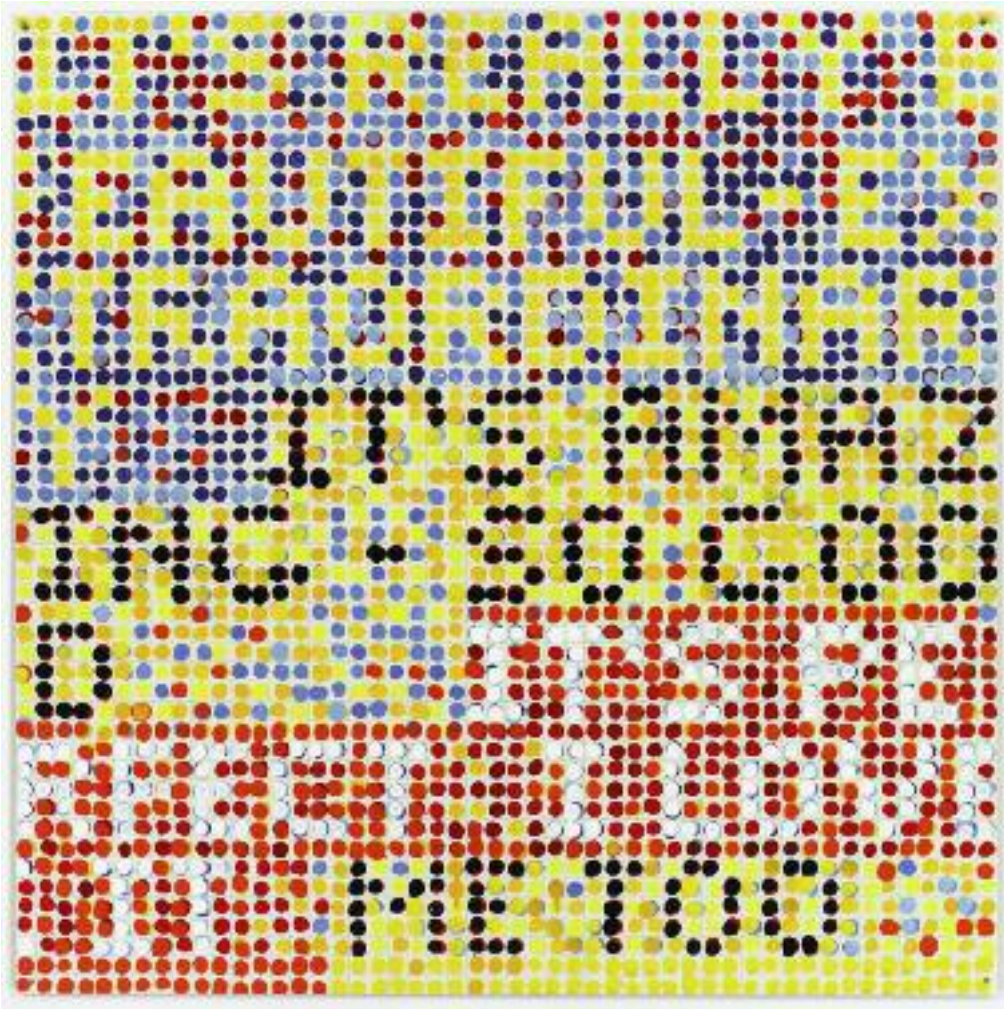
# JENNIFER BARTLETT

Painting The Language Of Nature And Painting

October 6–November 11, 2006

Essay by Donald Kuspit



**It's Really Beautiful**, 2003
enamel over silkscreen grid on baked enamel, steel plate
50 x 50 centimeters (19.7 x 19.7 inches)

# Jennifer Bartlett: Painting The Language Of Nature And Painting

Donald Kuspit

"The belief system of the old language of painting had collapsed," declared Joseph Kosuth, one of the founding figures of Conceptualism or Idea Art. This supposedly happened in the sixties, when Conceptualism, among other anti-painting movements, appeared on the scene. It is why Kosuth "chose language for the 'material' of my work because it seemed to be the only possibility with the potential for being a neutral non-material."(1) (Painting of course died before the sixties. It was stabbed to death, the way Brutus stabbed Caesar, by Marcel Duchamp's anti-painting *Tu'm*, 1918, and buried alive in Alexander Rodchenko's *Last Paintings*, 1921. Painting has been mourning for itself ever since, as some critics think, although it is not clear that its corpse has begun to decompose.)

So what are we to make of Jennifer Bartlett's new works, which use both the old language of painting and the neutral non-material of language? Is she trying to renew painting, suggesting that it still has something to say that can be said in no other language? Is her work part of the post-Conceptual resurgence of painting announced by the "New Painting" exhibition held in London in 1981? Or does she intend to remind us that language is not a neutral non-material, however neutral it seems, for it communicates concepts, which are an intellectual material, and always slippery – elusive even in everyday use, which assumes understanding of them? If one didn't, how is one to get on with the everyday business of life – life in the country, on the seashore – which is what Bartlett's works deal with.

