Jennifer Bartlett

From Rhapsody to Song

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Essay by David Moos

From Rhapsody to Song: The Monumental Work of Jennifer Bartlett

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"A grid can organize anything."
– Jennifer Bartlett

In May 1976 Jennifer Bartlett exhibited *Rhapsody* (fig. 1), a now fabled work of art that consists of 987 steel plates painted with enamel. As a catalogue and compendium of experience platted into consistently arrayed painted squares, *Rhapsody* is a panorama that unfolds with Whitmanic breadth—like *Leaves of Grass,* gathering up insight and observation, remarking upon the world while remaking it through iteration, incantation, repetition and declaration. The quixotic painting changes as one surveys its 153 foot span, moving from monochromatic to diagrammatic, free painterly passages to regimented dots applied within a matrix. The work inventories formal possibilities in painting, while offering a narrative that takes the viewer on a journey moving across various motifs (house, tree, mountain and ocean).

Bartlett has said that the work was painted in a burst, begun in the summer of 1975 in Southampton, on Long Island, and then continued throughout the autumn and winter in her New York loft. As the work gained momentum in her mind, an organic routine structured the epic undertaking as she made rapid decisions about each component: "If I didn't like what I'd done each day, I'd just wipe it out. I wanted the piece to have a kind of growth that was actual rather than aesthetic."[1] From conception to completion and presentation at the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York, *Rhapsody* represents the metric of one year of work. It is far more ambitious than any of the other multi-plate works that Bartlett had previously undertaken, and like the central poems of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass,* long poems such as "Song of Myself" or "I Sing the Body Electric," *Rhapsody* serves as a comprehensive elucidation of her creative vision.

The analogy to poetry seems appropriate not just because of the often bucolic subject matter (especially the tree and mountain passages) and ambitious narrative sweep of the work, but because the plate itself functions as a discrete unit akin to the page. And as numerous sketches and studies on graph paper reveal, Bartlett planned and

Fig. 1. Installation view showing *Rhapsody,* 1975-76, enamel over silkscreen grid on baked enamel steel plates, 90 inches x 153 feet, Robert Miller Gallery, New York, 1999

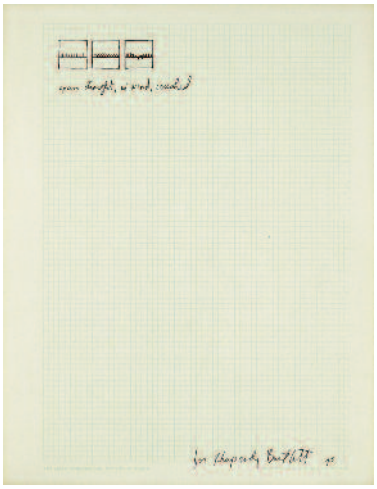

Fig. 2. *Study for Rhapsody,* 1975, pen on graph paper, 11 x 8 1/4 inches

plotted the breadth of *Rhapsody* on pages, often making highly detailed visual and verbal annotations. One page, a cream colored, vertically oriented, blue-gridded sheet of graph paper, shows three black squares in a row at the upper left corner (fig. 2). Within each square is a horizon line supporting various tightly drawn short lines; some vertical, some diagonal, and in the third box, variously drawn. Beneath these boxes Bartlett has written "grass straight, in wind, crushed." There is a correspondence, seemingly didactic, between the contents of the boxes and the captioning words below. Yet there is also an asymmetry between the equal squares and the line of language describing the three conditions of grass. Rather than write the word "grass" three times, Bartlett expects the viewer, who is a reader, to carry the idea forward. The only other marking on the page is the artist's notation and signature at lower right: "for Rhapsody Bartlett 75." The vacant expanse of the page, which becomes a charged void, is given over to the forces that might affect the way grass appears.

