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Artist Jennifer Bartlett was best known for her installation "Rhapsody," a collection of 987 painted steel plates that was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. (Timothy A. Clary/AFP/Getty Images)

Jennifer Bartlett, artist who made steel plates her canvas, dies at 81

By: Harrison Smith
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She was best known for her 1976 installation, 'Rhapsody,' a series of nearly 1,000 gleaming, gridded steel plates that she baked in enamel paint

Jennifer Bartlett, a painter who rose in the 1970s and '80s to become a rare woman atop the American art world, using a host of styles, colors and materials — including hundreds of gleaming steel plates — to explore ideas about change, repetition and the limits of modern art, died July 25 at her home in Amagansett, N.Y., on Long Island. She was 81.

Her death was announced by the Paula Cooper Gallery and Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York City, which represent her. A spokesperson for the Paula Cooper Gallery, Sarah Goulet, said Ms. Bartlett was ill but did not give a specific cause.

Finding inspiration in a seemingly unremarkable house, a simple sailboat or the dreary view from her backyard, Ms. Bartlett saw infinite variety in commonplace scenes. She often painted the same object dozens or even hundreds of times in works that were melancholy or jubilant, figurative or abstract. The scale of her pieces varied along with the tone: While many of her paintings were made on large canvases, other works were vast steel-tile mosaics, filling an entire gallery as they stretched across walls and around corners.

"Jennifer charted a path for younger artists, especially women artists, with the idea of making really monumentally sized installations with painting," said Klaus Ottmann, a curator at the Phillips Collection in Washington, in a 2013 interview with the New York Times.

Late in her career, Ms. Bartlett painted scenes from her garden, views from the hospital where she was recuperating in Manhattan and a pointillistic image of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. But she remained best known for an earlier, more conceptual work: "Rhapsody," a collection of 987 painted steel plates that filled the Paula Cooper Gallery when it was first shown in 1976. Times art critic John Russell opened his review of the installation by calling it "the most ambitious single work of new art that has come my way since I started to live in New York."



In recent years, Ms. Bartlett's "Rhapsody" piece was shown in the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art.
(Jennifer Bartlett/John Wronn/Courtesy of Museum of Modern Art)

Instead of using a traditional canvas, Ms. Bartlett fabricated one-square-foot steel plates that she baked in white enamel. Then she added a motif that became one of her trademarks, silk-screening a pale gray grid that she used to organize her images. Finally, she added or subtracted abstract markings or geometric shapes (triangles, squares, circles, lines) or painted more elaborate images (a house, a tree, a mountain, the ocean), using all of the enamel paint colors that were sold at the time by Testors, an art supply company.

Taken as a whole, "Rhapsody" was both playful and philosophical, serving as a catalogue of sorts for the motifs, styles, colors and shapes available to modern painters. "To master it from end to end is a singular adventure," Russell wrote, "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 itself."

Ms. Bartlett said she made up the piece as she went along, intending it to unfold like a conversation "in which people digress from one thing and maybe come back to the subject, then do the same with the next thing." The installation was later acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which exhibited "Rhapsody" in its atrium.

One of four children, Ms. Bartlett was born Jennifer Ann Losch in Long Beach, Calif., on March 14, 1941. Her father owned a construction company, and her mother was a former fashion illustrator. Ms. Bartlett sought to build a different life for herself, drawing constantly as a young girl and dreaming — even at age 5 — of moving to New York to become a painter. After seeing the Disney animated movie "Cinderella," she drew the fairy-tale princess some 500 times, she said, "all alike but with varying hair color and dresses."

Ms. Bartlett studied painting at Mills College in Oakland, Calif., graduating in 1963. She continued her art education at Yale University, receiving a bachelor of fine arts in 1964 and a master's the next year. Her teacher Jack Tworok, an abstract expressionist, introduced her to experimental young artists including Claes Oldenburg and Robert Rauschenberg, whose work opened Ms. Bartlett to new directions in modern art.

As she later put it, "I'd walked into my life."



