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Artifacts | Doting on Dots: Jennifer Bartlett's 'Recitative'

CULTURE | By LINDA YABLONSKY | JANUARY 13, 2011, 5:24 PM

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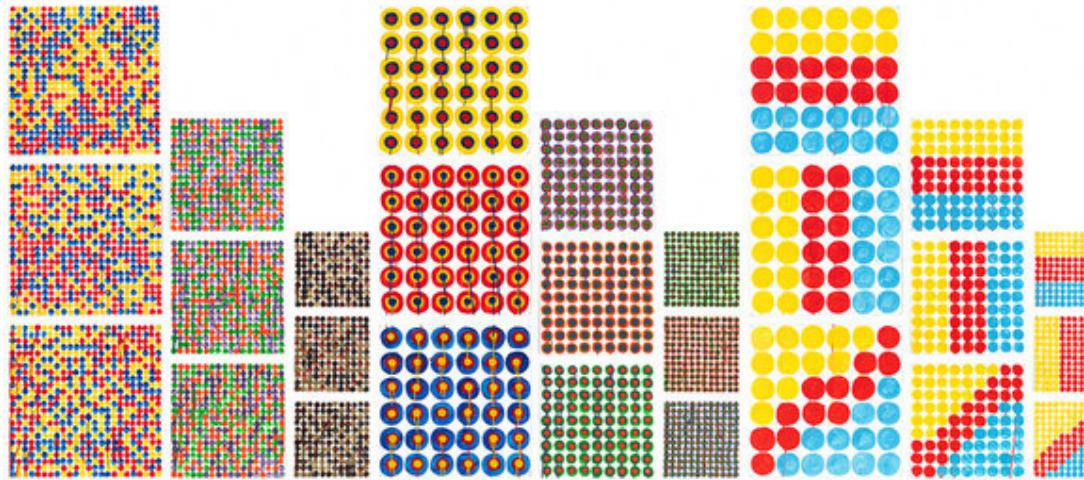
An installation view of "Recitative," at the Pace Gallery, 2009-2010. *Photo courtesy the artist and The Pace Gallery*

When is a painting more than just a painting? When it is made of 372 different parts, for one thing, and has a mad panoply of numerous circles, squiggles, drips and smears that come in a full spectrum of color brushed into or over the 1/4-inch squares of a grid pattern that has been silk-screened onto white, baked-enamel steel plates. And also when it is really visual music.

Jennifer Bartlett's "Recitative" is such a painting. The 69-year-old conceptualist child of Minimalism introduced it to the public on Tuesday night at the Pace Gallery in Chelsea. At 158 feet long, it ranges across three walls of the gallery's garagelike space, cycling through several styles of abstraction in a syncopated rhythm you can almost rap to. Essentially, it is a dialogue with art itself, where color is the central subject and intuition plays against mathematics.

The enamel plates come in three different sizes and are hung in groups, each a step in Bartlett's evolving narrative of relationships between color, shape and line. Like human relationships, they are too messy to be merely decorative.

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A detail of the painting



Circles, or dots, are the dominant motif. Fat ones contain smaller ones, in complementary colors; smaller ones the size of price stickers fill the squares of the grid in precisely measured rows, like those on a multiple-choice exam. Even tinier ones that obliterate the grid beneath it make almost pointillistic ground cover. A section where skeins of paint splash all over the surface recalls Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, or graffiti on a street wall. Bartlett worked Jasper Johns-style hatch marks onto another group. In the group of tiles beside it, each is a monochrome of a different hue and looks finger-painted.

At the end of "Recitative," Bartlett breaks free of her modular bindings with an exuberant flourish: a looping, freehand black line painted across 24 large white panels that overlap in a haphazard fashion and say, "Get me outta here."

This is one artist who doesn't seem capable of thinking small. "Rhapsody," which she worked on from 1975-6, has 987 baked enamel plates, but they are all a uniform size and stack up the wall in a grid, while their dots add up to clear images of houses, mountains, trees and seas. It looked right at home in 2006, when it was installed in the humongous atrium of the Museum of Modern Art, which owns it. Three years ago, Bartlett produced "Song," which measures 97 feet and has black-and-white, strictly geometric patterns. That one is in the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Sometimes Bartlett composes with a throw of the dice. This time out, she said at her opening, she plotted the structure of "Recitative" by picking numbers of longitudes and latitudes from a box. I couldn't help asking where her fondness for painting circles came from. The answer, she said, was simple: "When in doubt, dot."

"Jennifer Bartlett: Recitative" is on view through Feb. 26 at the Pace Gallery, 545 West 22nd Street.