An undertaking as ambitious as *Rhapsody* could only cohere if it was premised upon an internal structure. And as the sketches detail, Bartlett carefully planned certain plates. Ink on paper tree sketches precisely prefigure plates in the finished composition (fig. 3), as do certain house drawings (fig. 4). Such preparatory work adds another layer to the already meticulous and methodical labor associated with the making of *Rhapsody*. Some sketches, however, are more notational and convey an almost diaristic approach. "Mt 3 views / blk / diff directions dots" begins one page, as the artist outlines her observations, fantasies and research findings concerning mountains (fig. 5). One line in a tightly packed cluster reads, "up mt / inside mt, tunnel, cave, Lascaux," and another, in the center of the page notes, "mt attached / to other mts / to earth." In Bartlett's thinking there is often a chain reaction, as one motif triggers association to another, offering a cascade of imagery. This page of mountain notes surveys a profusion of alpine possibilities, unlike the sparse page pondering three conditions of grass.

Fig. 3. *Study for Rhapsody,* 1976, pen on paper, 13 3/4 x 18 inches

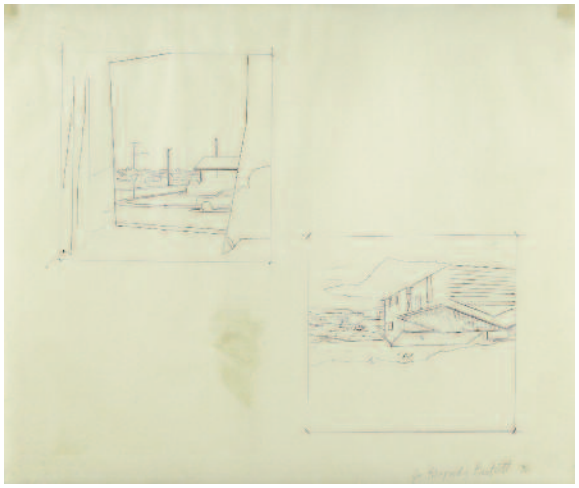

Fig. 4. *Study for Rhapsody,* 1976, pen on paper, 13 3/4 x 16 1/2 inches

By comparing these specimen pages, one glimpses the breadth of Bartlett's imagination which is tightly controlled and concisely articulated, yet also meandering and enumerative, inclusive and tentative, willing to wager transitory thoughts: "50 of each," "leaves," she has written, and along the lower right, in capital letters, "AIRBRUSH," proposing an option that the artist never engaged.

By comparing these divergent sketches, one gains insight into Bartlett's creative enterprise that has unfolded over four decades and has served as a bridge between abstract expressionist, minimalist and new expressionist tendencies. Indeed, a sampling of the sketches—encompassing the purely pictorial, spare visual poetry, and penned notations that have an almost gestural velocity—evidences that Bartlett never wanted to privilege one way of thinking or perceiving. By relying upon the unit of the plate, she is able to sequester each tendency while bringing them into proximity. Her monumental work clearly elucidates her conviction that painting should engage plurality—both figuratively and in material terms. In some large commission work, for example, Bartlett conjoined her customary grids of steel plates with conventionally painted canvases. *Swimmers Atlanta* (1978) revealed how the plates make a link between the ideal, classical space of painting on canvas and the architecture that physically contextualizes the work. In other similarly large works, such as *Atlantic Ocean* (fig. 6) and *Pacific Ocean* (fig. 7) (1984), Bartlett reiterated this distinction, juxtaposing plates with canvas to signal the postmodern condition of contingency and inclusiveness. Bartlett has always been an artist who has incorporated opposites, preferring to use all available vocabularies and strategies, rather than limit herself. Her most recent monumental composition *Song* (2007), with a title that chimes with *Rhapsody,* unfolds across a fractured grid and relies upon the basic unit of the black dot to articulate a countless range of impulse. In this dot which is incessantly repeated there seems to be a distillation, perhaps a reduction, of painting to its most basic unit. The brush is used telegraphically to

