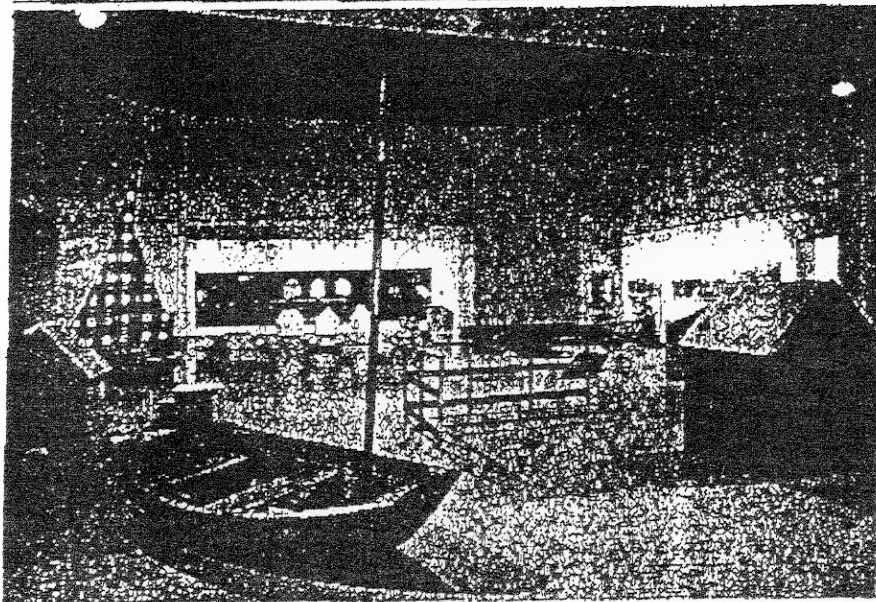


I HEAR AMERICA THINKING

New York/ December 9, 1985

"...Bartlett's work holds a conversation between the Forms of understanding and the sloppy hedonism of raw experience..."



VESSELS OF MEANING: Jennifer Bartlett's boats and houses, at the Brooklyn Museum.

ANY RETROSPECTIVE SHOULD REVISE AN opinion or two, but I have never seen one do more to secure a place for its artist than the Jennifer Bartlett show at the Brooklyn Museum. By laying out the long view of Bartlett's fifteen-year career, minus its few hesitant moments and near-mistakes, this thoroughly enjoyable exhibition confirms the depth of Bartlett's intelligence and the significance of her vision. She was already a major artist. Now it's increasingly clear that she is one of the two strongest painters of the post-minimalist generation. (The other is Elizabeth Murray, who will be getting her own retrospective next year in SoHo.) The thrill of being present at a historic moment owes something to the fact that both artists are women, and to the likelihood that no such statement has ever been made.

To call Bartlett the best of her generation (with Murray) is not just to say that she is a fine painter, or even to argue that she has all the kinks worked out of her art. Kinks or not, what counts is her forceful confrontation with the current crisis in painting and her willingness to cut straight through the vogue for anxiety to find rejuvenation in the action of mind on paint. Artists who have come of age at the end of the 40-year dominance of abstract art have had to cope with the

hordes of manufactured images that have drifted into the memory banks of the visually literate. Appropriating this information overload into painting—even by such savvy stratagems as, say, David Salle's—typically just recycles visual and spiritual exhaustion into other forms. Much recent art is infected with a desperate ennui.

Bartlett, on the other hand, is staggeringly forthright. Even though there are "wrong" things—ideas not resolved, or resolved badly—the issues she takes on are immeasurably deep, and their irresolution is part of the essential awkwardness of a thinking artist's struggle with the elements of seeing. Her ability to focus on issues and not on ennui has undoubtedly been helped by the fact that, as a woman, she is not a candidate for leadership of the international art pack; she has been saved the trouble of jockeying for position, and can simply go on painting. But she has had another and probably more useful advantage in the sheer force of her intellect, which understands the equivocal character of a mark on paper—its nature as both an image and a sign—with a clarity that, to my mind, is best compared to that of Jasper Johns.

