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Jennifer Bartlett believed abstract painting was more figurative than a figurative painting, 'because it is closer to the thing it is depicting'.
Photograph: Susan Wood/Getty Images

Jennifer Bartlett Obituary

By: Charles Darwent
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American painter whose systemic yet figurative artworks defied categorisation

In 1987, the BBC aired a documentary called *Painting With Light* in which six artists were filmed making work with a computer graphics system called Quantel Paintbox. One of the six was Jennifer Bartlett, who has died of leukaemia aged 81.

Bartlett was variously the odd one out in the series. All the other artists – Larry Rivers, David Hockney, Sidney Nolan, Richard Hamilton and Howard Hodgkin – were men. Not coincidentally, they remain household names in the modern art world, where the prodigiously creative Bartlett is now rather less well known than she was 35 years ago. But she also stood out from the six in being the hardest of them to pigeonhole, her art defining itself by being defiantly unlike anybody else's.

Typical of this was the work with which she had made her name a decade before, a 47-metre-long mural called *Rhapsody* (1975-76), now in New York's Museum of Modern Art. Size was not its sole oddity. Travelling on the city's subway in 1968, Bartlett's eye had been caught by the network's signage. "The signs looked like hard paper," she recalled. "I wanted a unit that could go around corners on the wall, stack for shipping. If you made a painting and wanted it to be longer, you could add plates. If you didn't like the middle you could remove it." With \$500 borrowed from a friend, she ordered 100 foot-square enamelled steel plates from P Feiner & Sons, a sign manufacturer in New Jersey. Seven years later, these became the basic unit of *Rhapsody*.



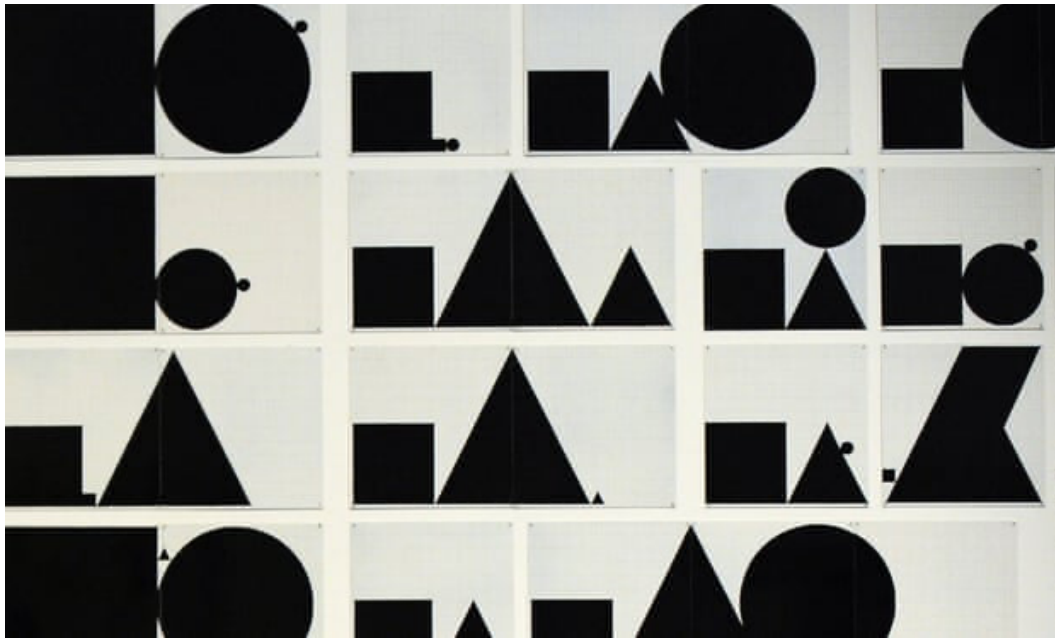
A section of the 47-metre-long artwork *Rhapsody* (1975-76), by Jennifer Bartlett, which consists of 987 metal plates individually painted, subdivided, or left blank, to make up a larger, pixelated image. Photograph: Timothy A Clary/AFP/Getty Images

This was not quite as eccentric as it sounds. Fifty years earlier, in Weimar, the Bauhaus artist László Moholy-Nagy had had enamel-on-steel paintings made for him by a sign maker, ringing in his order for them by telephone. Pretty well every American artist of Bartlett's generation experimented with industrial materials. What made the 987 white plates of *Rhapsody* different from all these was that they appeared in some way domestic – “like a refrigerator”, as Bartlett said.

