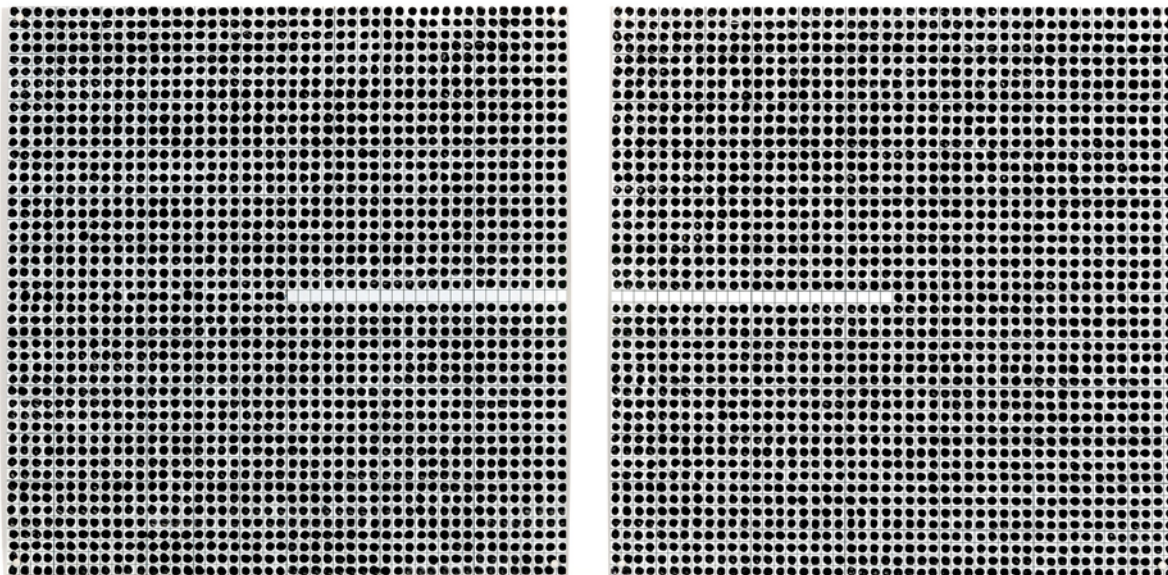


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ART REVIEW | LONG ISLAND

Grids and Steel Spanning Great Divides



Works by Jennifer Bartlett at the Parrish Art Museum exhibition include “One Foot Line” (1974). *Gift of Paul F. Walter*

A Review of ‘Jennifer Bartlett: History of the Universe — Works 1970-2011’ in Water Mill

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER
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The grid was one of the reigning motifs of 20th-century American art, but few artists have treated it with as much versatility as Jennifer Bartlett. Ms. Bartlett came of age in the '70s, following minimalist artists for whom the grid was a kind of talisman, a model of mathematical consistency that cut through the existential drips and heroic angst of the Abstract Expressionists. Ms. Bartlett added some things that made the grid pleasingly weird, however, several of which are apparent in the 26 works in the grandly titled “Jennifer Bartlett: History of the Universe — Works 1970-2011” at the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill. (“History of the Universe” is also the title of Ms. Bartlett’s autobiographical novel, published in 1985.)

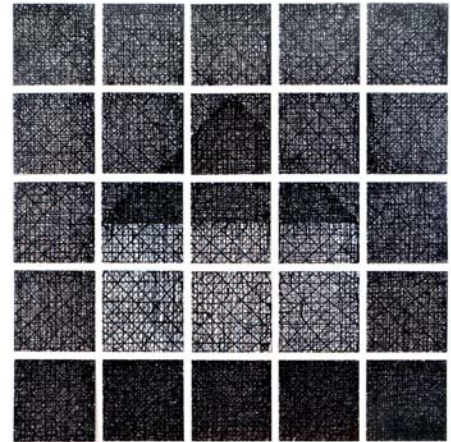
The show, put together by Klaus Ottmann, a curator at the Phillips Collection in Washington, starts off with a modest black-and-white diptych called “One Foot Line” (1974). This work features her signature: painting with enamel on a one-foot-square steel plate inspired by New York subway signs. Ms. Bartlett silk-screened a pale-gray, quarter-inch grid onto the plate and painted inside the tiny squares. The effect is like that of an industrially created object, but with the delicate touch of the artist’s hand, in the form of painted black dots.

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Ms. Bartlett took this idiom and expanded it. “237 Lafayette Street” (1978) consists of 27 steel plates arranged in a grid — a grid of silk-screened and painted grids, in other words — that also includes a simple red house with a pitched roof that repeats three times in the work.

