

MODERN PAINTERS

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SPOTLIGHT # JENNIFER BARTLETT

On and Off the Grid A painter bends Conceptualism's rules

BY WENDY VOGEL

ON THE WORKTABLE in Jennifer Bartlett's home studio, in the former Candy and Confectionary Workers Union Hall in Brooklyn's picturesque Clinton Hill, rests an array of materials. Alongside dozens of Testors enamel pots and a smattering of seashells from a recent vacation, there is a single quote scrawled onto paper running the table's length: "That's not painting, that's knitting." Bartlett explains: "Kynaston McShine told me that once about my work. I thought it was a great remark."

The comment might sound off-putting, especially given the source. A legendary curator, McShine is known for exhibitions like "Primary Structures," 1966, and "Information," 1970, which surveyed early Minimalist and Conceptual art, respec-



Bartlett, from her earliest Conceptual works to her recent landscapes. In the 1970s, Bartlett's cerebral compositions resembled the highly logical works of her peers, but with a twist. "I think I never understood such as art, but I liked the look of it, and that's what I worked with," she admits. Consider the monumental



ANALY: Installation view of *Grid*, 2005-10. (Photo: Gallery 2011. From the artist's archive. © 2013 Jennifer Bartlett. All rights reserved.)



HEAD: Installation view of *Grid*, 2005-10. (Photo: Gallery 2011. From the artist's archive. © 2013 Jennifer Bartlett. All rights reserved.)



TOP: Jennifer Bartlett. (Photo: Gallery 2011. From the artist's archive. © 2013 Jennifer Bartlett. All rights reserved.)

RIGHT: From 1975-76, under in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Composed of 847 one-foot-square grid panels of enamel on steel, the work vividly catalogs the vocabulary of painting, starting from dots and lines and progressing to the forms of the house, tree, mountain, and ocean.

In 1978 Bartlett was included in the Whitney Museum's "New Image Painting" show with other rising stars working against the grain of abstraction, such as Neil Denney and Susan Ruffalo. Also featuring Neo-Expressionist artists, the exhibition would polarize the debate on painting in the 1980s between market-friendly figurative and cooler methods like appropriation. In the following decades, Bartlett's work has undergone many shifts of style as well as medium, from technical painting with grids to her current series depicting houses and boats. She has also worked with sculpture and found experimentally into mediums as diverse as jewelry, glassware, furniture, theater design, and even fabric weaving, with her 1995 autobiographical novel *History of the Universe: Gardening in weather patterns*, and her *Bookish* spell, dotted with hoodlums, evergreens, and original houses of gods, prove charming even during a frigid winter visit.

Since the early 2000s the language of short stories, no element that Bartlett says has risen to the surface as a kind of figurative element. In one stunning example from 2005-06, *Twin*, she plays out a dialogue between herself and her longtime friend and fellow painter Elizabeth Murray, who died in 2007. The multi-panel work depicts an imagined conversation between the two artists, written on the left-hand side and mirrored on the right, with images of eggs and snails that Murray gave Bartlett in the center. Her McShine's knitting comparison comes perhaps closest to the truth, as Bartlett incorporates snail-like patterns on a grid resembling the style of needle point. Recently, however, her works in progress show a more expressive approach to language, and an enamel-on-steel piece on the subject of domestic life is the artist's attention to the word as a variety of hands. Although she was one of the most commercially successful artists of the '70s, Bartlett's work had long been under-recognized—until this year. Her first major museum survey, "History of the Universe: 1978-2011," is on view from April 17 to July 13 at the Parrish Art Museum following a run at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. From May 23 to 27 the British national dance company Rambert will stage, in London, Lucinda Childs's evening-length *Four Elements*, 1990, which features Bartlett's stage design and costumes. And in September the Cleveland Museum of Art will launch a show of Bartlett's largest multi-panel piece, *Rhapsody*, which will be joined by *Swag*, 2007, and *Bookish*, 2009-10. For an artist who has always believed in the idea of bending the rules, these accolades confirm the value of thinking outside the box—or grid.