In 1985 Kay Larson described Bartlett as "one of conceptualism's most willing survivors, an artist to be looked to for painting's future."(2) Has that future arrived in Bartlett's new works, in which both paint and language, that is, words, are on conspicuous display? Both are presented with an insistence and vigor that show that painting is not only alive and well but that words are always saturated with

meaning, however ordinary and simple (everyday) the words, and however ordinary and simple – conceptually transparent – their meaning seems. In Bartlett's new works paint materializes words and words qualify painting, refreshing the meaning of both. If painting's post-conceptual and post-(modernist) painting future means the reconciliation of irreconcilable painting and language, more particularly, painted images and painted words--establishing dialectical complementarity between the visual and verbal, and with that overcoming their difference – then one future has certainly arrived in Bartlett's new word paintings. The conflict between the verbal and the visual can be traced back to Plato, who regarded language as the medium of ideas and visual art as the realm of illusion, and as such at the furthest remove from pure ideas (I am thinking of the divided line metaphor in the Republic), and intensified with Lessing's essay on the Laocoon. He argued that they are incommensurate ways of representing and thus conceptualizing the same thing, and have different aesthetic effects. The problem of their supposedly inherent difference – between literary narration and perceptually pure art, as Clement Greenberg famously put it (art with human interest, and as such for life's sake vs. art with purely aesthetic interest, and thus for art's sake, as he also said) – has been with us ever since. Has Bartlett solved it?

The visual is emotionally primary, the verbal is emotionally secondary – we dream in images, and the words with which we remember them hardly do them justice, as Freud pointed out – but Bartlett gives them a peculiar parity. This is not only because she incorporates words into her paintings, making them part of the representation and thus a kind of concrete thinking about it, as well as a way of communicating about it in ordinary language. Words are usually comments about pictures, coming at it from the outside, as it were – one picture is proverbially worth a thousand words, suggesting that words are dispensable – but Bartlett's words are an indispensable part of her picture. They refer to the scene pictured directly, often giving us information that is not readily available in it, for example, that *The Same Person* (owns both boats) in the 2005-2006 work with that title or that (the man who left the hammock) *Smokes* in the 2006 work of that title. No person is visible in either work, but the offstage presence gives the scene more presence, and meaning. So does the offhand words, although they are present on stage. The words always "inform" the scene, especially when they raise questions about some aspect of it, as in *Those Sticks* and *SHHH* both 2006, which suggests its peculiarly problematic character, making it more of an intellectual or conceptual challenge.

My point is that the language draws you further – "conceptually further," as it were – into the picture, making it more mysterious – and subtly incomprehensible – than it might otherwise seem. The words

make the scene puzzling, dare one say philosophically puzzling: each picture becomes a kind of Wittgensteinean language game. As Wittgenstein said, every language game is a life game – indicating that Bartlett's words, which turn the painting into a kind of narrative, add another dimension of life – a reflective dimension – to the intense life her handling gives it. Take the words away and we are left with romanticized landscapes – sort of hallucinated landscapes – some viewed from the distance, others seen close up, and all personally meaningful as Bartlett's powerful handling suggests. Her virtuoso gestures play the landscapes like a passionate Paganini.

Indeed, the paintings are abstract expressionist in all but name, and, as Kosuth said, "abstract expressionism attempted to push the physical stuff of [painting's] language to the edge, as thought the whole semantic infrastructure [of painting] was straining, trapped." Bartlett's paintings are forthrightly physical, making what Kosuth calls "the magical fictive world of [Bartlett's] painted reality" even more magical. She clearly doesn't feel trapped by physical painting--dare one say "animal expression," which is how Duchamp characterized it, in contrast to the "intellectual expression" he preferred (Bartlett's words make her paintings intellectual expressions, even though they're clearly not intellectual defenses against painting, as words were for Duchamp) – and her painterliness is exuberant, even euphoric, rather than strained. Bartlett seems intoxicated by painting – unembarrassedly Dionysian – suggesting that her words, whatever their ironical narrative function, are a nominal conceptual fig leave on her painterly fever and fury, a token residue of her conceptual heritage, a sort of old intellectual medal pinned on the heaving breast of her impassioned painterliness. The paint has its own ecstatic structure apart from the pictorial structure it informs, and the words stand out with deceptive innocence in the midst of its controlled violence. Indeed, I venture to say that Bartlett has become more of a painter than a conceptualist, however "conceptual" her paintings are. She has not only outlived her own conceptualism, whatever linguistic traces of it she leaves in her paintings, but has put it to "literary" use, suggesting that it was a way of framing words so that they became "picturesque."