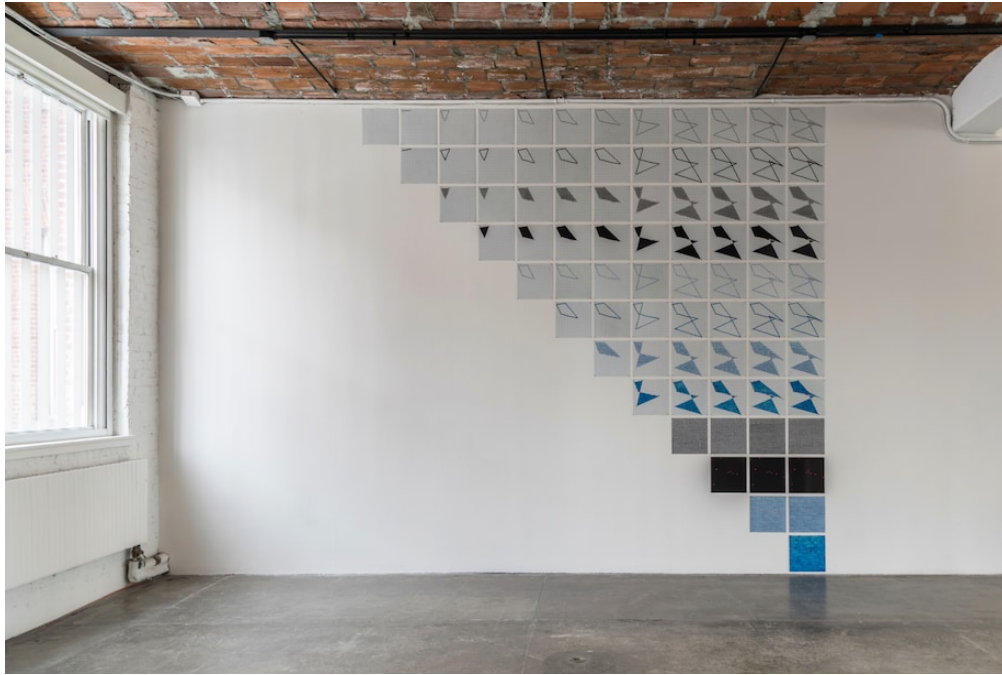
"Air: 24 Hours, Five P.M." The painting is part of a 24-piece series, one for each hour of the day, that Ms. Bartlett made in 1991 and 1992. (Jennifer Bartlett/Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

While in graduate school, she married Ed Bartlett, a medical student. For a while, she commuted between their home in New Haven, Conn.; her art studio in Manhattan; and the University of Connecticut, where she taught and slept in her office. That arrangement proved untenable, and after a few years, she got a divorce and settled in SoHo, where she was part of an art community that included Richard Serra, Chuck Close and Jonathan Borofsky, who lived across the street.

"Art at that time had to be new," she told Bomb magazine in 2005. "One had to make the next move." To distinguish herself from her peers, she scavenged found objects from the neighborhood ("rubber plugs, plastic tiles, hanks of rope, red plastic teapots") and baked, froze, dropped, painted and smashed them into works of art. Inspired by subway signs, she then turned to steel plates.

By the mid-1980s, she was one of the nation's most prominent artists, with a retrospective of her work opening at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and traveling around the country. She was photographed for Vogue and Vanity Fair, profiled in the New Yorker, and began splitting her time between New York and Paris, where she lived with her second husband, German actor Mathieu Carrière, before their marriage ended in divorce.

She also branched into poetry and prose, publishing an autobiographical novel called "History of the Universe" (1985). "The skin on the soles of my feet is rough," she wrote in one impressionistic passage. "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."



Left: "Drawing and Painting," a 1974 installation of 78 painted steel plates, was shown in 2016 at MoMA PS1 in New York. (Pablo Enriquez/Courtesy of MoMA PS1, New York)



Right: In the early 1990s, Ms. Bartlett created a ceiling installation for the Homan-ji Temple in Choshi, Japan. (Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York)

At the same time, she continued to make ambitious grand-scale art projects, including site-specific commissions for the lobby of a federal court building in Atlanta and the ceiling of a Buddhist temple in Japan. Her work has since been acquired by institutions including the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in D.C., the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and the Tate Modern in London.

Survivors include a daughter from her second marriage, Alice Carrière, and two sisters.

When Ms. Bartlett rented a villa on the French Riviera in the late 1970s, she started drawing and painting her view outdoors, ultimately making nearly 200 pictures for a series called "In the Garden." Her later projects included "Sea

Wall" (1985), an installation of boat paintings and sculptures that stretched more than 35 feet; "AIR: 24 Hours" (1991-92), which included a painting for each hour of the day; and "Recitative" (2011), an installation of 372 painted steel plates that recalled the landmark work that launched her to fame.

"Instead of refining things, I just do more," she told People magazine, explaining her serial approach to art. "I can't seem to do one of something."



Ms. Bartlett at work in 1975, at a friend's garden shed in Southampton, N.Y., on Long Island.
(Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York)