Fig. 5. *Study for Rhapsody,* 1975, pen on graph paper, 11 x 8 1/4 inches

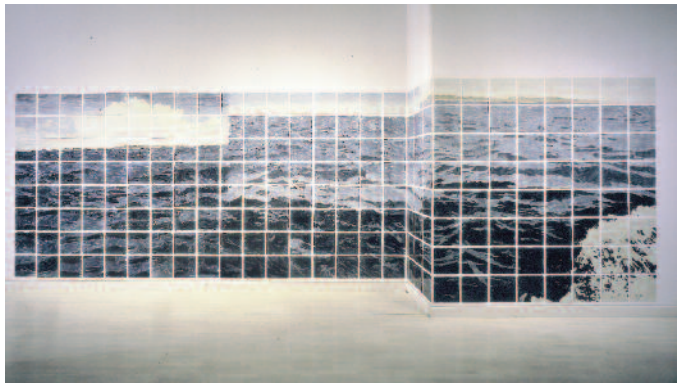

Fig. 6. *Atlantic Ocean,* 1984, enamel over silkscreen grid on baked enamel steel plates, 103 x 363 inches

convey a syntax of shape and form, pattern and density.

Despite the manifestly different character that distinguishes *Song* from *Rhapsody,* the new work is anchored by a similar conceptual logic, which for Bartlett has a linguistic dimension. In a statement written for the Whitney Museum's 1978 exhibition *New Image Painting,* Bartlett noted: "The gridded steel plates allow me to approach painting in a very methodical manner, where each thought can be seen as if it were a clause. The white spaces between the plates act as punctuation—they function like the space between words and sentences, dividing one unit from another."[2]

Bartlett's notion that the whiteness of the wall might serve as punctuation, giving the work visual cadence, not only affirms a poetic framework but also calls attention to the wall itself, forcing painting into a relationship with the space of display, in the manner of installation art. In its various installations dating from the 1970s and also from more recent exhibitions *Rhapsody* inevitably wrapped around various walls, breaking "whenever necessary to turn a corner," as one reviewer recently observed.[3] So too does *Song* which spans 97 feet when installed, conform to the contours and dimensions of the room. Bartlett has always thought of her work in this dimensional manner, demanding of painting that it take narrative leaps that are figurative and associative, while operating in real space to activate and affect physical presence. Her choice of the plate as a support for paint conveys this inclination, the need to straddle genres and to resist being absorbed into existing painting categories and contexts.

Indeed, Bartlett's work stands apart, often subtly, from the various movements to which she is often compared. If her incessant use of the grid aligns her with the minimalism of Sol LeWitt and Carl Andre, her need for narrative content curtails easy affiliation. And while she is often associated to the artists with whom she attended graduate school at Yale in the early 1960s (such as Chuck Close, Janet Fish and Michael Craig-Martin) and the artists of the Paula

Fig. 7. *Pacific Ocean,* 1984, oil on canvas, 90 x 360 inches

Cooper Gallery with whom she exhibited since the early 1970s (Elizabeth Murray, Joel Shapiro, Jonathan Borofsky), all of these references merely elucidate her milieu rather than determine her artistic identity—which as one considers the diversity of her creative arc, appears increasingly singular.

Speaking of Bartlett's evolution throughout the 1970s, and her use of the plate as a structuring device, Elizabeth Murray realized that it allowed Bartlett to operate apart from traditional painting, minimalism and conceptualism: "You had figured out a way to paint and not paint."[4] Bartlett's work was very much about painting, yet by breaking it into component parts she parsed the drama of making into a practice of doing, transferring action into activity. A work like *Rhapsody* is not only a summation of Bartlett's aspirations for painting (embattled as it was in the mid-1970s), but equally serves as a status report of painting's viability in an era of intense conceptual questioning at the threshold where modernism joins post-modernism.

Near the centre of *Rhapsody* a brushy section abuts a grid of monochromatic plates. The stark juxtaposition contrasts an intuitive, freely flowing brush with surfaces that seem automatic and rote. Drips of viscous paint run down from the lilting stokes in the gesturally painted plates, while in the monochromatic section a spectral progression from wan yellow to black occurs, evidencing scant trace of the brush. By bringing such disparate painting vocabularies into contact on the equivalent surface of her plates, Bartlett was licensing herself to inhabit, chameleon-like, a replete range of painterly possibilities. In the uniformly silkscreened grid of her plates, everything was feasible.

