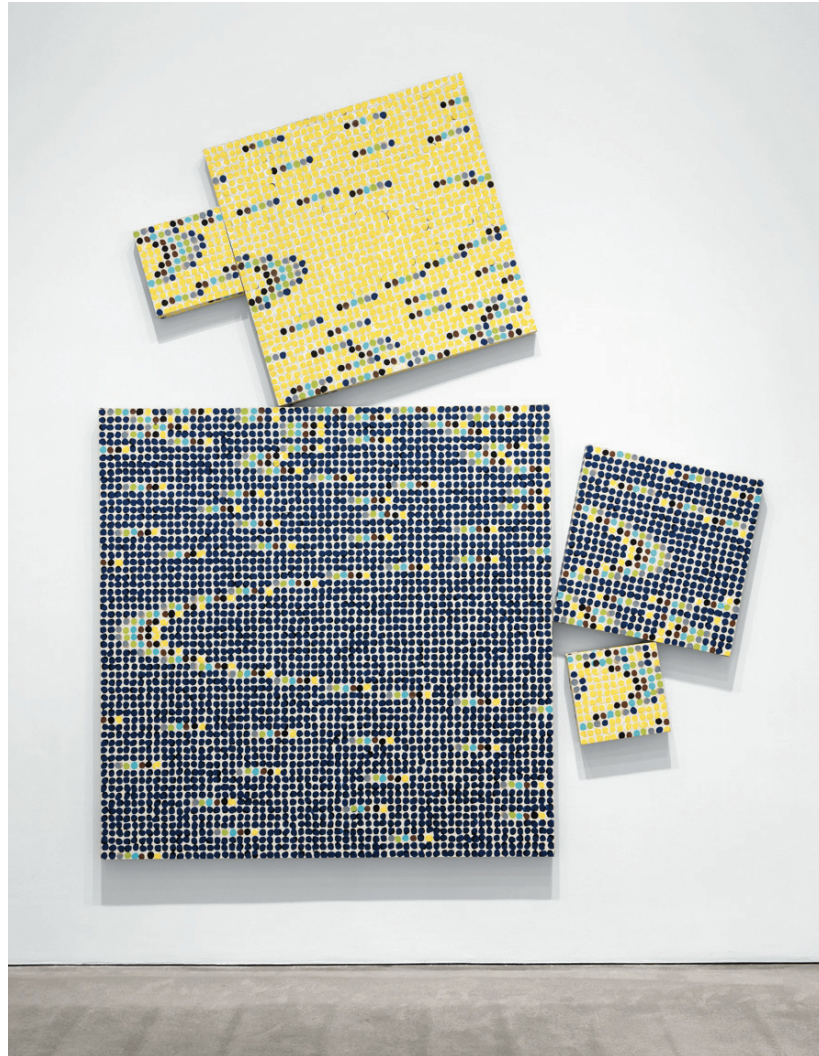


ARTFORUM



Jennifer Bartlett, *Leaking Systems*, 2001, oil on five canvases, overall 104 × 88"

Jennifer Bartlett | Paula Cooper Gallery

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The dichotomous tension between abstraction and representation is as important today as it was a century ago. The polarity is particularly rich in painting, where the construct tests relations between what we see, what we imagine, and what we know. That this domain has been the basis of Jennifer Bartlett's practice for more than half a century is in and of itself quite remarkable. Her exhibition here, presenting work made between 2000 and 2003, showed how adept she is at activating both the sensual and the cerebral, using formal vocabularies that emerged in her art during the late '70s and early '80s and that over time have proved to be inexhaustibly rich.

Two paintings stole the show. The first, *Red Yellow Blue*, 2000–2001, comprises a pair of canvases fitted together to create a dynamic, seven-sided rectilinear form. A grid gives structure to an eruption of radiant

circular motifs that percolate and bubble, rising to a full rolling boil and exploding in all their variety to create an effervescent field of exuberant energy. The pulsing, jewellike palimpsest, a visual perpetual-motion machine, beckons with its wild and colorful profusion. The second, *Leaking Systems*, 2001, made up of five canvases—four smaller squares, two dark blue and two yellow, orbiting a larger, stationary dark blue one—is animated with the suggestion of a counterclockwise force. Rhythmic, wavelike patterning meanders across their surfaces. The grid is evident once again, and the application of paint is straight-forward, confident. Close inspection is rewarded, but take a step back and Bartlett's matter-of-fact technique gives way to an illusionistic space whose linear loops and ghostly outlines suggest fluid motion in the material world—ripples in water, radar echoes, radio frequencies.

Squiggle, 2001–2002, was a three-part work consisting of a pair of canvases festooned with an arrangement of variegated crescent-like forms—one has a yellow ground; the other is blue. A red serpentine line, similarly patterned, stretches for almost eleven feet, connecting the two square paintings. The piece's graphic quirkiness is reminiscent of stylistic attitudes that blossomed in the '70s and '80s in association with extreme opticality, color intensity, and, sometimes, loads of whimsy, whether in the Pattern and Decoration group, Manhattan's East Village art scene, or even the Italian Memphis design school's postmodernism. Mixing decorative impulses with the stasis of the grid and the meditative spaces associated with Minimalism, Bartlett doesn't belong to any movement per se, because, one suspects, she mines, pairs, and hybridizes sensibilities that are considered antithetical.

Mapping played a big role in a number of canvases on display. Many bore explicit titles, such as *Serengeti, Tanzania* or *Reserva de Elefantes e des Bufalos, Mozambique*, both 2003, referencing famous elephant preserves in Africa. More than a dozen other paintings detailed places in Central Africa, Ethiopia, Guinea, Uganda, and elsewhere—locales the artist has never visited, as noted in the press release. Because they looked like facsimiles of real maps, they suggested a one-to-one correspondence between the region depicted and the work itself. At first glance, the images appeared to be more factual than faux, but they lacked legends. What we took to be symbols for roads and automobiles might just as well have been migratory animal paths. Many insignia were layered into the representations—some we imagine to be markers for gas stations or rest stops for the traveler. But many other motifs dropped into these cartographic pictures were distilled from an inventory of poetic iconographies that Bartlett introduced in her paintings decades ago.

References to wildlife preserves trigger thoughts about the ravages of climate change, mass extinction, ethnic conflict, migration, and poverty. From our contemporary perspective, the conceptual underbelly of Bartlett's map paintings is fed by global crises. Her early works reference the beauty and sustaining comfort of nature. These impulses don't seem to have changed—but the world has, in countless devastating ways.