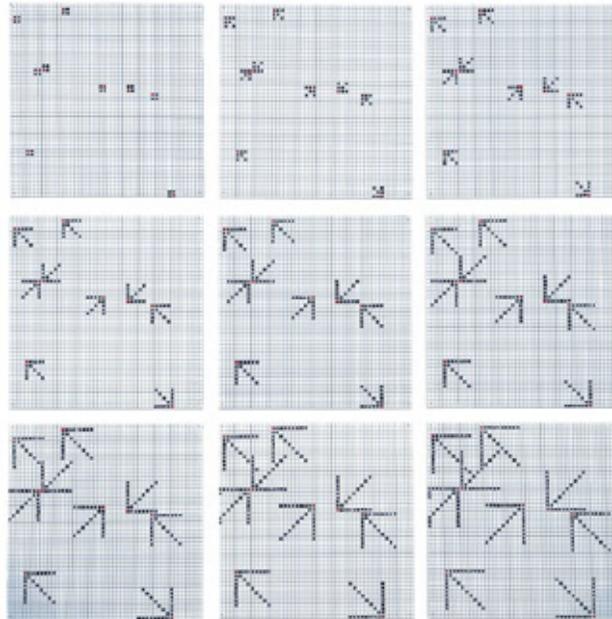


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DOT DELIRIUM

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“When in doubt, dot,” Jennifer Bartlett has said, and so, as though to keep herself from doubting -- her creativity? herself? -- she obsessively dots, creating vivid grids of color dots. Sometimes grids within grids, as in *Random Sequence*, *Random Changing Space* and *Color Titles with Samples* (the subtitles of a stunning series of Untitled works from 1969).

That was for starters. Outdoing herself, Bartlett made *2,304 Colors and Lines (Set B)* in 1970, *Binary Combinations* and *Series XVIII (Grids)* in 1971, *Color Index I* in 1974, *Color Index II* and *Color Index III*, *Mixing* in 1975, with many equally ingenious works along the way. And, most stunningly and climactically, the justifiably famous *Rhapsody* of 1975-76, in which images of mountains and trees -- landscape -- form. Most are composed of dots, some seem like spontaneous sketches. There are schematic, abstract images, as flat as the surface, resembling inorganic signifiers, and descriptively vivid images, as though Bartlett were eager to bring out the life in nature rather than its structure, often complexly geometric.

There's nature here but also ruthless abstraction, the “romantic” and the “classical” side by side, each irreducible in itself, but both reducible to dots and, sometimes, gestures -- but then the “natural” gestures are often inscribed in a field of dots, like leaves carefully pressed on a page, preserving them forever, ghostly, crystalline presences that nonetheless have a peculiar energy. Careful, meticulous handling is a byword of Bartlett's technique: her color dots may have been arrived at by way of Seurat, as she says, but they are less fuzzy than his pointillist colors.

Instead of optical indefiniteness, with its evocative power -- Seurat was, after all, a Symbolist, in pursuit of expressive effect, as his black-and-white drawings make clear, however “scientific” he claimed to be (his dots

are pulsing feelings as well as vibrating sensations, psychically as well as physically expressive, and thus doubly energized) -- Bartlett is very definite. It is as though each dot was definitive of some Platonic dot, as though she was trying to make a perfectly shaped dot -- freehand, indeed, free-spirited, in contrast to the machine-made, mass-produced look of the grid. The dots are excited touches -- "touchy" and peculiarly "feely" -- however routine their application seems, and however much they conform to the grid, suggesting a certain "nonconformist" aspect to them, or at least a reluctant conformism. They don't exactly fit into the procrustean grid -- their colors radiate beyond it, lifting them out of it, overcoming its containment with their sensuous power -- however mathematically exact the grid they form.

Are Bartlett's works just another example of what Lawrence Alloway called "systemic painting," by which he meant paintings that, like a system, "form an organized whole, the parts of which demonstrate some regularities?" I don't think so. They're much more passionate -- emotionally intense, not just intellectually rigorous -- than the standard systemic-grid painting.

