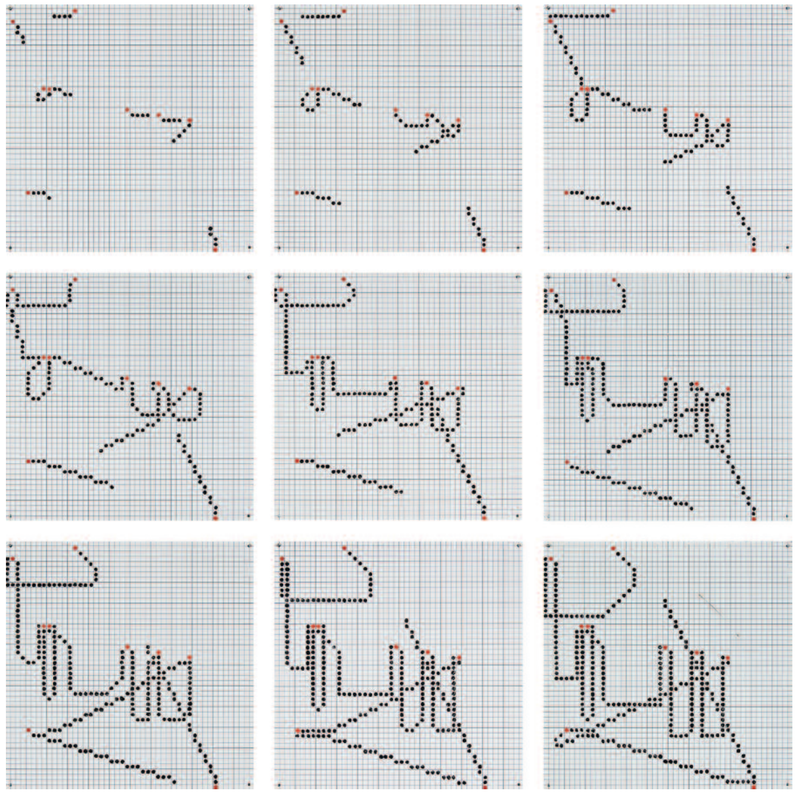

Chaos Theory

Ann Landi

"Chaos Theory" is a singularly apt title for a show of Jennifer Bartlett's abstract works. As explained by mathematician William L. Paschke, Chaos Theory posits that "if you do the same simple thing over and over, beautiful patterns can emerge, and, more importantly, sometimes if you change the starting point by just a tiny little bit, you can get a completely different-looking pattern."

For more than 40 years, Bartlett has made gorgeous paintings, both serious and playful, by setting certain self-imposed rules for each of her series of works. These may not always be evident to the viewer, who senses a certain underlying rationale without knowing precisely what systems are set into motion, but the results are almost always beguiling. The savvy art lover will discern the referents to earlier movements—the drippy spontaneity of Abstract Expressionism, the shaped canvases introduced by Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly, and the austere rigors of Minimalism. But Bartlett has always absorbed the past and made it completely her own.

Much has been made of Bartlett's use of the grid to organize content, and yet artists have always looked to mathematics, and science in general, to figure out how to bring the sublime into the realm of the visible. Praxiteles had a canon of proportions for the ideal human body; Leonardo and other Renaissance masters introduced three-point perspective to give us a heightened sense of the real; Seurat drew heavily on the color theories of his day. Closer to our times, Agnes Martin made very precise numerical calculations before mapping out her luminous paintings and drawings, also predicated on the grid.

Bartlett's particular genius has been to look to her immediate predecessors and filter their achievements through a sensibility that speaks to both connoisseurs and casual gallery-goers. If Carl Andre and Sol Lewitt still remain somewhat inaccessible for many, Bartlett is not. At the same time she is every bit as adventurous and seems always to be testing out new ground. In her larger works, such as the landmark *Rhapsody* of 1975–76 (fig. 2), Bartlett re-introduced narrative to painting (it's been compared, rightly so, to an unfolding epic poem), and has upended our ideas about landscape in sprawling depictions of the Pacific and Atlantic oceans (1984), even

1 Getting Somewhere, 1974, enamel over silkscreen grid on baked enamel steel plates, 38 x 38 inches

going so far as to introduce sculptural elements into the mix with *Seawall* (1985).

"Chaos Theory" offers a chance to look at Bartlett's purely abstract work and explore in it the underpinnings of all her art. At the very beginning of her career, as seen in *Five* (1971; pp. 18–19), the artist started to use baked enamel on steel plates. It was an uncannily prescient idea, both for her own endeavors and for others. As she told Elizabeth Murray in conversation several years ago, "I wanted a unit that could go around corners on the wall, stack for shipping. If you made a painting and wanted it to be longer, you could add plates. If you didn't like the middle you could remove it, clean it, replace it or not." Other artists—some as remote from her aesthetic as the African sculptor El Anatsui—have discovered that making work from discrete units (in his case, the lids of tin cans or liquor-bottle seals) made for easy shipping and allowed either the author or the curator to make choices about placement in the galleries.

A system of organization, for Bartlett, made decision-making easier and flew in the face of the "in-the-moment" existential theatrics of a previous generation of artists. "I always have some kind of rule for the paintings," Bartlett says. "The rules are to make a situation where nothing has to be decided after I've begun." It's not always clear what system or rules she is using, but an educated viewer might deduce from the title "Fibonacci," for instance, that the artist is playing with the mathematical sequence that adds two numbers together to come up with the next number, except here the game is played

2 Installation view of **Rhapsody,** 1975–76 at Robert Miller Gallery, New York, 1999

3 Lozenge Trapezoid, 2000–01, oil on two canvases, 84 x 64 inches

with colors. Similarly, in the "Counting Series," (pp. 32–51) the viewer senses a simple logic at work, which makes sense when Bartlett explains her process: "If you're counting one, two, three, four, and so on, and you're counting it out on a rectangle, it's different from counting it out on an ellipse or a parallelogram. I was interested in how the shape of something changes any system."

It all sounds rather dry and predictable on paper, but then when confronted with the dazzling colors of *Lozenge Trapezoid* (2000–01; fig. 3) or the exuberant geometries of *Color Study: Size, Hue and Tint* (2001, p. 55), all the systematic thinking falls away and one is left simply with a thrilling visual experience.

What's often lost in discussions of Bartlett's work is the role of chance and her sly sense of humor. Early on, in the late '60s, she recognized the importance of John Cage's ideas and, as she told Murray, "quickly embraced random elements." She admits this might have been the genesis for *Color Study* ("I think I had leftover canvases at that time, and I decided to put them together that way," she says) and one suspects that the addenda in the "Footnotes" canvases (pp. 61, 63), the attachment of new elements in the upper and lower corners, may have come about in the same way. The wit lies in making these the visual equivalents of the annotations to a text, which attempt to enlarge on or elucidate something in the primary document.

Her latest paintings, the "Blobs" (pp. 80–91), mark a kind of turning point for the artist but nonetheless emanate from the same impulses. They are totally freehand, which is unusual for her, and they demonstrate from a certain antic spirit that's not always apparent in her art. A lot of her work, she says, comes out of a desire to keep herself amused. "I cannot emphasize enough how much the word 'blob' just amuses me," she admits. "It puts art in its place. It doesn't have to be aggrandized."

Nonetheless, in turning to the homeliest elements of painting—geometric shapes, grids, and primary colors in tints and hues—Bartlett makes statements that are as grand as they are appealing. These are, indeed, the "beautiful patterns" of Chaos Theory.

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