



LOCKS GALLERY, 600 Washington Square South, Philadelphia, PA 19106

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ART

The repetitive power of Jennifer Bartlett, master of the '80s art world

Review by Kriston Capps
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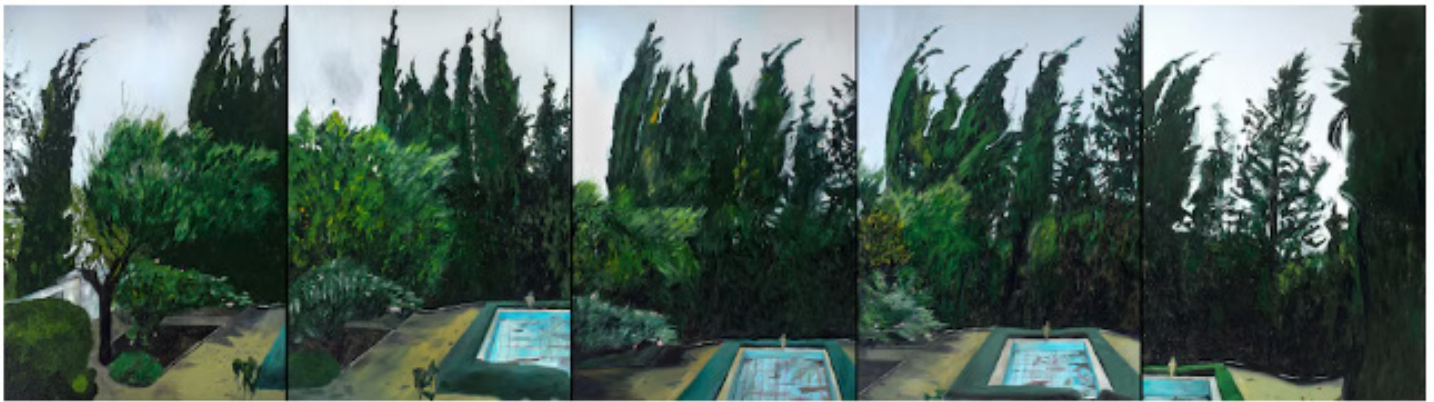
Jennifer Bartlett, "Pool," 1983, oil on canvas. (Private Collection/Locks Gallery/Jennifer Bartlett 2013 Trust)

In the winter of 1979, fresh off a monumental solo exhibit, painter Jennifer Bartlett traded homes with a writer in southern France. Her show three years prior at the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York — “Rhapsody,” an installation of 987 paintings, each of them one square foot in size but varying wildly in style — was still making waves. At the villa that her friend rented in Nice, the artist would begin work on an ambitious follow-up.

Suffice it to say, Bartlett did not love her stay: Over a dismal winter on the French Riviera, the artist dwelled on the villa’s dilapidated grounds, which she described as an “awful little garden with its leaky ornamental pool and five dying cypress trees.” Bartlett produced nearly 200 drawings of this garden in almost as many styles — none of them quite capable of disguising her scorn.

With its cinematic sweep, “In the Garden,” the resulting series exhibited in 1981 at Paula Cooper, won even higher critical acclaim than “Rhapsody.” But the show was only a first draft: Over the next two years, Bartlett went on to add paintings, prints and works in other media, each one an elaboration of an epic two-star review.

“Jennifer Bartlett: In and Out of the Garden,” a selection from this series on view at the Phillips Collection, features only a small fraction of the works Bartlett ultimately produced from 1979 to 1983. A fuller presentation was planned for 2020 but delayed by the pandemic. Which is a shame: Bartlett and other New Image Painters, whose star dimmed before the end of the 1980s, are due for another look.



Jennifer Bartlett, “Wind,” 1983, oil on canvas. (Private Collection/Locks Gallery/Jennifer Bartlett 2013 Trust)

Bartlett’s polyglot nature is apparent at first glance. “Wind” (1983), an oil painting spanning five canvases, is an expressionist cycle of menacing cypress trees that resembles a sequence of blown-up film stills. Across the room, “In the Garden II, #1” (1980) comprises a cluster of smaller works on paper, canvas, plate and glass — a fauvist suite of dashed-off compositions. Still another artist might have painted “In the Garden #190” (1982), a grave black-and-white oil diptych, in which representational elements lose their coherence. “In and Out of the Garden” reads as a postmodern group survey, but the work is all Bartlett.



Jennifer Bartlett, “In the Garden II, #1,” 1980, oil on canvas; enamel over silk-screen grid on baked enamel steel plates; gouache on paper; enamel on glass. (Joseph Hu/Private Collection/Locks Gallery/Jennifer Bartlett 2013 Trust)

Her disdain for the home swap in Nice is every bit as evident as her range. Central in most of Bartlett's variations is a statue of a cherubic little boy urinating into the pool. In most compositions, this "manneken pis" is rendered as no more than a sorry thumb, a fixture for her gloomy ruminations. Even the more tender renderings of the villa have an acerbic note to them. "Pool" (1983), an oil triptych — and one of the few iterations to depict the garden in daylight — shows a sequence of mottled light giving way to brooding shadow. Harsh red tones for the water could reflect the play of light on its surface, but a more ominous suggestion is right there for the taking.

Phillips Collection chief curator emeritus Klaus Ottmann originally intended to pair Bartlett's works with those of Pierre Bonnard, the fin de siècle postimpressionist painter who lived in Le Cannet, not far from where Bartlett stayed, and whose style Bartlett confidently aped at times. The two would have split the billing fifty-fifty. At the same time, the Phillips was working with Fort Worth's Kimbell Art Museum on a broader Bonnard survey, and after the pandemic scrambled plans, it instead pursued that larger show now on view.

According to the catalogue, the show that might have been ostensibly paired Bartlett and Bonnard for their love of nature and gardening: sweet manna for the retired museum-going set. But that's hardly the thing to say about the two of them together. Bonnard was a transitional painter who cheerfully showed the way forward from impressionism, flirting with abstraction without ever fully committing to the radical ideas he hinted at. A century later, with all the brilliant energy of that era finally exhausted, Bartlett retreated to a rearguard posture, adopting conceptual feats of strength — including her Kierkegaardian acts of repetition — to push her paintings through.

The Museum of Modern Art, which owns "Rhapsody," put the piece back on view again in 2023, showcasing Bartlett's protean project a year after her death for a new generation of viewers who might not know her name. The broader Phillips survey would have helped to put Bartlett in context. Did her work mark a turning point, at the end of the long 20th century, by an artist who refused to give up when everyone else declared painting dead? Or did she herself hit a dead end? The only way to decide is to do like Bartlett did: look again and again and again and again.

Jennifer Bartlett: In and Out of the Garden

Phillips Collection, 1600 21st St. NW., 202-387-2151. phillipscollection.org.

Dates: Through April 30.