An exuberantly playful, panoramic melange of abstract and representational imagery, it was painted on a grid of 987 1-foot-square steel plates, and it measures 7 1/2 feet high by 153 feet long.



Jennifer Bartlett's "Rhapsody" at the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover.

Luckily for Boston-area art lovers, "Rhapsody" is now on view in an exceptionally illuminating exhibition at the Addison Gallery of American Art. Organized by Allison Kemmerer, the Addison's curator of photography and art

after 1950, "Early Plate Works" examines an eight-year period that began in 1968 when, as a young artist in New York, Bartlett started painting exclusively on 1-foot-square steel plates with white, baked enamel surfaces overlaid by silk-screened grids of fine gray lines. (The plates are like thick, rigid sheets of graph paper.) For paint she restricted herself to the 25 colors of Testors enamels -- a material normally used by model-building hobbyists.

Bartlett derived her approach from the examples of such Minimalist and conceptualist artists of the '60s as Robert Morris and Sol LeWitt: She made works that logically reflected their own structure, materials, and procedures.

An uncommonly industrious artist, Bartlett produced most of the early pieces by applying small dots of paint within the little squares of the printed gray grid. One part of the show is devoted to multi-plate work bearing orderly, densely knit patterns of colored dots. Sensuously textured, optically captivating, they are like unusually vivid textile design studies.

Other works are made mostly of black dots and use the grids as game boards on which to follow predetermined rules for dot application. "Squaring 2; 4; 16; 256; 65,536," for example, starts with a single panel with two black dots in the upper left corner. Then comes a panel with two times two dots, or four, followed by one with 16 and another with 256. The last step, the square of 256, requires a set of 30 plates to accommodate the grand total of 65,536 dots.

The black dot pieces are like primitive computer games, and part of the fun of them is figuring out what the rules are. There is also a definite visual intrigue about them that has to do with the repetition, rhythm, and progressive elaboration of the more or less comprehensible patterns.

If you have never seen it before, you are in for a shock when you enter the gallery devoted solely to "Rhapsody." None of the early works prepare you for its size and complexity. Unfortunately, it is awkwardly shoehorned into the too-small gallery. It has to jog around the short walls of an

entryway that juts into the main space, and that prevents you from seeing it all at once. Nevertheless, it is all there, and going from the earlier plate works to "Rhapsody" is like going from a performance of short piano solos to a big-band concert.

At once wildly disjunctive and systematically sequential, "Rhapsody" is a kind of landscape with certain archetypal images recurring: house, tree, mountain, and sky. At different points, these motifs are realized in different styles: in Pointillist dots, Expressionist brush strokes, cartoon outlines, and photo-realistic vignettes.

The landscape images are also interspersed with extensive passages of pure abstraction. One area presents dozens of variations on the relationship between a circle, a triangle, and a square -- all painted black on white. Another area explores permutations of overlapping straight and arcing lines, and several different areas have plates painted Minimalist-style in solid colors.

So "Rhapsody" may be less a landscape than an encyclopedic compendium of modern art styles. It is, in a way, a profoundly academic exercise, but it doesn't feel dryly cerebral. Bartlett is like a jazz musician improvising with inexhaustible panache on illustrations from a textbook of 20th-century design.

"Rhapsody" has been called an art-history watershed, and it is in ways that are obvious and not so obvious. To '60s-style purists, its promiscuous mix of abstraction, conceptualism, and cartoonish representation would appear ridiculous. But for a later generation it heralded a new kind of freedom. The law of one style per artist was rescinded; style became optional. You could work in different styles even within the same work; you could combine representation and abstraction. Think of the clash of styles animating the paintings of David Salle in the 1980s. An era of insouciant pluralism came after "Rhapsody."

What is perhaps less obviously significant is the treatment of art as a kind of language game. "Rhapsody" is a field of free-floating signifiers that relate to one another more than to anything in the real world. It's not irrelevant to note that semiotics -- the quasi-scientific study of signs -- began decisively to influence academic thinking and writing about art around the time that Bartlett was working on her magnum opus.

Bartlett completed "Rhapsody" long before the advent of the personal computer and the Web, but in its play with ungrounded signifiers it anticipates a world in which machine-mediated virtual realities increasingly substitute for old-fashioned natural and concrete experience. (Seeing it in photographic reproduction, you could mistake it for a huge computer printout.)

The world as projected in the works of many artists who came of age after "Rhapsody" is a mediated world made up of movies, TV shows, pop songs, art reproductions, magazines, clothing brands, computer downloads, and countless other sorts of consumer products. For many artists the purpose of art has become to juxtapose and manipulate cultural signs lifted from the capitalist marketplace in ironic, semiotically sophisticated, and subversive ways.

But the play with empty signifiers can also breed a too-predictable cynicism. Nothing means anything more than anything else, and all culture starts to appear vacuous. As the art historian Brenda Richardson relates in her richly informative catalog essay, Bartlett went on to deal in her art with more complex and personal experiences, including recovered memories of early adolescent sexual abuse. Whether or not that made for better art, it does suggest a hunger for an art of more humanly real substance. When "Rhapsody" first appeared, though, it opened up an exhilarating new universe of aesthetic and conceptual possibilities. At 30, it still gives off infectiously adventurous vibrations.

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