The gesturally dynamic character of Bartlett's paintings, along with their containment in the modernist icon of the Suprematist square as well as the brilliant fusion of "dripping" gesture and geometrical grid evident in such works as *SHHH* and *Something is Wrong*, 2005-2006 (it's raining?) – a deceptively simple solution to the familiar modernist problem of integrating gesture and geometry – and also their integration of luminous and ominous colors, stretch the contradiction between the language of modern painting and the "language" of conceptual art to the ironical limit. Aggravating the inherent tension

between them – it seems self-evident in *These Ducks*, 2006, where the gestural turbulence and formlessness on the bottom is sharply at odds with the more formal shapes of the intelligible words above, although they share the same luminous whiteness – she nonetheless establishes them in a paradoxically coherent visual whole.

In so doing, she creates what might be called a postmodern visual poetry. The proto-Conceptualist Johns ironically incorporated ordinary words in his paintings; Bartlett follows him in using them as titles. Earlier Miro did so with greater flair, as though the words were unfolding flowers. In their different ways, both tried to integrate poetry and painting. Bartlett's *The Jar*, 2006, a "translation" of a famous poem by Wallace Stevens, does so much more convincingly. Bartlett's painting gives the traditional idea *ut pictura poesis* contemporary credibility. Exceptional poetry and painting resonate with archetypal and adventurous rhythm. Stevens's poem and Bartlett's painting have a similar rhythmic inevitability and power. Stevens was often inspired by painting, as poets in the past have been, for example Baudelaire and Apollinaire, and painters have often been inspired by poems, for example Dürer and Giorgione, indicating that Bartlett is following tradition in her synthesis of poetry and painting.

But her visual rendering of Stevens's poem changes it radically. His taut sliver of a poem is a restrained reflection on the jar and its transformative effect on the surrounding nature. Bartlett dramatically "expands" the short poem, giving it painterly grandness – adding painterly fury to its solemn sound. She brings out the exciting physicality of the jar – shows its power to excite the landscape with its stillness, bring out the dynamic of the landscape so that it becomes cosmic, a sort of big bang of nature at the moment of its creation. Bartlett's work is a tour de force of painting and creative translation, and boldly states her intention--the creation of abstract poetry. Her work reminds us that both linguistic and visual representation are abstract, which is paradoxically why we experience them as magically real. Bartlett's visual poetry rescues the prosaic language games of Idea Art from the philosophical and visual banality and triviality that have become their fate, reminding us that it was boring and aborted poetry from the start. Ideas without interpretive passion inevitably are.

One should finally note that the so-called death of painting coincides with the so-called death of nature, except that the latter is more likely to happen than the former. If two weak planks – planks that seem problematic – make one strong board, then by uniting nature and painting, which have become "conceptually" problematic, Bartlett strengthens both. In

her capable hands landscape painting once again becomes romantically credible, and painting once again seems "natural." In a sense, Bartlett re-mythologizes and re-primordializes nature, once again giving it inevitable and invincible presence, by investing it with the mythological primordiality of action painting. Painting at its most assertively and poetically physical gives new body and concreteness to nature, confirming that both are not hollow concepts. The paradox of Bartlett's painting is that because both nature and painting have become terminal concepts –"losing" languages – each can catalyze a fresh experience of the other. We live lonely nature through visceral paint and lonely paint through visceral nature in Bartlett's new works. Each becomes the medium through which the other struggles to acquire sublime meaning, suggesting that Bartlett's new pictures are desperately haunted fantasies of both.

Notes

1. Joseph Kosuth, "Painting Versus Art Versus Culture (Or, Why You Can Paint If You Want To, But It Probably Won't Matter)," *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 90-91.

2. Kay Larson, "Making Sense of Sensuality," *New York Magazine*, April 29, 1985, p. 88.

DONALD KUSPIT is an art critic and a professor of art history and philosophy at the State University of New York at Stony Brook and A.D. White professor at large at Cornell University. He is a contributing editor at *Artforum*, *Sculpture*,and *New Art Examiner* magazines, the editor of *Art Criticism*, and the editor of a series on American Art and Art Criticism for Cambridge University Press. Kuspit has written more than twenty books, including *The End of Art* (2004); *Redeeming Art: Critical Reveries* (2000); *Idiosyncratic Identities: Artists at the End of the Avant-Garde* (1996); *Daniel Brush: Gold without Boundaries* (with Ralph Esmerian and David Bennett, 1998); *Reflections of Nature: Paintings by Joseph Raffael* (with Amei Wallace, 1998); and *Signs of Psyche in Modern and Postmodern Art* (1994). His new book, *A Critical History of 20th-Century Art*, is being serially published in *Artnet Magazine*.