Their color gives them an irrational aura -- unconscious impact -- however much they're conspicuously cognitive. Also, the closeness -- density -- of the dots gives them an aura of intimacy. Irregular patterns are often embedded in the all-over grid system, giving them an unexpected intensity. Beethoven's 13th (ca. 1970) is a brilliant example, confirming the intricate musicality of Bartlett's works. Each color dot is in effect a note, much the way Kandinsky regarded his color gestures as Wagnerian notes, confirming that Bartlett's works are in the grand tradition of modernist musical painting, whatever the "poetic" natural motifs that appear in some of them, as they also did in Kandinsky's less "pure" and refined works. Series XIV (Map) (1971-72), a map of the United States -- shades of Jasper Johns -- is also eccentrically (and ironically) abstract. So is 2001 (1973), a geometrically rational construction that seems oddly irrational by reason of its complexity. Chicken Tracks (1973) makes the point clearly: Bartlett manages to pull witty irregularity out of diligent regularity -- find the bizarre in and through system, implying that it is not as neat and predictable as it should be.

A useful way of understanding Bartlett is via of Lucretius' De Rerum Natura, with its Democritean vision of nature as a system of atoms in motion. It was an enlightened scientific view intended to liberate people from animistic superstition, which sees every natural thing -- a mountain, a tree, a stream -- as inhabited by some deity who must be appeased and of whom one must be wary. But there's one catch to the system: Venus starts it. She sets the invisible atoms in motion: They "swerve" -- deviate ever so slightly from their neat paths -- to converge, forming molecules of visible matter, because of the goddess' power. Eros gets the cosmos going and keeps it moving, generates its complex togetherness. Eros keeps it from running down -- becoming an entropic grid.

The grid is entropy perfected: It is the supreme example of entropic emptiness -- "the emptiness of homogeneity," as Rudolf Arnheim calls it, that is, entropy at its most absolute. It is the climax of the "striving toward simplicity, which will promote orderliness and the lowering of the level of order," resulting in "tension reduction" and finally total stasis, with its superficial tranquility. The grid is a "minimal structure at a low level of order" indicating "release from the demands of organized experience." In Bartlett's work the "countertendency" to the homogeneous grid, with its dumb inevitability -- the inevitability of the death instinct -- is what Arnheim calls "the anabolic establishment of a structural theme, which introduces and maintains tension." This is the function of the quirky geometrical structures that inform Bartlett's grid, all the more so when they are constructed of hypnotic color dots. The hypnotically arranged color dots that inform Bartlett's grid give it the tension of "complex experience and invention" -- complex experience of nature re-invented as delirious art. Without them the grid lacks dynamic life -- natural life in artistic form.

There is a manic intensity to Bartlett's early works, a Dionysian release of intoxicating color, enlivening the deadening, minimalist grid that defends against it -- that puritanizes what is otherwise an ecstatic work. This frugal grid symbolizes creative inhibition and self-doubt, but the color bursts its chains -- without, however, totally disrupting it, suggesting that Bartlett needs its empty structure to feel intact, however much she fills it, sometimes to overflowing, with color, and with structures that seem to be wrestling with themselves, as their shifting shapes suggest. Before there was Seurat, there was van Gogh, as Bartlett acknowledges, and she never forgets him, and his projection of himself into nature, in search of erotic discharge through aggressive gesture. There are vestiges of van Gogh's painterliness in some of the "naturalistic" panels of Rhapsody.

Bartlett's gestures are much "cleaner" and sanitized -- less briskly tragic -- than those of van Gogh, but they derive from them, distill them into a kind of elixir of life. Even her blacks glow with life, not only because the light of California, where Bartlett grew up, is different than the light of Arles, where van Gogh lived, but because a century of the modernist pursuit of purity separates their work. Van Gogh's work is also much more impure because it is explicitly emotional -- aggressively erotic and erotically aggressive. He also had real religion, not only the religion of art. And he didn't bother to hide his suffering behind his élan, but rather fused them. He didn't need a grid to manage his conflicts, to create a semblance of self-containment.

I am happy to say that Bartlett has entered a van Gogh mode -- a disruptive and eruptive gesturalism, in which the grid itself becomes painterly, veiling the landscape in fluid color while continuing to frame it (but without Cartesian fastidiousness and analytic persuasiveness) -- in her recent landscape paintings, suggesting that she no longer feels she has to hide her inner life behind a glistening surface, nor tip her hat to artistic "advance." (Rhapsody is a post modern encyclopedia of modernist visual ideas, suggesting that the next "advance" is their integration.) While not as briskly tragic as van Gogh's gestures, her painterliness bristles with a similar morbid energy. But then, her early plate works are subliminally expressionistic, for color dot delirium is also overpowering, also subverts calm and steady perception, sensuously and finally erotically -- rather than morbidly -- overwhelming us.