

Art/Kay Larson

## MAKING SENSE OF SENSUALITY

“...Jennifer Bartlett is becoming one of conceptualism's most willing survivors, an artist to be looked to for painting's future...”

Jennifer Bartlett HAS REACHED THE MID-point of an artist's stardom. There are several indicators of the transition: The art journals have lost her, and she is now the province of the news magazines and fashion pages. A major book on her appeared three years ago, and a second one arrives this month (Abbeville Press; \$35) to serve as a catalogue for the precocious retrospective opening April 28 at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. (The show will be at the Brooklyn Museum in November.) And her current show at the Paula Cooper Gallery is only a slight deviation from vintage Bartlett, an art obsessed with looking and thinking and the conflict that flares up when those things are pursued simultaneously. As someone who came of age during conceptualism, she gives no quarter to material existence. Lately, however, she's been looking harder without thinking less. She is becoming one of conceptualism's most willing survivors and an artist you look to for the future of painting.

Bartlett's new show is, as usual, a travelogue. In the tradition of “Up the Creek,” “At Sea,” and “In the Garden,” this exhibition is called “The Island” and includes memories of a recent idyll in the Caribbean near Antigua. These “diary entries” include a sequence of paintings hung around the walls and visual souvenirs—boats, flagstones, fences—scattered about the floor. There are the familiar Bartlett devices: a ruling proposition, plus endless permutations and juxtapositions. There is an outburst of sensuality, which ripples luxuriantly over every nuance of wavelet and sand hump, dappling them with gorgeous colors. Basic Bartlett consists of a relentless gnawing at the Beautiful, a refusal to accept the life of the senses until it is stripped to the bone.

Bartlett has always relied on conceptual devices, patterns for ordering and explaining experience: spotting Testor's colors on steel plates, in predetermined sequences, using standardized shapes like mountains or houses, and arranging the plates in tight grids on the wall. The systems began to lose some rigidity when she was forced to spend a rainy winter in Nice in 1979-80, drawing a backyard pool to stave off boredom. Alone in her borrowed prison, she had to relinquish most of her control. She managed to ex-



Lyrical: The Island, part of an installation by Bartlett.

ert some nonetheless by drawing with as many materials (pastel, watercolor, crayon) and from as many sources (direct experiences, photographs, memories) as she could manage. The force of Bartlett's newly unfettered scrutiny is awesome. She can pick apart a scene stroke by stroke, down to the dampish black-green of cedars in a storm, or the clear fluorescent aquamarine of waves on a Caribbean beach. Yet her pictures are suffused with a mood, compounded out of the smothering, decaying atmosphere of a place, and a peculiar aura of doubt that is hers alone.

“In the Garden,” the series that came out of her monkish retreat in Nice, produced Bartlett's least mannered show. If Bartlett were anybody else, these uncluttered pictures would have established her as one of the finest landscapists working. But since she is so systematic, I wondered whether those experiences would disappear, like other forms of enlightenment. The lessons about drawing have been assimilated, though, sharpening that contradiction between looking and thinking to increasingly devastating effect.

The room at Paula Cooper is lined with large paintings that are now confidently, conversationally lyrical. Sunlight irradiates the lucid waters of *The Island*,

while waves lap at a shore scattered with houses and boats. On the floor of the gallery are some of the houses you see in the paintings: simplified cubic peak-and-gable archetypes, painted in clear primaries (red, yellow, blue) or pastel secondaries (lavender, pale orange, citron green). The picket fence, the chain link fence, the dinghies and rowboats are also duplications from the paintings. Next to the lushness of the pictures from the tropics, the objects seem irritatingly featureless and artificial.

But Bartlett's seductive sensuality is a snare that jerks you into deep philosophical waters. You are forced to think about those objects, to wonder about their presence and their ability to irritate. They aren't just souvenirs; they also pop up here and there in the paintings, outrageously out of place, like projections from another dimension. If the show is a travelogue, it divides in half. Bartlett's concentrated self-abnegation in Nice has prepared her to observe the fecund ordinariness of ordinary things, and the paintings are descriptions of this raw immersion in the senses. But memory—the other dimension—intrudes. Out of experience she picks the conceptual essences and arranges them so they justify what she saw. The painter's mind breaks in on ordinary things and asserts

command. Bartlett can therefore focus on those qualities that snagged memory in the first place and can invest them with ontological strangeness.

The mood of ominous scrutiny is odd, since it comes from nothing in particular, though everybody who writes about her notes it. Bartlett's anxiety, you gradually realize, has no specific source, but it has a profoundly general one. The anxiety comes from the mind's desperate struggle to "make sense" of sensuality, to reduce the unreconcilable otherness of things to a pattern that can be grasped and ordered. The works most charged with anxiety are also the ones that most fully indulge in sensuality. Occasionally Bartlett sinks to hokey literalness, as in the painting *Yellow and Black Boats*, which includes such dramatic cues as an overturned boat and a red stain in the water. On the other hand, one drawing, which merely presents three views of the same grassy Caribbean clearing, crackles with foreboding.

In Bartlett's latest work, idealism and materialism contend bitterly for the same luxuriant turf. The artist still insists that the mind dominates experience and can structure it to suit. But material existence has been gaining authority. The grassy clearing with its buggy ripeness, the windy ripples on turquoise water, the dank shoreline are all in states of transi-

tion. Bartlett looks first for rules, but those rules are not the end of the observation; she is also able to show the unnerving fluidity of things, their evanescence for consciousness. The voyeur's role, which is also a traveler's role, thus perfectly suits her and explains why she prefers to find her subjects in her brief visits abroad. She betrays, in passing, her most profound observation: that the transience of experience is not easily impressed on the mind, which heeds its own nature and its rules, and, against all evidence, believes them eternal.

In Bartlett's new work, you find yourself dragged from one side of the idealist-materialist argument to the other. In that pastel drawing of an ominous clearing, rank unruliness—fetid swamp grass, decaying outbuildings, and scraggly wind-tossed trees—vies with the impulse to perfect order. With the artist, you sense the presence of flux, the implacable passing of time, the recognition of which threatens to bring down the mind's mental house of cards. You are led to hope for changelessness; what you get are portents of decay and death. It's easy to step back and appreciate the beauty of Bartlett's system—this whole show is, after all, a product of the artist's unshakable intelligence. But even as you lose yourself in the gorgeous pleasantries of the paintings, you feel yourself struggling to

deny what they imply. "The Island" is a modernist's memento mori. (155 Wooster Street; through April 27.)

**"Precious: An American Cottage Industry of the Eighties"** does a serious disservice to the artists in it and to any belief in the moral force of contemporary art, though I'm sure that wasn't the intention of Thomas Sokolowski, the Grey Art Gallery's new director.

"Precious" is at least the right word. Glitter, gilt, melodrama, and kitsch are the ruling principles of what Sokolowski calls "the decorative mode." Anybody who set your skin crawling in recent seasons is probably here. One or two of these artists at a time might have preserved a shred of conviction, but any value their work might have had in isolation is obliterated when put in such a context. Tawdriness gains value only when it offends respectability.

Constructivist theory got us into this mess by encouraging the appropriation of fragments of real life into art. So many variations have been wrought on this notion that no one now blinks when the objects appropriated come from junk bins and thrift stores. But every age leaves behind it a wake of intellectual debris shed from the leading edges of a powerful idea, and I suspect this is ours. (33 Washington Place; through May 4.)