The use she put the plates to was also unexpected. Arranged on the wall in the familiar modernist grid and further subdivided into quarter-inch squares silkscreened on to each plate, they seemed tied to early conceptual movements – systemic art, perhaps. Bartlett either painted each gridded mini-square with a blob of craft enamel or left it blank, so that a pixelated image emerged. (Inevitably, Bartlett being a woman, this process was compared to embroidery, or knitting.)

Surface Substitution on 36 Plates (1972), in the Tate collection, is typical of her work of the time. The resultant images might be either abstract or representational – “I think an abstract painting is actually more figurative than a figurative painting, because it is closer to the thing it is depicting,” Bartlett said – the latter drawn from a repertoire of forms that would remain a mainstay of her art for the rest of her career: a tree, the sea, a mountain, a red-roofed house with a white picket fence. Representational and abstract, intimate and monumental, systematised and impulsive, *Rhapsody* broke every rule of the art of its day by signing up to them all. Asked what *Rhapsody* was about, Bartlett cheerily replied: “Everything.”

The work made her famous, and – it sold for the then astronomical sum of \$45,000 – well-to-do. By 1985, Bartlett was being given monograph shows that travelled the US: the first went from Brooklyn to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh. She had already won a coveted place in the 1977 Documenta art exhibition in Kassel, Germany, and her work had been hung in the US Pavilion at the 1980 Venice Biennale alongside that of Laurie Anderson and Christo. As with *Rhapsody*, the art Bartlett made in the 1980s remained natural in an unnatural way. Her 1980-83 series, *In the Garden*, showed 200 different views of a small repertoire of motifs from the garden of her villa in Nice. This was reprised, in the early 2000s, in the garden of her studio in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, the works' cross-hatched surface a sign of Bartlett's painterly intent.



A further section of *Rhapsody*, 1975-76, which Jennifer Bartlett said was about 'everything'.
 Photograph: Timothy A Clary/AFP/Getty Images

All this was a far cry from her childhood in Long Beach, California. The first of four children of Joanne (nee Chaffee), a graphic artist turned housewife, and Edward Losch, a businessman with interests in construction, Jennifer nursed a desire to escape to New York from an early age. "My mother would have liked for me to have gotten a job at Hallmark cards, done some painting on the side, gotten happily married, had some children and lived in Long Beach," she later told *People* magazine.

After a BA at Mills College in Oakland in 1963, freedom came in the form of an MFA at Yale. The two years Bartlett spent studying alongside the likes of Richard Serra, Chuck Close and Michael Craig-Martin opened her eyes to modern art. So, too, the proximity of New York, 90 minutes away from New Haven by train. By 1968, she was living in the city; her first show, in 1970, was in the flat of an artist friend. The system behind the works in this was predicated on the avoidance of certain colours. "I felt no need whatsoever for orange or violet," Bartlett said, "but I did need green."

Like many early *coups de succès*, *Rhapsody* came with its problems. In the mind of the public (and the art market), Bartlett was defined by her trademark white plates. Refusing to be bound by this stereotype, she spent the years from the mid-80s to the turn of the century making large-scale figurative paintings, some of which – *Sea Wall* (1985), for example – were paired in the gallery with sculptures of themselves. None was ever quite as successful as *Rhapsody* had been.

In 1996, Bartlett left her long-term gallerist, Paula Cooper, and, for the ensuing two decades, showed mainly outside New York. In 2016 she returned to Cooper, having already gone back to her white plates. Until blurred by the dementia of her last years, her energy remained undiminished: she turned her hand to a startling variety of media, from theatre design to glassware to printmaking. In 2001, she had watched the events of 11 September unfold from the roof of her Greenwich Village flat. Her painting of the scene – *Goodbye, Bill*, now in the Yale University Art Gallery – is one of the few representations in art of the horrors of that day.

Bartlett married twice: first, in 1964, to Edward Bartlett, a physician; and second, in 1983, to the German actor Mathieu Carrière. Both marriages ended in divorce. She is survived by a daughter from the second, Alice.

Jennifer Losch Bartlett, artist, born 14 March 1941; died 25 July 2022