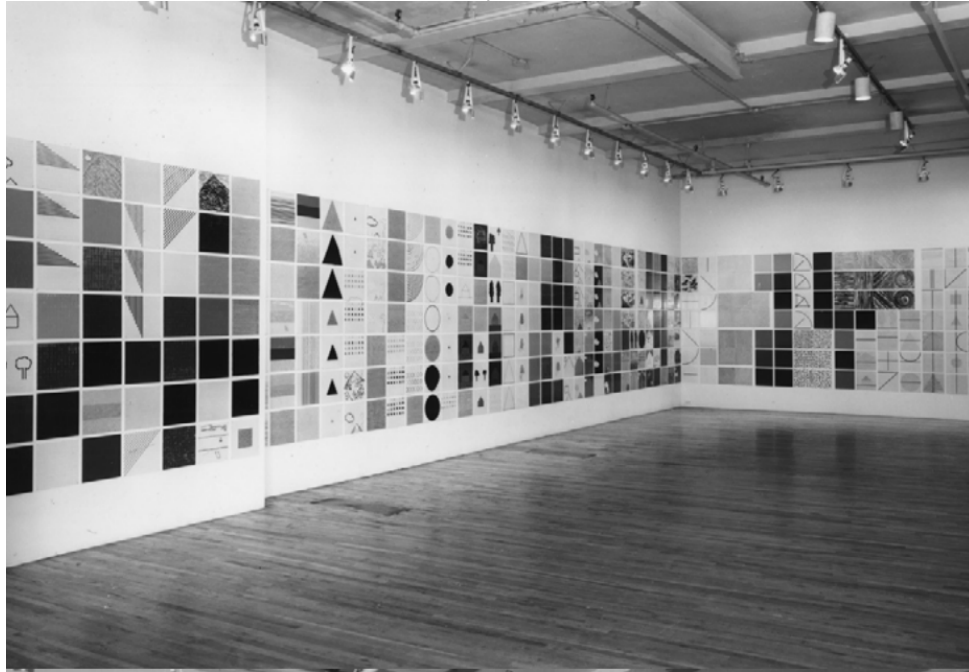


# The New York Times



**GALLERY VIEW**  
BY JOHN RUSSELL  
May 16, 1976

The most ambitious single work of new art that has come my way since I started to live in New York is "Rhapsody" by Jennifer Bartlett at the Paula Cooper Gallery.

Like most sweeping remarks, this one needs amplification. Even "single" can be contested, since "Rhapsody" actually consists of 988 separate paintings, each exactly one foot square. "Ambitious" could be contested also: on behalf, for instance, of Cleve Gray's murals at the Neuberger Museum in Purchase, N.Y. But Mr. Gray's paintings relate at one remove to the ancient European principle of the huge decorated hall in which a single theme is pressed to a monumental conclusion. That is where "new" comes in. "Rhapsody" is new in that it is motivated by problems that are peculiar to our time, by knowledge that is peculiar to our time, and by a quirky panoramic point of view that would have been unacceptable (or unworkable) as the title of "Rhapsody" was taken from Webster's Dictionary, by the way, and has no Hungarian connotations. It is a mix of autobiography and encyclopedia. As might be expected from someone who is writing a novel (already over 2000 pages long) called "The History of the Universe" it is a deepbreathing affair. (That is not the same as long-winded).