The house, rendered as a banal, abstract pictogram, became a recurring form for Bartlett: a geometric box that is universal and domestic; a subject favored by feminist artists during the women’s movement, and yet not too far from the minimalist cube, with its cool, cerebral overtones. Two later works, “House: Lines, Black” and “House: Lines, White,” both from 1998, have the house at the center of a grid, anchoring the work in the midst of skeins of black-and-white enamel lines, a little like a Baroque Agnes Martin painting.



“House: Lines, Black” (1998)
Collection of Ron Shamask



“Amagansett Diptych #1” (2007-8), oil on two canvases, *Promised gift of Michael Forman and Jennifer Rice*

Sometimes the steel-plate works include text, in the form of capital letters painted with dots, in the individual grid squares. The text wraps around the plates, breaking up the words and reminding one of works by artists like Jenny Holzer or Christopher Wool, who employ similar techniques. The text in “Twins” (2005-6) is mirrored, so that the words on the right-hand side of the work appear in backward letters. It also references her close relationship with the painter Elizabeth Murray, who died in 2007. In the single-plate work “The Exact Spot” (2004), the text is created out of light-colored dots against a deep blue ground that read almost like LED lights emitting a dark message: “This is the exact spot where those who will live meet those who will die.”

In 2006, and again in 2011, the Museum of Modern Art displayed Ms. Bartlett’s magnum



opus, “Rhapsody” (1975-76), a massive work consisting of 987 steel plates which is also an important piece of art history: When it was first shown in Paula Cooper’s gallery in SoHo, it filled the entire space and was painted with the 25 colors then available in Testors enamel. (Having the colors in your work determined for you by a paint manufacturer rather than mixing them to your personal preference was a gesture favored by many artists in the 20th century.)



“Pool” (1983), oil on three canvases, *Courtesy of Locks Gallery, Philadelphia*

Closest to the epic scale of “Rhapsody” here is “Atlantic Ocean” (1984), which is over 8 feet high and 30 feet long, and made up of dozens of steel plates painted with blue and white enamel depicting a fairly naturalistic view of the ocean, what one might observe on a nearby beach. (Ms. Bartlett divides her time between Brooklyn and a cottage in Amagansett; a museum news release also points out that she painted the first 100 plates of “Rhapsody” while house-sitting in Southampton.)

The exhibition, organized by the Parrish and seen last year at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, also includes a selection of Ms. Bartlett’s paintings on canvas, which are interesting, but often less so than the steel-plate works. They are best when she is toying with the grid, as in “Pool” (1983), which consists of three canvases showing different views of a rectangular pool with gridded tiles, in a garden in France watched over by a small, cherubic statuette. Swirls of red, presumably flowers or petals or leaves that have fallen into the pool, recall Monet’s “Water Lilies,” but they also look like blood, suggesting creepy narratives like “The Great Gatsby” or François Ozon’s film “Swimming Pool” (2003), in which pools become the scene of a crime.

Like Fairfield Porter, another artist who spent considerable time on the East End of Long Island, Ms. Bartlett has chafed at the restrictions imposed by an art world that has at times wanted artists to paint exclusively in an abstract or a figurative manner. Her paintings from the last decade resolve this conundrum rather nicely, while still employing the grid.

“No One Is Home” and “Something Is Wrong,” both from 2005 to 2006, include large sections of sky in which the clouds are like scrawled abstractions. Grids have been applied over the compositions with thinned-out paint. The grids here look simple and effortless, as if they had been

drawn with magic marker. (They were actually made with a graining brush with several brushes on a handle, a tool used for architectural decoration, like creating faux wood grain.) Meanwhile, “Amagansett Diptych #1” (2007-8) features two slightly different views of the seashore overlaid with grids. This work blurs the boundary between landscape and abstraction, as painters from J.M.W. Turner to Milton Avery have done.

While Ms. Bartlett’s steel-plate works, which reinvigorated the practice of painting when it was under siege during the postconceptual era, remain the touchstone of her career, there is a lightness and freshness to these later canvases. They have been liberated from the rule-based processes of the ‘60s and ‘70s, and from the rigid structure of the one-foot steel plate. The grid is still there functioning. But as the exhibition’s title suggests, Ms. Bartlett’s recent paintings, even with their grids, offer an expanded version of the history of the universe according to art.

*“Jennifer Bartlett: History of the Universe — Works 1970-2011”
through July 13 at the Parrish Art Museum
279 Montauk Highway, Water Mill, NY.
Information: (631) 283-2118; parrishart.org.*

