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Jennifer Bartlett's Epic 'Rhapsody' Back on View at the Modern



The Jennifer Bartlett installation "Rhapsody" at the Museum of Modern Art in 2006.

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"Rhapsody," Jennifer Bartlett's epic polymorphous post-painting painting in nearly 1,000 parts is once again on view at the Museum of Modern Art, wrapped around three long walls and looking tailor-made for the museum's giant atrium. The work was first shown here five years ago, as part of an exhibition of works given to the Modern by the collector Edward R. Broida. At that time, the piece's appearance was an early indication that the atrium might serve as something other than a large, alienating event space.

Now "Rhapsody" is back, just in time for its 35th birthday, looking as fresh and irrepressible as ever. Its persisting visual bounce owes something to its being painted in bright enamels on gleaming white one-foot-square steel plates silkscreened with a pale gray quarter-inch grid. But the works' exuberance mainly reflects Ms. Bartlett's logical yet often capricious turn of mind, further liberated by an infinitely expandable painting surface that allowed her to make up "Rhapsody" as she went along.

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A section of the installation, "Rhapsody."

The result is an immense cacophonous expanse of pictorial cross-talk played out on 987 plates arranged in 142 vertical rows of seven plates each. The first impression overwhelms, yet the work unfolds intimately, plate by plate, in real time, with novelistic, cinematic and, as its title implies, musical overtones. The basic components, wildly matched and mixed, include four universal motifs (house, tree, mountain, ocean), a handful of abstract elements (circle, square, triangle and vertical, horizontal, curved and diagonal lines) and the 25 colors of Testors enamel available in 1976. The extended finale, a kind of fade-out on an environmental scale, is a 126-plate sequence of sand, surf and distant ocean in shades of tan, white and blue.

Overall, "Rhapsody" shows us Conceptual Art system-making run amok and sums up '70s pluralism (Photo Realism, hard-edge abstraction, New Image painting, "bad" painting, Pattern and Decoration) while also heralding aspects of 1980s Neo-Expressionism and appropriation art. The four seasons work their way in, as do images from National Geographic and the New Topographics photography of Robert Adams. There are so many passing, often inadvertent references to other artists and styles that the piece starts to resemble a joyful celebration of the death of the author. But it is also an example of a fierce, profligate and intelligence finding her voice and testing it at full strength.