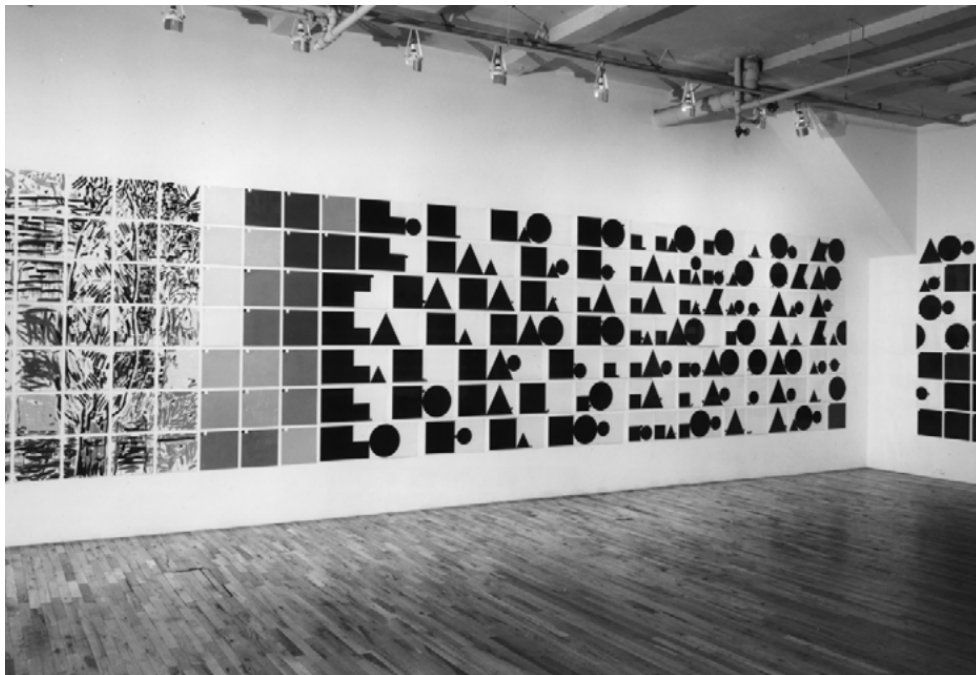
It is conversational in tone; and as happens in good conversation one idea thrives on another and three or four separate kinds of speculation can be kept going at once.

The ideas relate to the state of painting, to begin with. Miss Bartlett takes the most rudimentary marks that can be made on a flat surface, combines and re-Combines them, adds color or subtracts it, and goes on to sample all the possible ways in which paint can be applied. The gridded, enameled surface on which all this is done results from the search for a constant and unchangeable substance. (Three separate processes go

into its making: one for the fabrication of the square plate, another for the baking of the enamel, a third for the silkscreening of the underlying grid which is sometimes visible but more often not).

Much of the imagery in "Rhapsody" is "abstract," to the extent at any rate that the pictured demonstrations in Paul Klee's notebooks are abstract. As is inevitable in the case of an educated person who has been steeped in recent art since 1960, fleeting allusions to classic attitudes in modern art may be glimpsed: above all in the sections of "Rhapsody" which deal with the adventures of those standard formal units the triangle, the square and the circle. But where we might think of Auguste Herbin, for instance, or of the Catherine wheels of color which we owe to Robert and Sonia Delaunay, or even to the sumptuous horizontal bands of Brice Marden, these are no more than momentary asides in a conversation which does not aim at a strict linear consistency. THE NEW YORK TIMES GALLERY VIEW BY JOHN RUSSELL | MAY 16, 1976

This is even more the case when "Rhapsody" rakes through the basic elements of figuration. It does this in terms of four archetypal subjects, all of them Charged with emotional content. They are (i) a house, (ii) a tree, (iii) a mountain, (iv) the ocean. Each of these takes the front of the stage in turn, reverting afterwards to a supporting or incidental role. And it is in this context that "Rhapsody" really sets itself apart from other recent paintings which are, in effect, shopping lists of linguistic possibilities.



For "Rhapsody" in its figurative aspect has reserves of feeling which have nothing to do with system or alphabet. It examines for example the role played in our lives by kitsch, and by visual infatuations of a sort that would never be countenanced in a straightfaced history of art.

We are at the mercy of such things: What if the Word "house" suddenly brings to mind a bloodcurdling housing estate that does nothing but foul the environment? What if the word "mountain" brings to mind a white rabbit who just won't go away but sits there, as big as a gorilla, on a foreground of powdered snow? What if the idea of a mountain top brings to mind both the quick summations in Kandinsky's "Kleine Welten" and the colorwork in an ad for Swissair? It is one of "Rhapsody's" many fascinations that each and all of these ungovernable images is made equally welcome.

As will by now be clear, "Rhapsody" in all its ramifications is a work of art that functions simultaneously on many levels at once. To master it from end to end is a singular adventure; and by the time that we have

pondered the 54 different blues which have gone in to the final "Ocean" section we shall have enlarged our notions of time, and of memory, and of change; and of painting