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ORGANIZING AN ORGANIZERS LIFE

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS | JUNE 20, 2013



Jennifer Bartlett likes to pose questions, then follow them to logical — or occasionally illogical — conclusions.

In the late 1960s, when many conceptual artists were using graph paper to chart their ideas, Ms. Bartlett wondered if she could make hard graph paper that could be wiped clean and revised, and that would resist coffee stains and cigarette ashes. Inspired by subway signs, she fabricated 12-inch-square steel plates coated with baked white enamel and silkscreened with a pale grid on which she could paint with Testor enamels. (Joel Shapiro, her neighbor in the tight group of artists colonizing SoHo then, lent her \$500 to make the first batch.)

Those plates became the building blocks of Ms. Bartlett's signature paintings that she configures in expandable grids. Best-known is her 987-plate installation, "Rhapsody," first shown at the Paula Cooper Gallery in 1976. The piece addressed the question of what options are available in modern painting and playfully categorized the spectrum of possibilities in sections devoted to color, geometric shapes, types of line and the basic motifs of house, tree, mountain and sea.

"'Rhapsody' was absolutely groundbreaking and new, incorporating the space itself by wrapping painting around walls and corners," said Klaus Ottmann, a curator at the Phillips Collection in Washington. The piece received significant critical acclaim, making Ms. Bartlett one of the most successful artists in the 1970s, Mr. Ottmann said. "Rhapsody" was eventually acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, and was shown in the atrium in 2006 and again in 2011.

"Jennifer charted a path for younger artists, especially women artists," he said, "with the idea of making really monumentally sized installations with painting."

Mr. Ottmann is putting together Ms. Bartlett's first American museum retrospective, "Jennifer Bartlett: History of the Universe — Works 1970-2011," which is to open at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia on Thursday; it will travel in April to the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill on Long Island, which organized the show.

"History of the Universe" is also the title of Ms. Bartlett's autobiographical novel, published in 1985. Composing a big picture in a parallel manner to "Rhapsody," her memories and fictions drift into stream-of-consciousness inventories like: "The skin on the soles of my feet is rough, I am inclined to alcohol, anxiety, nervous stomach, moods, tentative optimism and inflammatory infections. I have been analyzed unsuccessfully though we both tried; the same is true of marriage."

Mr. Ottmann said he felt that the novel echoes how freely Ms. Bartlett can shift gears between abstraction and representation, control and exuberance, grids of steel plates and large-scale canvases — often diptychs that juxtapose two slightly different perspectives of the same scene and always painted with layers of grids that seem to embed the imagery in a web.

“The grid is not an aesthetic thing, really” said Ms. Bartlett, sitting in her expansive studio and home in Brooklyn, where she has designed every element, from the minimalist furniture to the organic tableware to the fanciful garden framed by a glass wall in her downstairs workspace. “It’s a method of organization. I like to organize things. Anything.”

She compares painting grids across her canvases, done with a multiheaded graining brush, to making a sandwich with several pieces of bread. “I think of bringing the image out, pushing it down, bringing it out, pushing it down,” she said.

Lately, she has painted views of her garden, including a diptych with two oversize pink roses up against lush green foliage. “It was just two ideas of two,” she said, adding without elaboration, “The third one’s hidden.”

Terrie Sultan, the director of the Parrish, said: “Jennifer can be incredibly revealing when she wants to be, and she can be infuriatingly opaque. That really reads in her work, too, I think to her advantage. Some people are going to mistake these landscape pictures for being too pretty and not as conceptually rigorous as the early plate paintings and I think that would be a mistake. There’s a lot lurking underneath psychologically.”

That tension between bland and loaded feels particularly present in Ms. Bartlett’s paintings of a generic house, an image that has recurred in her work since 1970. Just a rectangle topped with a triangle — she likes that the simple geometric shapes are also a universal symbol. She has subjected it to a barrage of painting styles, color schemes and lighting conditions, with the house projecting moods from cheerful to melancholic to sinister.

“Jennifer presents a strange combination of super-rational and nonrational content direct from the unconscious,” said Wallace Shawn, the actor and playwright who has been her friend for decades. “She can paint an empty room or a house at night seen from the outside in a way that seems to expose the human soul or the strange irrational worms that are crawling underneath the surface. At other times, her work can have an explosive, happy quality, just with its rather obsessive mathematical side or the incredible sense of humor in her word paintings.”

Ms. Bartlett began creating paintings with phrases and stories in 2004, after a hospitalization when she wrote a lot because she couldn’t paint. The text runs the gamut from wry snippets of dialogue to a dream about Prince Charles bedecking her with jewels, all spelled out in dots on the gridded plates yielding buzzy, pixilated

images.

A 65-plate grid called “Twins” (2005-6) is a tribute to Ms. Bartlett’s close friendship with the painter Elizabeth Murray, who died in 2007. The center plates juxtapose Ms. Murray’s signature cup-and-saucer image with Ms. Bartlett’s familiar house from multiple vantage points, while the flanking text is an imagined conversation between them about classic stories that confuse good and evil twins.

Another show, on view through Saturday in Philadelphia at Locks Gallery, which represents her, is “Jennifer Bartlett: Chaos Theory (1971-2013),” devoted to her abstract dot paintings based on systems of counting and color variations. “I always like when I postulate something and I don’t know what it will look like,” Ms. Bartlett said. “It’s boring when I know.”

In one of her earliest pieces, “Squaring: 2; 4; 16; 256; 65,536,” she used black dots on her square plates to map the results of multiplying each of the numbers by itself — the last equation of 256-by-256 taking 29 plates to illustrate. “I was interested in how quickly the number got big.”

Her 372-plate installation, “Recitative,” at the Pace Gallery in New York in 2011, showed her ability to riff endlessly and operatically on a theme, introducing each of the primary and secondary colors and playing them out in different combinations and sizes using dots, squiggles, diagonals, plaids, stripes, cross-hatches and loose brush strokes. At the end, she undermined the right-angled structure of the composition with a completely free-form black line painted across 24 plates scattered on the wall, trailing off like an unfinished sentence.

Her penchant for breaking the systems she has created drove her former dealer Paula Cooper crazy, according to Ms. Bartlett. “She was looking for Sol LeWitt, and this is not the place to find him,” she said of the artist whose wall drawings are executed by others based on his precise set of rules and whose approach influenced Ms. Bartlett when she moved to New York after getting her masters in painting at Yale in 1965. “I would explain something, and by the time I had explained it, I had totally contradicted it.”

She shrugged, and added, “That’s O.K. with me.”