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ART: THE UNEXPECTED FROM JENNIFER BARTLETT



Works by Jennifer Bartlett at Paula Cooper Gallery

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AS unexpected as Jennifer Bartlett's new show seems, it is very much a Jennifer Bartlett show. Her work has to do with the unpredictable, the unsystematic and the unexpected. While this show occupies the floor as well as the walls of the Paula Cooper Gallery, 155 Wooster Street, this is a logical development of her longstanding environmental ambition. All of the beached objects - blown-up Monopoly-like houses, enamel-painted wood boats, a plywood swimming pool, flagstones, a wood and a chain-link fence and a concrete sea wall and dock - also appear in the landscape paintings around them that, as usual, evoke a variety of moods and styles. And everything in this show, too, is held together by narrative threads and by a sense of life as an exhilarating, desperate game of surfaces and reflections.

Like Bartlett's other major shows then, this exhibition (through April 27) can also be seen as a culmination and extension of what came before. Houses, pools, seas and landscapes are staples of Bartlett's iconography. It was, however, only with her 1984 commission for the Volvo headquarters in Göteborg, Sweden, that she began to conceive projects with actual objects. Her shows have often been a kind of diary. But it is only as she has become a public figure, involved with large-scale commissions, that her work has also included a more private, almost confessional record.

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Indeed, within the chaotic, playpen atmosphere of this show, there is something even darker and more unsettling than what emerged in Bartlett's last series, "In the Garden." The key work is probably the painting "The Island." We view



boats and a tropical island from a vantage point that is partly underwater. There is an upright white sailboat and a dark one that has capsized. As a male figure swims underwater back to the white boat, another figure seems to be frantically swimming away from it, toward the boat reclining on its side. On the sea bed, between sexually suggestive underwater flora identified with both swimmers and boats, there is a disconcerting red blotch. We, too, are at sea. Like the figures, we are hopelessly removed from the white sands, which are about to be pounded by the uncontrollable sea.

The show brings to mind works and styles of many artists, including Manet, Monet, Edward Hopper, Jonathan Borofsky and David True. Partly because of the artist's timing, and partly because Bartlett starts out with a Postmodernist doubt about absolute originality and the existence of the self, the associations tend to make her work stronger. The most illuminating reference may be to Eric Fischl, whose paintings of murky personal, sexual and class conflicts in idyllic settings are, like Bartlett's works, comedies of manners. Like Fischl, Bartlett throws out a host of clues, and every one of them is ominous. What has happened in "The Island"? What does the blood floating on the water of "Yellow and Black Boats" and the red of the house in the painting "Sunset" mean? Why is the swimming pool in and alongside the painting "White House" like a fractured mirror?

The content of the paintings finally alters the way we see the objects on the floor. If they seemed somewhat irritating and gimmicky when we entered the gallery, they are eventually charged with the uncertainty and anxiety that ooze from the same forms in the paintings. The longer we settle among the objects, the more they seem indefinable - not toys, not models, not sculpture - and the more they produce a sense of longing and unease. In this risky show, so filled with middle-class icons that the gallery floor sometimes seems like a big game of House, Bartlett makes us feel a particular combination of panic and pleasure that is characteristic of her work alone.

Jennifer Bartlett
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 155 WOOSTER STREET