"A grid can organize anything,"[5] Bartlett recently remarked, and in *Song* she sets out to define the grid as a rhythmic, uneven proposition. Unlike the regularity of her customary one foot square plates, *Song* consists of 20 sections of nine plates. Each section contains three small (12 x 12 inches), three medium (18 x 18 inches), and three large (24 x 24 inches) plates. *Song* begins with a small circle comprised of black dots posed centrally within a grid of beige dots. On the plate below, the circle increases in size, and in the third plate the black circle is a tightly woven grid that spans the four edges of the plate. As adjacent plates increase in size, Bartlett magnifies the circle, the dots increasing in size. For each set of three plates, she uses a slightly larger brush. This routine of progressive magnification continues within each of the 20 sections, sometimes remaining consistent within a nine plate section, and sometimes exploring variations and deviations from the initial motif. As quickly as Bartlett sets up and accepts a system she interrupts and contradicts it, thwarting expectation. Circles, crescents, squares, hemispheres, rectangles and dot patterns comprise the content of *Song,* which has a linear

Fig. 8. Installation view showing Jennifer Bartlett's *Nine Points,* 1973-74, and other Nine Point pieces, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, 1974

horizon running along its top edge, but a jagged, descending and ascending rhythm along the lower edge.

By using clusters of nine plates Bartlett consciously recalls her *Nine-Point Pieces* (fig. 8) from 1973-74, seminal works that first allowed her to conceive a motif on a large scale, extending the impulse of one plate to others or tiling a continuous image across all nine plates. Bartlett here formulated her notion of monumentality, introducing a painted work into a room in order to alter its architecture, and she achieved it by using small parts to create a much larger whole. This strategy was quite different from other artists' understanding of the monumental painting. Various abstract expressionist painters endeavored to amplify the impact of their work, aspiring to monumental impact. Clyfford Still, for example, ideally envisioned his canvases installed in dedicated rooms, in cycles that linked single paintings, forging a continuum. And Robert Motherwell, after creating some very large canvases, explored monumentality through the intimate format of rice paper ink drawings. For his well-known *Lyric Suite* (1965), which was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 1969, Motherwell obtained 1000 sheets of Japanese paper and, in keeping with his gestural ethos, painted them "without interruption ...without revisions or additions upon critical reflection or judgment."[6] The project was dramatically cut short at about 600 when Motherwell's close friend David Smith died, imbuing the works with an aura of existential urgency, linking each gesture to a moment in time. As a vast multi-part work, the *Lyric Suite,* named for an Alban Berg string quartet, is less about monumentality, and more about discrete individual components.

Song, by contrast, valorizes the connections between each plate, elaborating how the three registers of the image structurally fit together to create an overarching rhythm. If *Rhapsody* represented Bartlett's aspiration to make "a painting that wouldn't have edges, that would start and stop, change tenses and gears at will,"[7] then *Song* depicts a more integrated and coherent version of this changeable visual journey. Without explicit subject matter and floating free of narrative, *Song* appears to be about structure and process, it's methodically painted beige and black dots describing regimentation while equally, incongruously conveying a kind of random freedom. In *Song* an eventual image emerges—grains of sand, phases of the moon, Constructivist planes colliding—as the monumental work emerges to be the valorization of detail, punctuation within a system that reads like stanzas of a long poem.

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NOTES

1. For a vivid account of *Rhapsody* see Calvin Tomkins, "Drawing and Painting," *Jennifer Bartlett* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985), 21ff.
2. Jennifer Bartlett, statement, in Richard Marshall, *New Image Painting* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1978), 20.
3. *Rhapsody* was recently installed at the Addison Gallery of American Art in the exhibition *Jennifer Bartlett: Early Plate Work.* For insight about the work's installation see Vincent Katz, "Bartlett Shows Her Colors," *Art in America* (January 2007): 109.
4. Elizabeth Murray, "Jennifer Bartlett," *BOMB Magazine* 93 (Fall 2005): 59.
5. Conversation with the author, New York, October 17, 2007.
6. Robert Motherwell, "Addenda to the Museum of Modern Art Lyric Suite Questionnaire—from Memory with Possible Chronological Slips (Fall 1969)," *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell,* ed., Stephanie Terenzio (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992): 171-72.
7. See note 4 above.