The exhibition that does so much for Bartlett comes from the Walker Art Center and has been beautifully installed

in Brooklyn by curator Sarah Faunce. Within the Beaux-Arts generosity of the museum's lofty white halls, Bartlett's calm eloquence is shown to better advantage than it could have been anywhere in Manhattan (which is just as well, since no other museum had the guts to take it on).

Faunce chose to begin with a coda. Scattered about under an airy rotunda are the recent landscapes and their conceptual flotsam: boats in copper, in painted plaids, in flat cobalt blue; pastel houses; the shell-studded seahorse-shaped bench from last spring's "Caribbean" series. The rotunda leads into rooms filled with works from 1970 on: sequences of steel plates printed with grids and attached, gridlike, to the wall.

When these quiet clouds of pattern first appeared, they must have seemed like typical minimalist explorations of numerical sequence—quirky attempts to make a conceptual system out of dots of paint dispersed in various ways across the grids. In juxtaposition with the latest works, some of the clichés about Bartlett's career drop away. The older works are charged with a most unminimalist lushness that now seems embedded in her very reflexes. The flotsam, meanwhile, is even more clearly an expression of her attempt to reorder the very foundations of painting by creating a "free space" where an idea is left to work out its own destiny—and to have a good time doing so.

It struck me forcibly in Brooklyn that Bartlett is the true inheritor of Johns's flinty reasoning about the tyrannical power of a mark. But Bartlett's willingness to indulge in emotional byplay is also very much true to the mood of the 1980s. Johns, emerging from Abstract Expressionism, had to keep a tight hold on the mark's range of expression to prevent its autonomy from being undermined. Bartlett, emerging from minimalism, discovered an almost maniacal urge for characterization, as though each mark were an actor in a soap opera—a glee that reaches its slapstick peak in *Rhapsody*, of 1976.

Rhapsody, which is finally accessible after having been tucked away in a private collection for most of ten years, is a major piece of contemporary art and a monumental summation of Bartlett's eagerness to revel in the sheer beauty of

the idea at play. In 987 steel plates, arranged in 142 rows, Bartlett lays out an astounding "conversation" (her word). Sequences of solid color argue with single lines in series; symbols appear in themes and variations; impressionist passages reach their apotheosis in a long and blissful lapping of oceanic blues. A kind of discourse develops between pure color and form, and kitschy borrowed images of mountainsides, ski trails, even a golden tree silhouetted over a high pass. As Roberts Smith elegantly states in a new Abrams book, *Rhapsody*, this proto-postmodern prescience "pinpoints issues, devices, and strategies that were barely gleams in younger artists' eyes at the time, but are ubiquitous now. Among these are the renewed contest between abstraction and representation, the resurgence of subject matter, stylistic promiscuity, and cannibalism, a collage-like juxtaposition of images from high and popular culture alike."

The "conversation" in Bartlett's work is between the Forms of understanding and the sloppy hedonism of raw experience. Anxieties about change, dispersion, and death that I saw in her recent paintings last April grow out of her awareness of the mind's precarious hold on existence. The other side of that coin is *Rhapsody's* realization that with change (which is programmed into the

very nature of this picture) also come joy, release, and exaltation.

Rhapsody declared to Bartlett that it was time to quit the grid. She did, but with a struggle that had its painful and awkward moments, most of which are not included here. When she did leave the comfort of a predetermined structure, some of the joy disappeared and was replaced by that existential fear, as though she had finally admitted her terror of chaos. All the work since then seems to be out of balance, and struggling to right itself. The dialogue between Idea and feeling has become a war in which the combatants have had to be separated: conceptual objects on the one hand, sensual landscapes on the other. These pieces are haunted, not just by intimations of change and death but by the painterly willfulness that lifts its Forms out of the flux to put them through transformations (painting them plaid, sheathing them in copper) that are utterly arbitrary and strange.

But such complaints seem less serious in context, where the chess game Bartlett is playing becomes a passionately lyrical drama that attempts, Bergman-like, to confront the very origins of meaning in art. This is precisely the kind of contemporary exhibition New York needs and has not been getting: an artist in mid-career, whose work ought to be seen in

more than bits and pieces, and who speaks to issues more profound than fashion. If the Brooklyn can manage a few more shows like this one, it will change the face of contemporary art in this town. (200 Eastern Parkway, through January 6.)