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On the worktable in Jennifer Bartlett's home studio, in the former Candy and Confectionary Workers Union Hall in Brooklyn's picturesque Clinton Hill, rests an array of materials. Alongside dozens of Testors enamel pots and a smattering of seashells from a recent vacation, there is a single quote scrawled onto paper running the table's length: "That's not painting, that's knitting." Bartlett explains: "Kynaston McShine told me that once about my work. I thought it was a great remark."

The comment might sound off-putting, especially given the source. A legendary curator, McShine is known for exhibitions like "Primary Structures," 1966, and "Information," 1970, which surveyed early Minimalist and Conceptual art, respectively. Bartlett, age 73, is an artist whose paintings plumb the nature of both abstraction and figuration, based on rules the artist devises— and subverts— as she wishes. At times her laboriously produced works, on graph paper or gridded steel plates, begin to resemble the weave of fabrics. But Bartlett takes McShine's note in stride. "Everyone has always thought that my systems weren't right. They weren't very systematic." Comparing herself to the famed Minimalist Sol LeWitt, with whom

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she was friendly, she adds, “Maybe I’m a sloppy Sol!”

Looking at Bartlett’s work, however, one would be hard-pressed to call it anything of the sort. For more than 40 years the artist has been exploring painting’s very foundations, from her earliest Conceptual works to her recent landscapes. In the 1970s Bartlett’s cerebral compositions resembled the highly logical works of her peers, but with a twist. “I think I never understood math at all, but I liked the look of it, and that’s what I worked with,” she admits. Consider the monumental *Rhapsody*, from 1975-76, today in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Composed of 987 one-foot-square gridded panels of enamel on steel, the work virtually catalogues the vocabulary of painting, starting from dots and lines and progressing to the forms of the house, tree, mountain, and ocean.

In 1978 Bartlett was included in the Whitney Museum’s “New Image Painting” show with other rising stars working against the grain of abstraction, such as Neil Jenney and Susan Rothenberg. Also featuring Neo-Expressionist artists, the exhibition would polarize the debate on painting in the 1980s between market-friendly figuration and cooler methods like appropriation. In the following decades, Bartlett’s work has undergone many shifts of style as well as medium, from freehand painting with grids to her current series depicting houses and boats. She has also worked with sculpture and forayed experimentally into mediums as diverse as jewelry, glassware, furniture, theater design, and even fiction writing, with her 1985 semiautobiographical novel *History of the Universe*. Gardening is another passion, and her Brooklyn yard dotted with boulders, evergreens, and original bronzes of ponds, proves charming even during a frigid winter visit.

Since the early 2000s the language of short stories, an element that Bartlett says has always “underscored” her paintings, has risen to the surface as a kind of figurative element. In one stunning example from 2005-06, *Twins*, she plays out a dialogue between herself and her longtime friend and fellow painter Elizabeth Murray, who died in 2007. The multi-panel work depicts an imagined conversation between the two artists, written on the left-hand side and mirrored on the right, with images of cups and saucers that Murray gave Bartlett in the center. Here McShine’s knitting comparison comes perhaps closest to the truth, as Bartlett incorporates snatches of language on a grid resembling the style of needlepoint. Recently, however, her works-in-progress show a more expressive approach to language, and an enamel-on-steel piece on the subject of dementia sees the artist articulating the word in a variety of hands.

Although she was one of the most commercially successful artists of the ‘70s, Bartlett’s work had long been under-recognized– until this year. Her first major museum survey, “History of the Universe: 1970-2011” is on view from April 27 to July 13 at the Parrish Art Museum following a run at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. From May 20 to 24 the British national dance company Rambert will restage, in London, Lucinda Child’s evening-length *Four Elements*, 1990, which features Bartlett’s stage design and costumes. And in September the Cleveland Museum of Art will launch a show of Bartlett’s largest multi-panel pieces: *Rhapsody* will be joined by *Song*, 2007, and *Recitative*, 2009-10. For an artist who has always believed in the ideas of bending the rules, these accolades confirm the value of thinking outside the box– or grid.

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